UNDERSTANDING POLICY TOOLKITS ON EMPLOYMENT AND AGEING; A PROPOSAL FOR A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

Policy toolkits provide useful information and can be drawn upon as guidance in different stages of the policy-making process. This report is an initial review of existing policy toolkits on employment and ageing to distill a conceptual categorisation intended to inform research uptake strategies. The report starts by developing a clear definition of policy toolkits and proposing a typology of policy tools that consists of four items: good practice, social indicators, programme evaluation and simulation and forecast. We then describe the underlying relationship between research and policy-making, which is then used to provide a synthetic overview of toolkits available for ageing-related issues in the area of employment and pensions. We conclude with the observation that policy goals are often quite vague and that different policy goals may not always be congruent with each other or cannot be simultaneously achieved.

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1 Introduction

This report[1] gives an overview of policy toolkits that focus on ageing-related issues in the area of employment and pensions. The notion of *policy toolkit* is based on a metaphor and, as a consequence, does not have a completely definite meaning. Intuitively, it refers to a set of items that aid in the development and/or assessment of policies. Given this ambiguity and plurality, it is beyond the scope of the current paper to examine all existing policy tools or toolkits. Instead, we will exclusively focus on *analytical* policy tools, which are used to assess the efficacy and efficiency of existing policies in the area of ageing. Moreover, rather than attempting to provide a full inventory of the existing work in the field, this report explores the state of the art with the objective of identifying pervasive practices regarding the link between research and policies. To this aim, it proposes a typology of policy tools, which is subsequently used to provide a synthetic overview of toolkits available in the thematic area of interest. We also raise some critical questions regarding the public role of policy toolkits in the concluding section. First of all, however, we provide a clearer definition of policy toolkits and then spell out the underlying conception of the relationship between research and policy-making that is the central object of the present report.

2 What is a policy toolkit?

Policy tools or toolkits are a common end product of any policy driven research. 'Policy toolkits' are conceived here as comprehensive sets of recommendations for the setup or reforms of policies that are based on insights gained from research. In other words, the primary objective of policy toolkits is to inform policy makers of the key parameters that need to be considered for specific policy decisions relevant to a particular issue. Toolkits (a) establish the existing evidence that is relevant to a given policy goal (such as extended working life), (b) lay out the potential solutions, (c) address their applicability across contexts and (d) assess their long-term impact.

This initial conceptualisation is still markedly broad as the referenced tools and their finality can be conceived in a myriad of ways. An important distinction refers to whether the purpose of the tools is *analytical* or *strategic*.[2] An analytical toolkit aims at identifying what policies best achieve given objectives. By contrast, a strategic toolkit aims at influencing the policy process in a particular way. Informing and influencing policies is the main purpose of think tanks and many interest groups are similarly looking for ways to effectively advocate for their political

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[1] This report is a product of the work of an international project on "Gender and health impacts of policies extending working life in western countries" (COST Action IS1409), and specifically of its Working Group 4 on "Policy tool-kits, innovative policies and good practice". For further information, visit http://genderewl.com/.

[2] This distinction is in itself only analytical and not clear-cut. Any strategic political toolkit requires a certain element of analysis and information to be able to influence policies, whereas analytical toolkits are never completely opinion-free and inevitable draw on normative priors.

goals.[3] Additionally, more technical or implementation-oriented toolkits consisting of concrete guidelines exist that inform or instruct policy-makers concerned with reforming existing policy schemes or setting up new ones.[4] The present report focuses on the first type, that is, analytical toolkits.

The audiences of the tools are not only politicians, policy makers and public administration, but also (other) social scientists as well as the interested public audience in general: the tools are also used in the wider debate around the mentioned policy issues, and can also serve the articulation of public opinions in democratic societies. At the same time, it is naturally the least complex tools that are more often used in wider debates as they lend themselves more readily to addressing 'lay' audiences.

3 A typology of tools

As a framework to map existing analytical policy tools, we propose the following typology:[5] (1) good practice; (2) social indicators; (3) programme evaluation; (4) simulation and forecast. Table 1 gives an overview of the different tool types and their key properties. The order used here follows the degree of technical complexity.

