



PUBLIC POLICY TO REDUCE INEQUALITIES ACROSS EUROPE

Hope Versus Reality

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022935480

ISBN 978–0–19–289858–6

DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780192898586.001.0001

Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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Acknowledgements

This book was funded by a Horizon 2020 European Research Council Grant (Award Number REVINEQUAL-07-2016). It forms one part of the IMAJINE—*Integrative Mechanisms for Addressing Spatial Justice and Territorial Inequalities in Europe*—project (Principal Investigator: Professor Michael Woods). The IMAJINE website can be found at <http://imajine-project.eu/#home>

We thank Heather Mitchell for her work as coauthor of the qualitative systematic review on Health in All Policies (Cairney et al., 2021). Heather coproduced the long list of articles on which we draw to inform Chapter 7.

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1

Introduction

Why Do Governments Struggle to Reduce Inequalities?

Introduction

This book asks why governments struggle to reduce inequalities. In particular, we focus on inequalities policies and policymaking in states and regions within the European Union. There is a broad consensus across European states and the EU that social and economic inequality is a problem that needs to be addressed. Yet it is difficult to find clear evidence that this consensus is translating into substantive action or new practices and policy outcomes.

While this general problem is not unique to particular regions, there is clear value in a focus on the EU. Regional and country case studies are essential to our understanding of how different governments respond to similar policy problems and policymaking complexity. Further, developments within the EU highlight the importance of spatial rescaling, in which old assumptions about which type of government should take responsibility for policy are under challenge.

In that context, the originality of this book's contribution is that it approaches the issue of inequalities policy from two linked perspectives: the functional and the territorial. A focus on functional requirements highlights what policymakers think they need to deliver policy successfully. A focus on territorial politics highlights contestation over defining the policy problem and competing demands to take responsibility for policy solutions and outcomes. We show that this contestation, and the spread of responsibilities in multi-level policymaking systems, contributes to different policy approaches across spatial scales.

The problem of inequalities policies is not unique to Europe

There are three main reasons why the policy and policymaking problems we describe are not new or particular to the EU or its states and regions. First, inequality has long been treated as a 'wicked issue' (Rittel and Webber, 1973; compare with Turnbull and Hoppe, 2018). 'Wicked' describes ambiguous and complex problems that appear to defy policy consensus and remain unsolvable by the available policy instruments. Both the definition of the problem and the range of available policy responses are contested unusually highly. Key aspects of

contestation include: the prioritization of some forms of inequality over others, such as in relation to class, geography, gender, race, and migration, and debates on its cause, such as when poverty and low income represent a structural problem to be solved by the state, or an individual problem to be solved with market forces and limited state support. There are longstanding arguments about whether economic inequality is a micro-level problem to be addressed by equipping individuals with the right resources and skills, or a macro-level or structural problem rooted in the organization of the economy and society. Further, it may be defined narrowly in relation to income, or more broadly as the unequal capacity of people to participate in economic, social, and political life.

Second, there is a general tendency for governments to define the problem of inequality in a misleadingly simple way that makes it look manageable and susceptible to the policy tools they have at their disposal. They respond by describing their singular vision to address the policy problem, and focus heavily on the requirement for certain forms of collaborative or ‘joined up’ policymaking to deal with the problem’s tendency to cross many government departments (Cairney and St.Denny, 2020). This approach has contributed to the plethora of terms to capture inequalities (such as ‘multiple deprivation’) and connect inequalities to an overall policy response (such as ‘social inclusion’), but they are restating rather than resolving the problem.

Further, governments produce a messy compromise, in which they make a commitment to reduce inequalities in health or education but rule out the policy instruments—such as tax and spending to boost economic redistribution—that seem to be fundamental to policy success. Many of their economic measures, favouring markets over state intervention, may undermine a commitment to equity in these sectors. As such, they make simultaneous commitments to contradictory objectives: a new explicit commitment to reduce inequalities in many policy sectors, and an implicit commitment to maintain economic inequalities during routine government business.

The consequence is a twin-track approach in which governments pursue policies that reduce *and* exacerbate the problem they profess to solve, suggesting that the analysis of one track makes little sense without knowledge of the other. They describe holistic government as though sectoral and territorial integration and harmony could be achieved. They promise ‘inclusive’ growth policies, although there are trade-offs to be made. They talk of ‘levelling up’ (Jennings et al., 2021) as a way of avoiding the issue of redistribution. They even promise to make all regions more ‘competitive’, although it is—by definition—impossible. Further, reducing inequalities according to one set of criteria may result in increasing them as measured by others.

Third, all governments face a major contrast between what they need to happen to solve inequalities (in other words, a political system’s *functional requirements*) and what actually happens in real world policymaking. Governments require a

simple, orderly, and joined-up process to face a ‘wicked’ problem, but actually face the need to deal with complex, contested, and fragmented processes that can exacerbate the problem. A government’s lack of success in reducing inequalities relates partly to *choice*, when they accept that many policies maintain social and economic inequalities, and partly to *necessity*, when the policy process is beyond their full knowledge and control.

