

The use of the Policy Compass within the Dutch National Government

Evaluation framework and first evaluation of the Policy Compass¹

Summary Final report

The Policy Compass was introduced by the Dutch government in March 2023. It is intended to be applied by all departments of central government in developing policies and regulations. The Policy Compass aims to secure and improve the quality of policy and regulation. The tool consists of a website, which presents policy and legislative officials with a number of key questions that they should answer step by step when designing policy and regulations. The website provides them with an overview of the quality requirements that policies and regulations must meet and a wide range of tools and tests to answer the key questions.

The Policy Compass is the successor to the Integral Assessment Framework for Policy and Legislation (IAK) introduced in 2011, which had a similar objective. In practice, however, the IAK was not used to its full potential. The Policy Compass includes several changes to address the shortcomings of the IAK. The changes concern both the content of the Policy Compass and the measures and provisions to improve its use.

Part of the Policy Compass is the regular evaluation of application and achievement of goals. This study is an initial evaluation of the Policy Compass instrument. Given the recent introduction of the Policy Compass, it focuses not on the evaluation of goal achievement (outcome), but on the use of the instrument (the output). The emphasis is on plan and process evaluation. The study also provides a foundation for future evaluations, through the reconstruction of policy theory underlying the Policy Compass and the establishment of an evaluation framework.

Research questions

The research focuses on the following questions:

Questions related to research part A. the reconstruction of the policy theory and evaluation framework:

1. What is the policy theory underlying the Policy Compass?
2. What evaluation framework (criteria, indicators and metrics) can be used to evaluate the Policy Compass?

Questions related to research part B. the plan and process evaluation:

3. To what extent is it plausible that the Policy Compass -both in terms of the substantive questions and the intended provisions to stimulate use - leads to the intended goals?
4. To what extent have the intended measures and facilities to promote the use of the Policy Compass been achieved and applied?

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5. To what extent is the Policy Compass applied in the preparation of policies and regulation and what can be said about the quality of this application?

Research Approach and Data Collection Methods

Research Part A involves the reconstruction of the policy theory behind the Policy Compass. Based on the policy theory, an evaluation framework has been formulated with the help of which the first evaluation of the Policy Compass is conducted. Research Section B concerns the implementation of this initial evaluation. Various data collection methods were used in conducting the study.

A1. Document Study

- An analysis of documents provided by the client to reconstruct policy theory.

A2. Interviews and focus group.

- Interviews with 4 designers and administrators of the Policy Compass (held during November-December 2023).
- A focus group meeting with designers and administrators of the Policy Compass (including representatives of implementing organizations) to verify findings from the document study and interviews (held January 10, 2024; 9 participants).

B1. Survey

- A survey of awareness and use of the Policy Compass among policy and legislative officials and their managers (N=664). The survey was conducted as part of the Central Government Personnel Survey (PER) during February-March 2024.

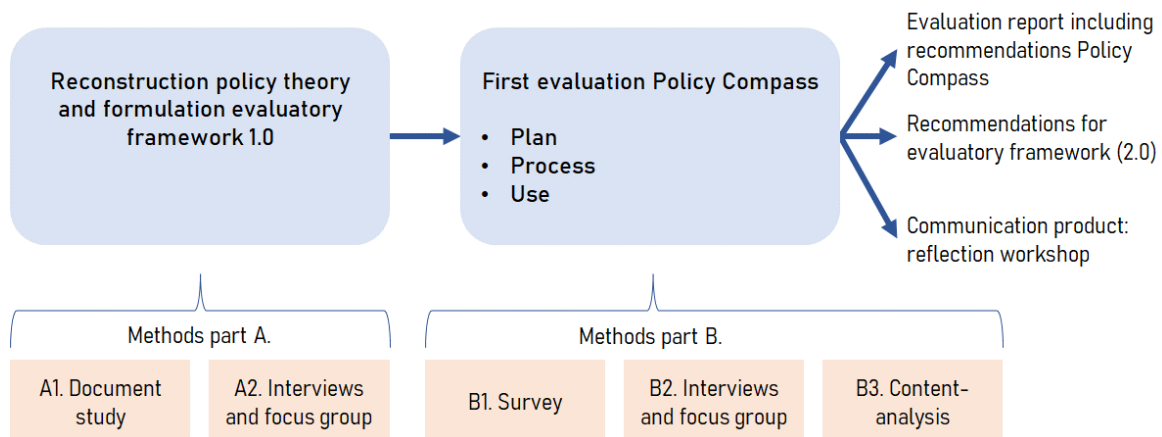
B2. Interviews and a focus group.