Table 1: Overview of Types of Policy Tools

Tool type	Technical sophistication	Mechanism	Strength	Weakness
Good practice	Low	Imitation	Simplicity	Transferability
Social indicators	Medium	Quantification	Comparability	Reductionism
Programme evaluation	High	Experiment	Specificity	Costly implementation
Simulation and forecast	High	Statistical model	Flexibility	Dependence on assumptions

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[3] For example, toolkits for civil society organisations in Africa have been released by both an alliance of NGOs and the UN Developmental Programme (Sonke Gender Justice Network, 2013) as well as by the Catholic Church (CAFOD, 2005).

[4] As example of such implementation-oriented toolkit is the "Policy Toolkit for Strengthening Health Sector Reform" published by the Latin American and Caribbean Regional Sector Reform Initiative (Scribner & Brinkerhoff, 2000), a joint effort of the US Agency for International Development and other organisations, which primarily addresses government officials. Similarly, the OECD has produced a Consumer Policy Toolkit in 2010 directed at and policy makers, which reviews policy tools and gives guidelines on developing an adequate consumer policy.

[5] We speak of tool*kits* if various similar tools are provided as a package. For example, the OECD Employment Outlook periodically publishes a series of standardized social indicators on the labor market (employment rates, long-term unemployment rate, broken down by country, gender etc.). Each report can thus be understood as a toolkit.

Each type of policy tool functions in a different way, given its distinct purpose, as we explain in more detail below. In addition, some of the strengths and weakness of each type of policy tool are also briefly discussed. Concrete examples of each type of policy toolkit are provided in Table 2.

3.1 Good practice

The most basic analytical tool consists of the identification of "good practice". It involves the assessment of a well-functioning policy or practice, typically through expert opinions or public discourse. Aiming at imitation, it is the simplest, yet possibly also the most powerful analytical tool. It emphasizes the virtues of a particular case that achieves good results, stressing the elements or defining features that are deemed responsible for its outstanding performance. The identification is usually based on "qualitative" analysis which employs interpretative research methods involving a case-oriented and context-sensitive perspective. However, this tool rests on the often problematic assumption that the model of "good practice" can be simply copied partly or entirely to improve the functioning of other cases. Moreover, anecdotal evidence often is an important initial step in the acquisition of the status as "good practice". Lacking a systematic method for comparison, the outstanding position that is assigned discursively to certain pioneer cases, role models or prototypes can be incidental. What practice is *en vogue* and counts as the "best" is partly subject to dynamics of herd mentality and/or media dramatization. Not unlike the fashion cycle, perceptions of boom or bust can also change quickly as fresh empirical evidence becomes available.[6] Therefore it is important to maintain a critical distance and not place too much weight on the presumed superiority of a given practice over others before it has been put to a more rigorous test, e.g. through more technically refined policy tools such as social indicators or programme evaluation (which are described in detail below).

There are two classes of "good practice" that are relevant in the present context: (a) good practice in legislation and public welfare programmes on the one hand, and (b) good practice at the workplace level on the other.

In the realm of legislation, a famous case of a "good practice" is the switch to defined contribution system of pensions in Switzerland, which was the first major pension reform in an advanced industrial society to react to the challenges posed by population ageing. By adjusting benefits according to average life expectancy and economic growth it offered a systematic solution that would ensure system sustainability. Many international observers took note as the reform tackled a common problem many other countries were facing in a similar manner. The system was celebrated in the pension policy discourse and several of its components were adopted in other national pension reforms (see, e.g. Palmer 2000). As another example, in 2014 the German parliament (Bundestag) approved by a large majority legislation introducing a minimum wage, set at €8.50 (although with some exceptions), thereby ending a decade-long controversy in the country on the subject. In addition, a commission of trade union and business

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[6] For example, the German model of publicly subsidized private pensions ("Riester-Rente") were first considered a failure as uptake was slow initially, then deemed good practice during a number of years as participation rates rose at a healthy pace, and now seriously questioned again as projected benefit levels disappoint and administration costs turn out too high given the moderate average performance of funds.

representatives will *evaluate* the minimum wage every two years, starting in 2016. In the public debate on the issue, the presence of minimum wage regulations in most other advanced economies was a powerful argument.[7] Interestingly, by introducing the system of regular monitoring, stakeholders are building a body of evidence to influence further policy development.