Why focus on spatial developments within the European Union?

In that context, our new research relates to the general policy problem and policymaking process, *and* the specific ways in which policymakers address it in different spatial contexts. Policymaking approaches to inequality always have a spatial frame of reference. Yet the spatial dimension of policymaking has often been taken for granted, with the nation state presumed to have primacy. Developments above and below the nation state have challenged this assumption. For example, globalization debates highlight how global production and trade systems can shape a division of labour that reinforces inequality, as well as the role of multiple governments and international organizations in challenging or reinforcing inequality. Further, there have long been internal debates in the EU about the balance between economic and social priorities, including concerns about inequalities within the European Single Market and discussions about the concept of ‘social Europe’ as a counterpart.

Recent years have seen a process in which policymaking responsibilities and networks have migrated to new scales below the state (Keating, 2013). This realignment can fragment policymaking systems along territorial lines, such as when different levels of government have responsibility for different policy instruments that could be used to address the same policy problem. Or, it can encourage a better connected system that focuses on joining-up multiple public services and functions at local levels. It could reduce some inequalities or generate new forms of inequality, either between regions or within them. On the one hand, decentralization raises the possibility of a ‘race to the bottom’, with regions competing to attract investment through low taxes and reduced social spending. On the other hand, rescaling upwards to Europe and downwards to regions and cities may generate new levels of solidarity and provide a better match between the spatial scale of the problem and the response. Indeed, there is a long history of place-based approaches to deprivation, which have sought to harness different public services at the point of delivery to join-up policies and priorities in social services with spatial planning.

These developments intersect with debates on the causes of inequalities. Some have argued that they are manifest and relevant only at the individual level while

others have insisted that differences among territories are themselves a problem. The European Union accepted the latter argument by introducing the concept of ‘territorial cohesion’ (alongside economic and social cohesion) as part of its focus on ‘spatial justice’.

Analysing the pursuit of spatial justice and territorial cohesion

The book forms one part of a larger project: the European Research Council Horizon 2020 project *Integrative Mechanisms for Addressing Spatial Justice and Territorial Inequalities in Europe* (IMAJINE). It builds on IMAJINE work that seeks to (1) understand the meaning of concepts such as spatial justice and territorial cohesion, while (2) enriching the empirical knowledge base on territorial inequalities in Europe, and (3) understanding the impact of crises on inequalities and policy responses (including economic crisis and the adoption of austerity policies, humanitarian crises with an impact on migration to the EU, and the emerging impact of COVID-19 and policy responses).

A key initial finding from IMAJINE is that, much like the pursuit of equity, the idea of spatial justice is a contested concept which has multiple dimensions and is difficult to operationalize. There is high political commitment to spatial justice, facilitated by its ambiguity which allows many actors to commit to the vague idea without making firm commitments to specific responses. Subsequently, there is low agreement about what spatial justice means, and how to cooperate to achieve it.

Weckroth et al., (2017) show that terms such as spatial justice and cohesion are ill-defined in research, while Weckroth and Moisiso, (2018) find similar problems in policymaking. Weckroth et al.’s, (2018) interviews with EU, national, and regional policymakers also identify clear tensions between actors when they seek to make sense of spatial justice and territorial cohesion in practice. There appears to be a low likelihood that the pursuit of spatial justice can be well-defined, commonly understood by a large collection of policy actors, and applied to problems such as territorial inequalities in a straightforward way. Instead, these interviews show that the definition of the problem (including its key elements and causes) and the range of available policy responses are ambiguous and subject to contestation in a highly complex and multi-level policymaking environment.

IMAJINE studies of EU policymaking reinforce this sense of terminological confusion and limited policy progress. Weckroth and Moisiso (2020: 183–184) examine two decades of EU policy, to (1) identify its general commitment to address ‘uneven geographical development’ but also its ‘peculiar, elusive and contested’ nature, and (2) trace its intellectual development from a macroeconomic focus on economic growth and regional Gross Domestic Product (GDP)

disparities towards focusing on individual experiences, including perceptions of regional variations in access to public services (2020: 187).

Similarly, Jones et al. (2020: 894–896) describe pressure on EU cohesion policy resulting from (1) its ‘dubious economic effectiveness’, since its own measures suggest that regional disparities are increasing, and (2) failure to counter ‘growing political and philosophical critiques of the very ideals of furthering European integration’. One consequence of limited policy and political progress is a push for new ways of thinking. In particular, there is some encouragement for the autonomy and capacity of regions to define and promote their own spatial justice agendas rather than being seen as perennial, inevitable losers in someone else’s race to the top (see also Shucksmith et al., 2021).

Three issues in spatial justice policy and policymaking

This IMAJINE research highlights new manifestations of continuous debates about the policy agenda: what does the pursuit of spatial justice mean, and is it a useful alternative to the idea of cohesion? Who should be primarily responsible for taking this agenda forward: the EU, member states, or regions?