- Interviews with members of departmental expertise teams, users of the Policy Compass (policy and legislative officials) and their managers (12 interviews, conducted in the period March-May 2024).
- A focus group meeting with members of the interdepartmental Policy Compass Working Group to verify the findings from the interviews for research component B (held on June 11, 2024, with approximately 15 participants).

B3 Content analysis.

- An automated content analysis of all policy and legislative files offered for Internet consultation in the period March-December 2023.
- An in-depth text analysis of 16 of these files.

The research approach as well as the associated data collection methods are summarized in the figure below.

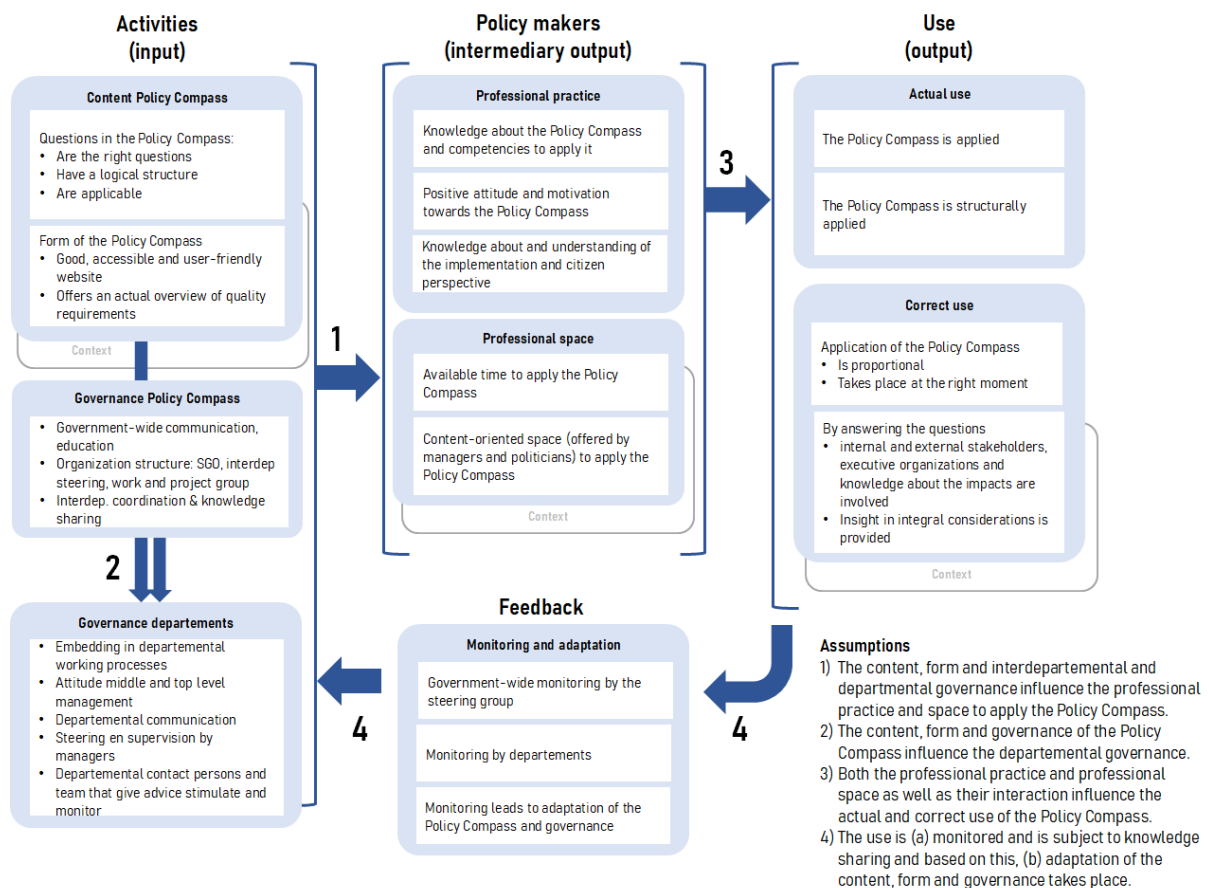


Policy Theory of the Policy Compass and Research Evaluation Framework

To arrive at an evaluation framework of the Policy Compass, the policy theory was first reconstructed. A policy theory is the set of assumptions about the relationship between goals, means and effects that underlie a policy or regulation. In Figure 2, we have represented at an aggregate level the main assumptions about the relationship between activities (input), policy practice and official space (intermediate output), and use (output) through arrows. Given the scope of this study, these are therefore assumptions as far as relevant to the use of the Policy Compass. The arrows in this figure relate to the following assumptions:

1. The content, form and interdepartmental and departmental governance of the Policy Compass influence professional practice and l space to apply the Policy Compass.
2. The content, form and interdepartmental governance of the Policy Compass influence the departmental governance of the Policy Compass.
3. Both professional practice and space and their interaction influence the actual and proper use of the Policy Compass.
4. Monitoring and knowledge sharing takes place about usage, and result in adjustments to the content and form of the Policy Compass and its governance.

The representation of policy theory in Figure 2 also forms the evaluation framework of this study. The evaluation framework is elaborated in indicators (see Chapter 2), based on which the first evaluation of the policy compass is conducted in this study.



Findings