While both of "good practices" mentioned here are examples of large-scale systemic welfare state reforms, smaller pieces of legislation can also become "good practice". For example, in the "employer toolkit" for managers of older workers published by the UK Department for Work and Pensions (2016), it is recommended to limit exposure to night work for workers over 60 and increase rest periods (despite recognizing that there exists no robust evidence that shift work had more adverse consequences for the well-being of older workers). An extensive report of good practice based company case studies recommends mixed age groups (European Commission 2006: 145). These are typical examples of good practice at the workplace level.

3.2 Social indicators

Social indicators are "[e]asily identified features of a society which can be measured, which vary over time, and are taken as revealing some underlying aspect of social reality" (Scott & Marshall 2005: 61). They are clearly defined quantitative measures which assess the outcomes that current policies produce in specific societal domains, and are used in all fields of policy. Social indicators capturing policy outcomes are usually long-established measures. Examples for social indicators in the field of old age and work are the unemployment rate (for example, among 55 to 64 year-old people) or average replacement rates offered by national pension schemes.

An indicator usually consists of a single figure that contains the relevant information in a very condensed form. At the same time, there are often variations of one and the same indicator (e.g. employment rates in different age groups, poverty levels based on different poverty definitions). In some cases (such as poverty), these variations reflect a lack of agreement on which is the most appropriate measure of an underlying matter. Other indicators, by contrast, are highly standardized and conventional (for example mortality rates). Social indicators are based on administrative data, censuses or large social surveys.

Social indicators are particularly useful for comparing outcomes over time, between gender, age or social groups, between spatial units (such as cities, regions, countries) or between administrative units. Due to their condensed form, social indicators are very powerful and attractive tools which are easy to use and to disseminate. Still, as they are so condensed it is of paramount importance to understand the origin of an indicator, i.e. (the generation of) its data base and its mathematical derivation, in order to interpret it adequately. Their reductionism is thus also the weakness of social indicators, as they can be easily shown or understood in oversimplifying ways. Misinterpretations can arise for example if the content of what the

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[7] Note that we do not wish to enter into judgements about the minimum wage as an institution. The crucial issue is that minimum wages have been put forward as good practice in the policy debate and an effective instrument to keep down poverty among households headed by low-wage earners. On the other hand, business lobbyists and German economists have warned that the minimum wage could destroy hundreds of thousands of jobs in Germany.

indicator measures is misconceived, if trends are misread or if variations across different subpopulations are not adequately shown. In this sense, social indicators carry the risk of being instrumentalised in detrimental ways.

Notably, not every quantitative measure relating to policy outcomes is a social indicator. Rather, social indicators are those measures which are seen as capturing a crucial aspect of policy outcomes (or other social processes), such as the distribution of resources, economic performance, etc. What kinds of measures become important and conventional as social indicator is the result of social processes, in particular the interaction of social sciences and policy practice, in the course of which the related measure becomes charged with meaning (see section 4 for further details).

Nowadays, social indicators are widely used on all kinds of policy levels, be they local, regional, national, or international. Complex infrastructures producing and reporting social indicators have been established (at least) on national and international levels. International organizations like the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) or the International Labour Organization (ILO), for example, use a multitude of social indicators for reports on policy outcomes and other important features of societies, comparing indicators between countries and over time, and similar reporting systems often exist on the national level.

3.3 Programme evaluation

Programme evaluation consists of the measurement of the efficacy and efficiency of public policies or workplace practices. It focuses on comparing costs and benefits of a given programme to put decision-makers in the public and private sector in the position to make informed choices about the efficient allocation of resources. To be capable of comparing inputs and outputs in an orderly manner, programme evaluation is based on sound accounting of budgets and clear definitions of the applied financial concepts. Often pre-defined "performance indicators" are used to measure outputs, which share many features of the social indicators described in the foregoing section.