In that context, three empirical findings from interviews conducted for the IMAJINE project—such as in Weckroth et al. (2018) and Jones et al. (2020)—represent a starting point for this book, since they each highlight the difference between policy actors’ *hopes for policymaking* to address these problems and the *theoretical and empirical study of policymaking* which explains how such problems endure. First, while EU policymakers and IMAJINE interviewees (spread across multiple EU states and regions) hope that ‘multi-level governance’ (MLG) will boost cooperation, it may also exacerbate an already fragmented agenda. Second, while they may seek the benefits of decentralization, to encourage local autonomy and creativity, they also seek centralization to encourage common standards. Third, when they seek to redefine the policy agenda, to focus on spatially equal access to public services, they expose unresolved problems with policy incoherence across relevant sectors, such as health and education. We describe each issue here, in order to introduce the key themes of the book.

1. *The gap between expectations and experiences of multi-level policymaking* Weckroth et al.’s (2018: 17) respondents describe ‘multi-level governance’ as ‘one possible way to integrate the bottom-up and top-down approaches for addressing territorial inequality’. As such, they highlight a profound difference between *normative visions* versus *empirical studies* of multi-level policymaking.

Normative visions connect MLG to policymaking design, to encourage cooperation among many organizations. They treat MLG as a choice, combining hope with exhortation to describe the potential for many levels and types of governments to produce policies independently *and* contribute to a wider coherent agenda. For example, there is a stream of literature arguing that there is an optimal level of operation for each governmental function and that this explains the territorial allocation of functions (see Hooghe and Marks, 2001; 2003). Yet optimality is a contested concept, depending on the aims to be achieved. Further, even if there was an optimal level, it does not explain why competences are placed where they are. Rather, their distribution is the outcome of political contestation in which claims to functional efficiency compete with interests, identities, and ideologies (Keating, 2013).

Empirical policy studies highlight perennial gaps between policymaking design and actual processes. They treat the absence of a single central government as a necessity, with reference to two concepts (Cairney et al., 2019). First, *bounded rationality* describes the cognitive and organizational limits of policymakers, who are only able to pay attention to a tiny proportion of their responsibilities, and delegate responsibility for the rest. Second, *complex policymaking environment* describes policymakers operating in a context where many policymakers and influencers are spread across many authoritative venues, each with their own rules and ways of thinking. As such, policymakers have limited understanding and even less control of their environments. Indeed, studies of complex systems suggest that policy outcomes emerge in the absence of central control or well-ordered coordination.

In other words, the multi-level spread of responsibilities to address territorial inequalities amplifies policy ambiguity and contestation. There is scope to agree on the broad meaning and implications of policy aims such as spatial justice, but also great potential for confusion and contradiction when governments adopt specific policies independently of each other. Indeed, even the simple mapping of policymaking responsibilities is difficult. The end result of mapping exercises may be an overwhelming list of possible measures that we would struggle to assign to each level or type of government (Cairney et al, 2021).

2. *The tensions between scales and modes of policymaking*

Although IMAJINE interviewees may describe vague support for the idea of decentralization, Weckroth et al. (2018: 14) identify ‘the tension between different levels of governance’ when they must work together. This tension relates partly to specific relationships, such as central versus local government, but also the more general tension between so-called ‘top-down’ versus ‘bottom-up’ approaches to policymaking. The latter includes encouraging meaningful levels of decentralization to foster ‘the ability of stakeholders to shape more just social and economic forms’ in relation to a ‘particular

region's capabilities and liberties to shape its own future' (Jones et al., 2020: 897–898). As such, it encourages the autonomy to define spatial justice and identify the spatial unit most appropriate to the task, as opposed to more top-down ideas in which the definition of appropriate spatial scales and outcomes are monitored from the centre by EU or member state organizations. Yet in practice, central governments encourage *and* discourage decentralization in different ways, and the vague commitment to a decentralization principle does not help us predict what happens next.

These tensions are important because they highlight the competition to exercise power to produce a wide variety of outcomes. By definition, the commitment to meaningful decentralization and encouragement of local stakeholder and citizen engagement is a commitment to accepting outcomes not chosen at the centre but within often-implicit limits. As such, keeping resources and powers for addressing inequality at the level of the nation state *and* encouraging a tradition of local action helps to challenge old ways of working to *some extent*, with the potential to create new winners and losers. However, these dynamics and outcomes are not predictable; they cannot be deduced from the formal responsibilities of each level of government. Rather, we expect to see differentiated definitions of inequality and policies serving different social groups from one place and time to another.

3. *The many ways to pursue equity in different policy sectors*

Weckroth et al.'s (2018) respondents also made frequent reference to the idea that territorial equality can be ensured via some kind of spatially equal access to public services. Similarly, Weckroth and Moisiso (2020: 5–8) track how EU policymakers describe a shift in focus from reducing regional disparities of GDP to disparities in access to services such as healthcare and education, summed up in phrases including 'ensuring everybody has access to the same opportunities' regardless of where they live, 'providing access to basic services to all EU citizens', and 'spatially equal access to services and opportunities'.