Findings related to the elements of the evaluation framework are presented below. First, findings regarding utilization (output) are presented, followed by findings regarding inputs and intermediate outputs. The latter can be seen as measures and facilities that influence utilization. Understanding these factors helps to explain the use of the Policy Compass and to identify entry points for formulating recommendations for improvement.

Findings regarding the extent of awareness and use of the Policy Compass are robust because based on a representative sample with a good response rate (21%). Findings related to opinions of managers of policy and legislative officials and findings derived from interviews and the in-depth text analysis of selected files are more indicative given the small number of respondents and files.

Actual use. Survey results show that a slight majority (56%) of policy and legislative officials and their managers within central government are familiar with the Policy Compass. Use to date is still limited. 18% of survey respondents report using the Policy Compass. Therefore, one cannot speak of structural and widespread use (yet). The use of the Policy Compass varies greatly between departments. To these conclusions on usage, it should be noted that the Policy Compass has recently been implemented and is a process of change that may take years. Therefore, it is quite early to chart usage.

Proper use. The quality of use of the Policy Compass shows a diverse picture. The intention is that the Policy Compass is used from the beginning of the policy and regulation preparation process and helps in making integral considerations and involving internal and external stakeholders. The findings show that in some cases, the questions from the Policy Compass

provide guidance during the legislative or policy process and are applied early on. In other cases, the use of the Policy Compass has proven to be a “tick-the-box exercise” at the end of the preparation process of a policy or regulation. In particular when policy and legislative officials are only confronted with the obligation to use the Policy Compass during Internet consultation, they experience it as pointless and a burden. It is noteworthy that in almost all the Policy Compass forms surveyed only one policy option was explored, whereas the Policy Compass aims at the integral consideration of multiple policy options. Respondents' opinions vary on whether the Policy Compass better identifies policy impacts and involves stakeholders earlier and better. The low number of respondents who feel that citizens are involved earlier and in a better way, is striking.