The gold standard to measure the efficacy of a policy programme or intervention applies an experimental research design. Simply comparing participants with non-participants or measuring the output of interest before and after participation in the programme may lead to flawed results because of possible confounding factors, selection effects and environmental influence. Rather, a rigorous impact assessment aims to find out whether a possible change in the target population has been a direct consequence of the programme, or possibly would have happened anyway. The causal effect of the programme is identified by means of comparison with a counter-factual scenario in which the programme does not exist. Therefore, programme evaluations characteristically involve closed experiments with treatment and control groups (or sometimes natural experiments), to examine the direct effect of a given policy reform or public intervention.

Programme evaluation can also be used for the appropriate fine-tuning of policy programmes, to check whether there are problems in their implementation (this also falls under the label of process evaluation), whether given programmes work better for certain subgroups of the

population or segments of the economy, etc. Sometimes, rather than employing an experimental design, the evaluation of public policies is based on a dense narrative or process tracing of the policy and its success. In these instances, the boundary to "good practice" tools is blurry as both approaches rely on "soft" methods for the measurement of performance.

The strength of programme evaluations resides in their analytical power and the elegance of the experimental design. Because it produces clear-cut estimates of the causal impact of a programme, it is highly appealing to decision-makers who can convincingly demonstrate tangible results to stakeholders. The proven impact and cost-benefit relation of a particular programme may also serve as performance threshold for similar programmes, thereby providing validated measurement scales that allow benchmarking the efficacy and efficiency of policy interventions in different areas.

The most important disadvantages of this methodology are pragmatic and refer to its elevated cost, work intensity and time requirements, especially if oversimplifying approaches like before-after-comparisons are to be avoided. Evaluating a public policy of a certain scale is a demanding task because often many actors are involved who need to be coordinated to ensure the proper setup of the experiment (e.g. compliance with assignment to treatment status, avoidance of contamination effects, etc.). Since programme evaluation usually involves considerable personnel costs and time requirements, there is the risk that eventual efficiency gains will be outweighed by the administrative and other costs of implementing the evaluation. Finally, as was the case with good practice lessons, the functioning of a policy programme is always to some extent context-dependent, and it is possible that the programme will not work in the same way in a different social environment.

3.4 Simulation and forecast

Projections, forecasts and simulations usually serve to predict future outcomes (in the case of projections and forecasts) or to speculate on potential outcomes (simulations) of a policy or several interrelated policies. They usually refer to the aggregate level of outcomes, not to the individual level, and involve several indicators that have been collected through either large-scale surveys, censuses or administrative data. Based on models using advanced statistical methods, this type of tools serve to infer from past and current policy outcomes and their causes to future or potential outcomes in order to establish clearly determined scenarios of what will happen or of what might happen if certain ancillary conditions change in a specific way.

In more detail, projections and forecasts often target an important social indicator, and extrapolate past changes and current influences on the targeted measure into the future, basing this on specific assumptions regarding ancillary conditions. As the latter are often uncertain, projections are frequently developed in several varieties, building on a number of distinct assumptions regarding the ancillary conditions. A typical example of this is population projections, which are usually established on the basis of several different scenarios regarding births, deaths and net-migration. Simulations work in a very similar way, except that assumptions about ancillary conditions involve changes that are currently not very probable. For example, a simulation may be related to what would happen if a certain policy is introduced

or ceased, or what would have happened if it had not been introduced. The boundaries between projections and forecasts on the one hand, and simulations, on the other, can be fluid.

Projections, forecasts and simulations become more complex the more ancillary conditions are included into the underlying statistical model. In most cases, projections and forecasts can only serve a simplified prediction of the future, amongst others because it is not possible to include all ancillary conditions, and trends and ancillary conditions can change in unpredictable ways, for example due to unforeseen events. Generally, results are more precise for the nearer than for the far future.

Projections, forecasts and simulations are very challenging tools to assess policy results, as they require detailed quantified assumptions about the crucial influences on the outcome of interest. The latter can only be derived from good statistical explanations of the past or very good theories – simple extrapolations from past trends to the future, without any ancillary assumptions, will often produce inadequate projections.

As projections, forecasts simulations can help to speculate about the future in a systematic way and to assess potential outcomes of a policy, they can be crucial for political planning. As other tools, however, they have to be adequately understood and interpreted to fully exploit their potential, and not doing so might result in consequential fallacies about the success or failure of policies. An adequate understanding of projections, forecasts and simulations importantly also includes the uncertainties inherent in each of these tools. Therefore, this type of tool tends to be targeted at expert audiences, be they policy experts or social scientists.