This new focus adds a further dimension to spatial justice policy: *multi-sectoral policymaking* (Cairney et al., 2021). We explore the relationship between the separate pursuit of equity (or attempt to reduce unfair inequalities) in policy sectors such as health and education as well as intersectoral initiatives in relation to spatial justice and gender mainstreaming.

In theory, these sectoral and intersectoral initiatives should complement each other. In practice, they have only tenuous connections to each other, and possess their own frames of reference, rules and norms, and networks. For example, studies of health equity tend to reject a focus on access to healthcare, in favour of more 'upstream' measures to address inequalities related to income, occupation, education, and social and physical environments. Further, critical studies of education equity describe policy agendas on equal access to schools as a way to

cover up more fundamental inequalities in educational outcomes. In other words, a shift of thinking on territorial cohesion towards public services may contradict established ways of thinking about those services in each sector.

This tendency towards distinctive sectoral ideas and ‘sectoral policy styles’ relates to the general dynamics of policymaking systems: bounded rationality prompts senior policymakers to delegate most of their responsibilities to actors such as civil servants, who rely on interest groups and experts specific to particular sectors or issues within them. These policymakers and influencers form policy communities with their own ways of framing and addressing policy problems (Cairney, 2021d: 79–80). Indeed, the distinctiveness of policy styles in each sector may be as important as the distinctive styles associated with different countries or regions (2021: 77).

This sectoral dynamic undermines the kinds of intersectoral policymaking that seem to be so important to initiatives such as territorial cohesion. Although the world’s most pressing problems (including inequalities) *require* cooperation across sectors, policy studies tend to identify the general lack of holistic approaches. They identify the problem of policy ‘incoherence’, which means ‘a lack of joined-up government that contributes to a confusing mix of policy instruments’ which ‘contributes to a major gap between expectations and policy outcomes’ (Cairney et al, 2021a: 2, citing Jordan and Halpin, 2006; May et al., 2006).

Further, there is a marked lack of integration among the researchers and practitioners that seek more integration! Some describe approaches that prioritize government, such as centralized planning, whole of government approaches, and reforms to encourage new inter-agency structures or organizations. Others emphasize governance driven by cooperation in the absence of clear hierarchies, such as when levels of government enjoy some autonomy, and governments need to cooperate with non-governmental actors (Tosun and Lang, 2017: 556–561). As such, a slogan-like commitment to joined-up government is insufficient in two main ways: it does not tell us how policy actors either *should* or *will* work together to pursue common policy agendas and outcomes. The pursuit of spatial justice in multiple policy sectors could be centralized to prioritize a common standard or expected outcome, or decentralized to prioritize new and relatively autonomous ways of local collaboration between multiple governments, stakeholders, and citizens at the point of policy delivery.

The approach of the book

Our team’s original guiding question for IMAJINE—*how do states design fiscal regimes and public services to mitigate the effects of socio-economic inequalities?*—is likely to produce many different answers. We would expect variation in relation

to models of territorial governance, economic development, and public service delivery. We aim to show how different approaches vary according to territorial levels, governmental structures, political balances, and the structure of territorial policy communities (Keating, 2013). These approaches take place at different scales, producing a kaleidoscope of activity that often exacerbates inequalities or policy incoherence.

In that context, we seek to relate such practices to real world policy agendas but also to avoid an overly prescriptive approach. On the one hand, we seek to understand the alleged effectiveness of different forms of regional autonomy as mechanisms for promoting spatial justice, and to identify appropriate scales and points for policy intervention to address territorial inequalities. Exploring how different kinds of approaches work in particular contexts provides a way to encourage thoughtful reflection on policymaking experiences. On the other hand, we do not aspire to identify the ‘best’ approach to reduce inequalities, because these matters are subject to value judgements and few approaches to inequalities demonstrate a clear link between policy and outcomes. We examine the arguments for addressing forms of inequality at different spatial scales but argue that there is no normatively-neutral ‘optimal’ level. Much depends on contested definitions of the problem and the forms of inequality that are to be addressed. In a multi-scalar Europe, these matters are worked out in specific institutional and political contexts. Trade-offs and compromises are inevitable.

We also relate territorial politics to sectoral policymaking dynamics. It is common in studies of comparative public policy to focus on specific types of function or sectoral intervention across different cases. This allows the comparison of specific policy programmes and instruments, but it may lose the important element of context. It is rarely possible to hold other factors constant to isolate the effects of specific measures. We adopt an alternative approach, looking at policies in their spatial context and considering how policymakers address intersectoral agendas in that context. Our approach is based on case studies with rich descriptions of key policy sectors (health and education), intersecting strategies (gender mainstreaming), and multiple levels of policymaking (EU, member state, and subnational), to explain how actors define policy problems such as inequalities, identify possible solutions, cooperate and compete across levels, and seek lessons from other governments. Throughout, we focus on the scope for policy learning and transfer across scales of government—including the EU, states and regions, and horizontally across states and regions—while recognizing that learning is a political and technical process (Dunlop and Radaelli, 2013; 2018).