Content. There is broad support for the content of the Policy Compass among policy and legislative officials and executives familiar with it. The questions are considered logical and providing an up-to-date overview of quality requirements and available tools and assessment methods. The website is perceived by many respondents as user-friendly, understandable and accessible. The Policy Compass unifies, 'rationalizes' and synchronizes policy and legislative preparation processes and contributes to a shared understanding of how to make good policy and regulations. However, there is a need for customization and clarity on 1) what types of policy and legislative files the Policy Compass should be used for, 2) whether application can be limited to parts of the Policy Compass, and 3) how the Policy Compass can be used during the policy and legislative process. Despite positive judgments about the website, there are also many respondents who indicate that the multitude of questions, activities and assessment methods that must be applied makes the Policy Compass very complex.

Governance. The organizational arrangements for implementing the Policy Compass are taking shape. Efforts to generate awareness are still of limited effectiveness. The incorporation of the Policy Compass into departmental work processes is still limited, although there are differences between departments and divisions. Within departments use is better embedded in legislative and regulatory processes than in policy processes, which appear to be less structured. In steering and monitoring usage, the balance is sought between obligation and stimulating. Stimulation is necessary to achieve early and high-quality use of the Policy Compass. A degree of obligation is needed to achieve structural use, but that may come at the expense of quality. Among managers who are familiar with the Policy Compass, there is broad support for the instrument. However, their efforts to steer and monitor use are limited. Departmental expertise teams and contact persons, who are supposed to promote and support use are still little known.

Professional practice and space. Many policy and legislative officials are positive or at least neutral about the Policy Compass. However, this does not automatically result in its application. Limited time and limited substantive space are perceived as major obstacles. These obstacles occur particularly in preparing policies and legislation of a relatively (legally) technical nature, in implementing European regulations and when there is already a clear political choice. While some respondents consider the application of the Policy Compass pointless when there is a clear political preference or assignment, others indicate that even then a good integral consideration of different policy options is necessary. The Policy Compass is seen as a support to claim time and substantive space.

Monitoring. The Policy Compass has recently been implemented and monitoring is still evolving. At this point it is too early to expect adjustments to the Policy Compass based on monitoring results.

Recommendations

The implementation process of the Policy Compass began in March 2023. Given its recent start, we recommend caution in making far-reaching changes to the Policy Compass and adding new elements at this time, but to continue on the path laid out. The implementation is a change and learning process that takes time and requires efforts that are sustained over a longer period of time. Based on the findings of this study, we have formulated a couple of recommendations in the report, which we outline in broad terms below.

- Invest in further increasing awareness of the instrument. Communication, training and education, and the expertise teams and contact points at departments play an important role in this.
- Define the use of Policy Compass not as an end in itself but as a means that contributes to the quality of policy and regulations and to the further professionalization of the practice of policy making.
- Ensure a good balance between obligation on the one hand and steering by stimulating, inspiring and motivating on the other.
- Make no significant changes to the Policy Compass at this time. However, do consider how specific action can be taken on problems that have been identified, such as inconsistencies in the Policy Compass questions, lack of clarity of certain concepts or questions, or the perceived complexity.
- In consultation with departments, explore how more customization and differentiation is possible. For example, develop a “light version” of the Policy Compass, run pilots with it and evaluate them.
- Clarify how the Policy Compass can be applied during policy processes.
- Ensure better incorporation of the Policy Compass into existing work processes and formats.
- Ensure a more committed governance of the use of the instrument within departments. Encourage managers within boards and departments to enhance the steering and monitoring of the use of the Policy Compass.
- Invest in the awareness and resources of the expertise teams and contact points within the departments.
- Stimulate the further implementation of the Policy Compass within departments and measures to promote its use.
- Make the interdepartmental steering of the instrument more committed and encourage members of the steering committee to act as ambassadors of the Policy Compass to their departments.
- In a subsequent evaluation, repeat not only the survey and automated content analysis, but also conduct a qualitative analysis of the use of the Policy Compass during processes of preparing policies and regulations.

Chapter 4 of this report lists more specific recommendations for the continued implementation of the Policy Compass, as well as for the design of future evaluation research of this tool.