Table 2. Definition and examples of policy tool kits

Toolkit type	Definition	Examples
Good practice	Identification of well-functioning policies in different areas through expert opinions and public discourse on the adequacy of a certain policy.	• The Swedish Notional Defined Contribution System. Adjustment of pension benefits according to average life expectancy and economic growth to ensure system sustainability (Palmer 2000). • The EU Learning Programme (2012). One relevant toolkit is the Peer Review of Older Workers in Public Service (http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=105&newsId=1300&furtherNews=yes) • In its European Observatory of Working Life (EurWORK), the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) provides case studies of companies as best practice examples, amongst others covering the issues of the "ageing workforce" (http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/case-study-names/ageing-workforce) and of "workers with care responsibilities" (http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/observatories/eurwork/case-studies/workers-with-care-responsibilities) (Eurofound 2016)
Social indicators	Use of clearly defined measures to assess the outcomes that current policies produce in specific societal domains, especially from a comparative perspective.	• Sustainable development indicators, e.g. the "at-risk-of-poverty rate of elderly people" (Eurostat 2015) • Social inequality indicators, including minimum wage; relative measures of poverty (e.g. % with household income below a certain amount); social spending as a % of GDP; deprivation indices; gender inequality index; gender pension gap • Employment trends of older workers during the economic recession that coincides with policy reform aimed at supporting older workers (Eurofound 2013)
Programme evaluation	Application of experimental research designs, characteristically involving either controlled experiments with treatment and control groups or natural experiments, to examine	• Impact of automatic enrolment into tax-qualified defined-contribution pension plans (Madrian & Shea 2001) • Retaining workers through firm-provided training, including older workers (Picchio and van Ours, 2013) • Retirement patterns of elderly Swedish workers during the Swedish pension reform of 1999-

	the causal effect of a given policy or public intervention	2003 (Glans 2008)
Simulation and forecast	Based on models using advanced statistical methods, simulations and forecasts serve to infer from past and current policy outcomes and their causes to future or potential outcomes in order to establish clearly determined scenarios of what will happen or of what might happen if certain ancillary conditions change in a specific way.	• OECD Pensions at a Glance: Simulated "Net pension wealth" per country (OECD 2013) • Hiring Older Employees: Do the age limits of early retirement and the contribution rates of firms matter (Ilmakunnas and Ilmakunnas, 2015) • Ansah (2015) compares projections up to year 2040 of persons aged 60-79 and aged 80+ with functional disability (at least one ADL or IADL) in Singapore with and without accounting for the changing educational composition of the Singaporean elderly.

4 Interaction of toolkits and policy processes

While a typology of toolkits provides a useful categorisation to delineate policy toolkits by types, it provides little insight into the effectiveness of these toolkits. In this regard, it is critical to understand the policy process, which these tools aim to inform. To study how policy toolkits influence actual policy decisions, some researchers focus on the ways in which policies are produced, captured and packaged as "knowledge products" (such as national policies or service frameworks) and/or how these knowledge products are then transferred to the realm of practice. Such approaches tend to promulgate the existence of a so-called "gap" between research and practice, which is usually manifest in the low uptake of research evidence, in the patchy implementation of policies, and in stakeholder behaviour defending particular interests. According to these approaches it is important to rethink knowledge and policy utilisation, and in fact, to frame knowledge and policy as integral element of practice, rather than apart from it (Gkeredakis *et al.* 2011).

4.1 Policies

Policies are actions aiming to achieve certain outcomes in response to "some sort of problem that requires attention" (Birkland, 2011: 8). While the term policy encompasses a wide range of actions and legislation, in the context of this working paper, the focus is set on the interactions between policy toolkits and regulatory policies.

Commonly, a distinction is drawn between public policies and other policies such as company policies. Public policies are "ultimately made by governments" (Birkland, 2011: 9). Thereby, they do not uniquely adhere to nation states. Especially in Europe, the case of the European Union (EU) highlights the importance supranational policies can gain. Since the establishment of the EU by the Treaty of Rome in 1957 supranational policy-making has been increasingly influential for its member states (among others Wallace *et al.*, 2015: 4).