The structure of the book

Part one examines policy learning and transfer to reduce inequalities across Europe, in relation to: the policy theories and concepts that expose a gulf

between policymaking requirements and reality (Chapter 2); our process to ‘map’ the policy instruments spread across many levels and types of government (Chapter 3); and a broad historical and comparative narrative on the rescaling of welfare state and inequalities policy responsibilities in Europe (Chapter 4). These chapters establish, in general terms, the opportunities and constraints to policy change, and help to introduce the empirical chapters in Part two. For example, a series of tables (Chapter 3) helps to demonstrate the unusually complicated nature of policymaking in this field. The examples relate specifically to the book’s case study chapters which envisage different ways to address inequalities in multi-level and multi-sectoral contexts: comparing the main policy instruments—including public service provision, and fiscal and welfare measures—associated with sub-state policymaking (Chapter 5); exploring holistic strategies to promote health equity (Chapter 6); comparing the instruments used in different ways to promote education equity (Chapter 7), and; mapping the range of policy instruments that contribute to gender mainstreaming (Chapter 8).

Chapter 2 examines the scope for policy learning and transfer to reduce inequalities in complex and multi-level policymaking systems. Policy learning is the use of new information to update policy-relevant knowledge, while policy transfer is the use of knowledge about policy and policymaking in one government to inform policy and policymaking in another. European governments have increasingly decentralized to the local and regional level, albeit in very different ways. This creates scope for different modes of policymaking and relationships with stakeholders. It opens the possibility not merely of policy differentiation but of experimentation and learning. Governments aspire to learn from each other’s experiences of inequalities policies, and often project the sense that policy learning can be a technocratic rather than political process.

This chapter examines two key aspects of this process. First, we compare two stories of policy learning and transfer processes. An *agent-based story* accentuates policy actors and their functional requirements of policymaking. Actors identify policy problems and seek solutions from other governments, using policy analysis, design, and management techniques that break policymaking into a series of stages. A *context-based story* accentuates the structural and institutional factors that constrain or facilitate policy management, explaining major gaps between actor requirements and actual policymaking dynamics.

This comparison introduces a policymaking dilemma: what can policymakers do if they seek agent-based policy learning but accept the context-based story? We outline the IMAJINE framework to encourage policy learning in that wider context. We focus on establishing the comparability of different government experiences in relation to how they define the policy problem, their political systems, and the dynamics of their policymaking systems. We use this framework to reflect on the ability of governments to engage in learning and transfer.

Second, governments talk about ‘evidence based’ learning but also participation and the local ‘coproduction’ of policy with stakeholders, via a suite of participatory processes designed to seek consensus. In practice, both forms of activity can contradict each other, or at least expose tensions in relation to who should be involved, whose knowledge counts, who is responsible for resolving disputes, and how much local deviation from national policies to accept. These issues are common to all forms of policymaking, but particularly acute in relation to inequalities: high uncertainty and ambiguity about the nature of the problem accentuate debates on who should be responsible to solve it. While governments use the language of evidence-based and coproduced policy to help depoliticize this process, we highlight the inevitable contestation in policy learning.

Chapter 3 examines our ability to ‘map’ the policymaking responsibilities to reduce inequalities. In other words, to identify clearly the relationship between (a) key policy instruments to reduce inequalities, and (b) the government responsible for their use. Mapping is essential to policy learning, since we need to know which policymakers are jointly responsible for policy problems, solutions, and outcomes. However, mapping exercises highlight a confusing picture in which collaboration may be possible but is subject to high uncertainty about what to do and whom to hold responsible for action. Further, contestation and the role of informal influence make it necessary to compare the on-paper maps based on formal responsibilities with the in-practice processes that are not described well in the public record. There remains high uncertainty about who is responsible for policy instruments and outcomes, and coordinative practices such as intergovernmental relations only address this problem to a limited extent.

Chapter 4 relates these policymaking dynamics to spatial politics. It examines the substance and impact of debates on the distribution of policymaking responsibilities to address inequalities. Most of the economic resources and powers for addressing inequality are at the level of the nation-state. Yet there is also a tradition of local action, focused on planning policies and service provision. Governments and the EU have pursued policies of territorial cohesion, ostensibly with an economic rationale but informed by social and political considerations.

Rescaling has challenged this old division of labour. Spatial economic strategies (whether centrally or locally-led) always generate winners and losers, provoking contestation and an opening to the social dimension. In recent decades, European states have seen the rise of an intermediate, ‘regional’ level of government, which itself has become an object of contestation. For some the region is a space of economic competition, for others a space of social solidarity, while others again invest it with identitarian or democratic meanings (Keating, 2017). Classical theories of federalism argued that redistributive functions should be allocated at the highest level, to harness resources and avoid the race to the bottom. This is no longer tenable, as distributive issues arise at all levels and in relation to all functions.

The boundaries of decentralized units are contested, as they determine who benefits from and who contributes to local communities of solidarity. At the local and regional level, there are territorial policy communities, in which the balance of influence between capital, labour, and social interests varies (Keating and Wilson, 2014; Keating, Cairney, and Hepburn, 2009). We therefore identify differentiated definitions of inequality and policies serving different social groups from one place to another.