Next to supranational and national policies, in a number of countries legislative competences also exist at subnational level. For example, the German Federal States have competences for regulatory policies which are in some cases shared with the Federal government and in others held solely by the *Länder*. Also in a range of other countries – such as Spain (the *Comunidades Autónomas*), the United States of America (the States) or the United Kingdom (the devolved regions) – specific competences for regulatory policies in certain fields reside at subnational level. The extent to which these subnational authorities can pass legislation varies distinctively from country to country. Policy-making at these different levels thus never stands alone, but is structurally embedded in a multi-level surrounding.

Equally important to note is that the business or corporate sector also frames policies to align with public policies or develops guidelines for the implementation of legal obligations. Particularly in the area of extended working life, corporate policies and workplace arrangements regarding older employees are a critical component of the broader policy framework.

4.2 Policy-making and policy toolkits

In order to assess the impact of policy toolkits, it is important to take account of the way policy-making works. The most influential and most commonly applied framework for policy analysis is the concept of the policy cycle. It emphasizes "the political process as a continuous process of policy-making" (Jann & Wegrich, 2007: 44) that consists of different phases or stages.

When referring to the policy cycle, it has to be kept in mind that the phases or stages distinguished in models of the policy cycle are only serve heuristic purposes (Blum & Schubert, 2011: 104). This means that in practice the different stages might not be clearly distinguishable as temporal phases (Sabatier, 2007), nor do all necessarily form part of every policy process (Blum & Schubert, 2011: 108). Despite the heuristic nature of the policy cycle model, it provides a valuable tool for conceptualizing policy processes and their different stages.

The most common framework of the policy cycle, which is illustrated in Figure 1, distinguishes four phases of policy-making: (1) agenda-setting, (2) policy formulation, (3) policy implementation, and (4) evaluation. As will be shown in the following, these four stages strongly vary in nature, and policy toolkits can be used to provide different kinds of input throughout the policy cycle. The role of policy toolkits is clearest in the evaluation stage, where policy outputs are systematically examined and analysed, but they can also be drawn upon at other stages. For example, we have already mentioned the existence of technical toolkits that are oriented toward the proper implementation of a given policy.

Figure 1: The policy cycle
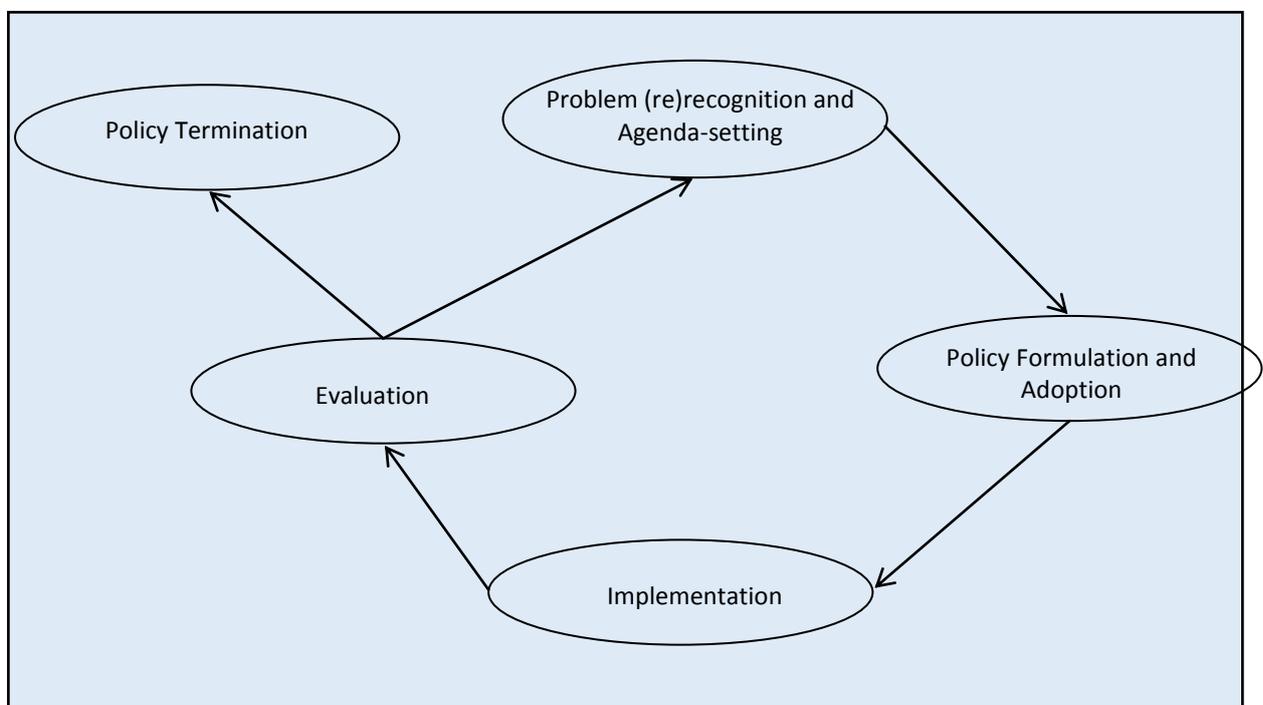
Source: own elaboration, based on Blum/Schubert (2011).

4.3 The Phases of the policy cycle

Problem recognition and agenda-setting

The starting point of every policy process is the identification of a certain "problem". The recognition of a given development, trend or situation as a problem that needs to be addressed is a social process (among others Dearing & Rogers, 1996: 91; Jann & Wegrich, 2007: 45; Rochefort & Cobb, 2005: 153f.). Yet, even though the recognition of a given fact (or a perception) as a societal challenge worth addressing is an act of social construction, (sound) empirical knowledge is important for the identification of problems as well as the assessment of their importance. Within this initial phase of the policy process, policy toolkits can therefore take an important place if they provide reliable information which can serve as basis for the identification of societal issues as well as their wider ramifications. In this way, analytical tools can be an indispensable part of the assessment of the situation and the articulation of a given phenomenon as political issue (Blum & Schubert, 2011: 109f.). By providing information about the current state of society, ongoing trends or expected developments, indicators, forecasts as well as scientific studies provide important tools for stakeholders and policy-makers in this stage.

The recognition of a problem is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the beginning of a policy process. Beyond having been identified as a problem, the issue in question has to attain the status of being relevant and requiring political action. The specific problem thus has to become part of "the agenda for serious consideration of public action (agenda setting)" (Jann & Wegrich, 2007: 45). In this sense, agenda-setting has been characterised as "an ongoing competition among issue proponents to gain the attention of media professionals, the public, and policy elites" (Dearing & Rogers, 1996: 1f.). Agenda-setting is a genuinely political process. While Dearing and Rogers (1996: 91) state that "scientific research results do not play an important role", other authors such as Barkenbus highlight the impact policy tools and expertise can have in supporting efforts of putting a specific problem on the political agenda by legitimizing the importance of political action (Barkenbus, 1998: 3).

Policy formulation and adoption

Once a political issue has become part of the political agenda, the question arises how to address it; the second stage of the cycle, policy formulation, begins. Policy formulation and adoption encompass different yet interwoven parts. Based on the recognition of the problem that precedes this phase, policy formulation starts with the identification of the exact problem that requires action as well as the definition of the objectives the policy in question is meant to achieve. Having identified the goals to be attained, alternative routes of action are considered and a final decision on the course of action has to be adopted (Blum & Schubert, 2011: 116ff).

Within this stage of policy-making, a different set of policy tools gains importance. In the formulation of policies, policy toolkits can be especially valuable if they provide insights into potential implications of policy design, key factors to consider for minimizing negative side effects or unintended consequences. In this sense, policy toolkits that provide information about the impact of alternative courses of action such as good practices, evaluation of previous policies or simulations can be important in this stage: Good (or best) practice can draw the

attention to features of policies or institutional arrangements that support the achievement of the desired outcomes. In this way, they can help identifying a route for political action. Similarly, evaluations of previous policies can highlight sound policies as well as those policy features that are likely to counteract the accomplishment of set goals. In addition, simulations of policy impacts can provide helpful tools in the specification of policy parameters as they contribute to the assessment of the longer term impact certain policy designs are bound to have.