Chapter 5 compares the strategies of different sub-state governments in the UK, Spain, Italy, and Belgium to define inequalities and respond through public services and fiscal and welfare measures. It argues that the pressures for a ‘race to the bottom’ are balanced by those for a ‘race to the top’. The varied outcomes are explained by differences in competences, available fiscal resources, policy capacity, the ideological composition of territorial governments, and the composition of territorial policy communities. The outcome is a complex pattern of differentiation within national welfare regimes which, at the limit, gives rise to regional welfare regimes while in other cases there is merely a fragmentation of welfare policy. It is not possible to judge which regions are most effective in reducing inequalities as outcome data are not always available, it is difficult to attribute differences to territorial government policies, and there are normative judgements to be made. It is, however, possible to identify distinct strategies and favoured groups.

Chapter 6 examines the development of ‘Health in All Policies’ (HiAP) approaches to health equity, encouraged by international organizations such as the WHO and the EU, and EU states and regions. HiAP is a broad strategy to describe the need to address a *policy problem* (the ‘social determinants’ of health inequalities), with a collection of evidence-informed *solutions*, combined with a *policy style* (which favours intersectoral action), and high political commitment. There is a large and growing literature on its adoption, but it lacks evidence on the delivery and success of HIAP initiatives.

We focus on three key aspects. First, how does HiAP compare conceptually with the new public service agenda in relation to territorial cohesion? We explore why HiAP rejects a focus on healthcare in favour of more ‘upstream’ population health measures, how this thinking could inform the idea that equal access to public services aids cohesion or equity, and the limited extent to which HiAP thinking is reflected in actual policymaking in the EU. Second, what can countries and regions learn from HiAP leaders? For example, Nordic experiences provide best case examples but also cautionary tales of limited progress. Third, we examine the spatial dimension of health equity policy, in which central government health departments recognize the value of collaborating across government, and with subnational and local governments and non-governmental actors, to combine a general focus on health with local initiatives to join up services at the point of delivery. Although often described as a single coherent approach, there are relatively centralized or localized variants of HiAP, reflecting a tendency

in public health to see policy progress from the top-down and describe local variations in relation to implementation gaps. As such, these experiences help inform comparable initiatives to foster spatial justice.

Chapter 7 examines how national governments and international organizations, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the EU, declare policy success in reducing educational inequalities. Compared to HiAP, education equity policy is more contested. There are equivalent social justice approaches that focus on ‘out of school’ contributors to inequality of attainment, but they tend to be overshadowed by ‘neoliberal’ approaches that focus on equal access to schools and comparing the performance of schools and education systems.

We follow the structure of Chapter 6 to focus on three key aspects. First, how does education equity policy compare conceptually with new agendas on territorial cohesion? While there is a clear policy focus on education services, critical accounts highlight a tendency for neoliberal agendas on equal access to schools to exacerbate inequalities in educational outcomes. Second, what can countries and regions learn from allegedly leading countries with comparable systems? This comparability relates partly to policy aims (how does each government define the problem, and identify politically feasible solutions?) and territorial differences, including the size of the state and division of responsibilities across national and local governments and education specific organizations. Again, Nordic experiences provide best case examples but also cautionary tales, in which well-established approaches to education are under threat from the spread of neoliberal agendas (with the exception of Finland). Third, we examine the spatial dimension of education equity policy, in which there is a general tendency to decentralize policy delivery (responsibility for managing schools) but centralize the design of the curriculum and student testing to foster performance management and high-salience accountability. As with HiAP, there are relatively centralized or localized variants of education policy, but with a greater tendency in education research to focus on the positive role of bottom-up policymaking as an antidote to centralization. As such, these experiences provide a different perspective to inform comparable initiatives to foster spatial justice.

Chapter 8 examines strategies to foster gender equality. Gender mainstreaming (GM) is defined by the [Council of Europe \(1998: 15\)](#) as ‘the (re)organization, improvement, development, and evaluation of policy processes, so that a gender equality perspective is incorporated in all policies at all levels and at all stages, by the actors normally involved in policy-making’. As such, it is an intersectoral initiative that asks policymakers across governments to consider gender in everything they do. This chapter explains why such strategies look straightforward in theory but seem incoherent in practice, particularly when multiple levels of government share responsibility for different aspects. The sheer weight of measures, combined with the spread of policymaking responsibility across many governments

operating at different territorial scales, helps explain why there would always be obstacles to joined-up government.

Again, we follow the lead of Chapter 6 to focus on three key aspects. First, we consider how policymakers define equity or equality in relation to gender, to identify different conceptions of ‘gender’ and ‘equality’ that lead to more or less interventionist forms of policy (with some implications for territorial cohesion policies). Second, we examine the multi-level and multi-sectoral nature of GM policy and policymaking. We identify how policy and policymaking trade-offs can be identified and tackled but never fully resolved, when actors need to negotiate the meaning of gender equity, choose more or less interventionist policies, and seek policy coherence when many levels of government are involved. Third, we consider how governments learn from leading countries. While Nordic countries have contributed to the expansion of political commitment to gender equality, there is generally no equivalent commitment to effective concrete action.

Chapter 9 concludes that EU national and regional governments promote many separate equity, equality, or justice initiatives across territories and sectors, without knowing if they are complementary or contradictory. Indeed, it seems unrealistic to expect a coherent overall vision to reduce inequalities across the EU, and we are not aiming to produce a manual of best practice of ‘what works’ that would be applicable across these cases. Our objective, rather, is to show how policies on inequalities are shaped, from problem definition to implementation, by local context. In that context, there are some lessons to be drawn. For example, rhetorical commitment to inequalities strategies provides a poor predictor of concrete action and outcomes, and a normative commitment to policy rescaling does not predict well the dynamics that will arise. Further, neither issue can—or should be—addressed with reference to technical fixes. Rather, policymaking is inherently a politically-contested process and this activity sits at the heart of democracy. Although these general insights are well known to policy scholars, they remain important to governments seeking to solve political problems with technocratic solutions.

Methods

This book combines methods to produce empirical case studies informed by multiple theoretical perspectives. Chapters 2 and 4 synthesize literatures on multi-level policymaking, comparative regional studies, and policy analysis, learning, and transfer to provide a framework to guide and interpret the case studies. Chapter 3 draws on studies of policy instruments and tools, examples of policy mapping, and the documentary analysis of government sources, to produce tables of policymaking responsibilities across policy sectors. Chapter 5 draws primarily on new documentary analysis and secondary sources, while reflecting on insights from multiple research projects (led by Keating) and based on semi-structured interviews with policy practitioners in multiple European states and regions.

Chapters 6–8 draw on a series of qualitative systematic reviews of HiAP, education equity, and gender mainstreaming policy research. Initially, we published two 25,000 word reviews on *Open Research Europe*, a peer-reviewed and open access article repository for studies funded by the European Research Council. Cairney et al. (2021) and Cairney and Kippin (2021) provide a full discussion of rationale and methods, which we summarize here (and in Cairney et al., 2022) by modifying Kuckertz and Block’s (2021) guide to analysing systematic reviews:

1. *Rationale.* In each sector, policy practitioners and researchers seek insights on the policy processes that constrain or facilitate equity policies. However, it is not clear from whom and what they learn. Our aim is to review the use of policy studies in each sector, identifying progress and gaps, and synthesizing insights from policy process research (and each sector’s approach) to facilitate greater understanding across sectors.
2. *The research questions.* Each review’s general guiding question is: how does equity research use policy theory to understand policymaking? We then use sub-questions to guide analysis, including: how do they describe policymaking and the causes of policy change that are vital to equity strategies, and what transferable lessons do these studies provide for each sector and spatial justice?
3. *Engagement with previous reviews.* We drew on comparable studies to highlight the lack of engagement with policy studies in sectoral studies (e.g. Embrett and Randall, 2014; Munro and Cairney, 2020) and to guide our research protocol (Such et al., 2019).
4. *Search terms.* We used sectoral-specific terms to focus on equity policies: Health in All Policies, Healthy Public Policy, integrated health policy; education, equity, and policy; gender equality, mainstreaming, and policy. We then used core terms on policy and policymaking to search manually within articles, including articles providing at least one reference to the policy cycle or a particular stage, or any established policy theory (such as multiple streams analysis) or concept (such new institutionalism).
5. *Databases.* We combined general and sector specific databases. For health, we searched eight: Web of Science, Applied Social Science Index and Abstracts [ASSIA], Centre for Reviews and Dissemination [CRD], the Cochrane Library, Scopus, ProQuest, TRIP, and PROSPERO. For education, we began with a specialist database—Institute of Education Services (ERIC), and used snowballing for core references—then searched the Cochrane/Social Systems Evidence database, Scopus, and Web of Science to explore gaps in coverage. For gender, we used Political Science Complete, Web of Science, Scopus, ProQuest, Science Direct, and searched the first 10 pages of results on Google Scholar to check for gaps of coverage.
6. *The timeliness of the review.* Each search ended in July 2020 (health), May 2021 (education), and October 2021 (gender). Our focus on the long-term

use of insights, rather than state of the art/emergent findings ensures a longer shelf-life of each review.