Implementation

Once a course of action has been decided and a policy has been adopted, it needs to be implemented. Policy implementation relates to "what happens between the establishment of an apparent intention on the part of the government to do something, or to stop doing something, and the ultimate impact in the world of action" (O'Toole, 2000: 266). For adopted policies to succeed in achieving their goals, the implementation of a given policy is essential. If the policy requires a set of actions that contain the implementation, restructuring or reorganization of procedural or structural aspects, policy toolkits can be used in a similar way as during the decision on the specific course of action. They can provide information about factors enabling or impeding successful implementation. Based on best practice examples and the evaluation of similar existing policies, lessons can be drawn about the successful implementation of policies and simulations allow foreshadowing future implications.

Evaluation

The last stage of the policy cycle is the evaluation of policies. Afterwards, and depending on its outcome, either a new cycle is started or the policy process is terminated. With the evaluation stage being an integral phase of the policy circle, it is evident that policy toolkits are a natural element of the policy-making process. Previous evaluations, indicators and good practice examples can be used in the course of this evaluation to the extent that it becomes an integrative part of the policy process. The policy toolkit of evaluation can therefore be a powerful tool for further policy-making, program design and implementation.

In brief, policy toolkits provide useful information and can be used as guidance in different stages of the policy-making process. Due to the inherent particularities of every stage, varying kinds of information are required. Depending on the specific needs for input, different types of policy toolkits gain importance in the various stages of the policy cycle. While toolkits providing information on societal developments, trends and problems are helpful in the initial stage of the policy cycle, toolkits offering detailed insights on policy features can be used in policy formulation as well as during the stage of implementation. Whereas the role of analytical toolkits in the first three stages of the cycle is contingent on circumstances, toolkits are the essential instrument for the evaluation of policies in the final stage of the circle. In democratic society, in principle all policies are subject to public debates regarding their legitimacy and the efficient use of resources. Policy toolkits provide a sound empirical basis for this analytical task and thus fulfil a crucial function at the interface between research and practice.

5 Discussion and conclusions

This report has defined policy toolkits as evidence-based sets of recommendations to create or change specific policies. Furthermore, we have placed policy toolkits within a conceptual framework of the overall policy process, and have shown how toolkits may enter the different stages of the policy cycle. Finally, we have developed a typology of tools and provided a structured overview of examples of existing policy toolkits in the area of employment and pension reforms in ageing societies. The identified policy toolkits need to be further reviewed to better understand their degree of effectiveness in influencing policy process. We have also suggested that it is critical to understand the policy cycle and understand which stage of the cycle the policy toolkit is addressing. Moreover, the different stages require varying information, making different types of toolkits more important than others in the different phases of the policy-making process.

The here-adopted conception of policy toolkits inevitably entails some limitations. As a precondition for the development of toolkits for policy analysis, there needs to be at least a tentative consensus on the societal goals and challenges that said policies aim at achieving. Notably, this starting point implies a normative position that has a political dimension and is influenced by national and international debates involving diverse sets of actors and stakeholders. The objectives established by the European Commission include the promotion of healthy and active ageing to guarantee the sustainability of European welfare states, but also the inclusiveness and social cohesion of European societies. In the public debate, these goals are arguably widely shared across European societies as well as among different social actors and segments of the population. However, these goals are also notoriously vague, and there exist discordant voices that question the scope of the demographic "burden" (e.g. Spijker & McInnes, 2013) or criticize the ideological connotations of the "active ageing" paradigm (e.g. van Dyk et al., 2013). There is also the more general debate on the extent to which social sciences actually should be judged by their capacity to produce "useful" knowledge in the first place (e.g. Demers, 2011).

Moreover, it can be questioned to what extent the different policy goals are congruent with each other, and can be simultaneously achieved. To a certain extent, the two sets of goals —those pertaining to efficiency and those pertaining to equality— are in fact at least partially competing among each other. There probably often exist trade-offs between them. In this case, is the main benchmark for public policies the extent to which they contribute to economic efficiency or whether they help attenuate social inequalities in terms of health, gender, class or other dimensions of stratification? Obviously, it should be on democratically elected politicians, not scientists or technocrats, to establish the order of political priorities to which applied research should adhere to.

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