7. *Inclusion and exclusion criteria.* Initially, we set a low bar for inclusion—to foster immersion within each sector’s literature—by including any peer-reviewed journal article that backed up a reference to a policy concept with at least one relevant citation. We did not insist on engagement with a ‘mainstream’ policy theory (Durnova and Weible, 2020). We then used snowballing to identify key texts in each field, such as books by routinely cited authors and essential ‘grey literature’ publications (including WHO and UNESCO sponsored reports). This approach yielded 113–140 articles per review, and allowed us to foster an interdisciplinary conversation, using policy theories (from political science) to interpret studies produced by health, education, and gender researchers. However, restricting inclusion to English-language peer reviewed articles biased the dataset towards a conversation taking place in a small number of countries (e.g. 40% of education articles were on the US; 50% of HiAP articles were on Australia or Nordic countries; 40% of gender mainstreaming articles were on the EU or cases within the EU).
8. *The aggregation and presentation method.* The rules associated with this method are less prescriptive than with its quantitative equivalent. They foster respect for each author’s methods and aims, and show how the reviewers balanced ‘flexible yet systematic’ searches and analysis by describing and accounting for each key judgement (Sandelowski and Barroso, 2007: xv). In addition, we employed an inductive approach to identify key themes in each field, and present theory-informed narrative reviews, using our initial framework on policymaking to interpret researcher engagement with policy concepts.
9. *The contribution.* Our reviews identify the use of policy studies to inform knowledge of policymaking in each sector’s research. We then synthesize policy theories and concepts to connect insights from multiple disciplines. Our book chapters focus on: how each sector’s discussion of equity compare with discussions of territorial inequalities; what countries and regions can learn from each other’s experience, and; the spatial dimension of policymaking, to explore models of multi-level policymaking in each sector. These experiences help inform comparable initiatives to foster spatial justice.
10. *Implications for future research and practice.* The larger reviews have a global coverage, examining sector-wide research priorities. Chapter 9 focuses in particular on implications for spatial justice and territorial inequalities.

2

Solving Inequalities via Policy Learning and Transfer

Introduction

Policy learning is the use of new information to update policy-relevant knowledge. Policy transfer is the use of knowledge about policy and policymaking in one government to inform policy and policymaking in another (Dunlop and Radaelli, 2013; Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996; 2000; Cairney, 2020a). Multi-level policymaking offers new ways for such learning and transfer to happen, as state and sub-state governments experiment with policy or take lessons from governments addressing inequalities in new ways. Yet it takes place in complex policymaking systems over which no single government has full knowledge or control. Further, learning is a political process that can be pursued in different ways, rather than a rationalist or technical process associated simply with research and expertise. In that context, we explore three aspects of learning and transfer that combine the aims of *policy analysis*, to prescribe learning-informed policy change, and *policymaking studies*, to use theories and case studies to describe learning in context.

First, we compare two stories of policy learning and transfer, driven by (1) *agency*, emphasizing policy actors and their functional requirements of policymaking, or (2) *context*, emphasizing the policymaking environments that constrain and facilitate action. Agency is front-and-centre-stage when learning is to be performed by analysts and policymakers. Policy analysis textbooks focus on learning as an agent-driven process with well-established guidance (e.g. Bardach and Patashnik, 2020). Learning and potential transfer are part of a five main steps: define the problem, identify feasible solutions, assign criteria (such as values and goals) to compare them, predict their outcomes, and make a recommendation to your client (Cairney, 2021b). Learning forms part of a functionalist analysis where actors identify the steps required to turn comparative analysis into policy solutions (Rose, 2005). Or, it is one part of a toolkit to manage stages of the policy process, learning ‘what works and why’ to foster policy improvement (Wu et al., 2017: 132).

However, agency is less central to policy process research, which describes learning and transfer as contingent on context. Actors compete to define problems and determine the manner and source of learning. They operate in a complex policymaking environment where institutions and structures constrain and facilitate action. Institutions provide rules for gathering, interpreting, and using evidence,

while structural factors include the socioeconomic conditions that influence the feasibility of proposed policy change. The result is a mixture of processes in which learning from experts is one of many possibilities (Dunlop and Radaelli, 2018) and transfer takes many forms (Stone, 2012). Further, as Chapter 3 explains, these processes take place across different spatial scales, in which contestation on how to learn and what to transfer varies by level or type of government.

Second, *we explore how policy learning can reflect different modes of governance*. Governments talk about evidence-based learning but also widespread participation, consensus-seeking, and the coproduction of policy with stakeholders and citizens. Comparing these approaches helps to expose tensions between them, in relation to who should be involved, whose knowledge counts, who is responsible for resolving disputes, and how much local deviation from national policies to accept.

These tensions are common to all forms of policymaking, but particularly acute in relation to inequalities: high uncertainty and ambiguity about the nature of the problem accentuate debates on who should be responsible to solve it. While governments use the language of evidence-based and coproduced policy to help depoliticize this process, we highlight the inevitable contestation in policy learning.

Third, *we explore how to facilitate learning with insights from policymaking research*. What can policy analysts do if they seek policy learning but accept that they are constrained by their environments? In other words, they seek to facilitate and explain policy learning, and do not benefit from policymaking research unless they can translate it into practice. Can policy theories provide ‘practical lessons’ (Cairney and Weible, 2017; Weible and Cairney, 2018)?

To that end, we present three steps to inform agency-centred accounts: identify the role of context, use these insights to inform practical analysis, and reflect on the implications. This approach invites participants to incorporate key limitations to policy analysis: problem definition is not in the gift of policy analysts when they encourage learning, and the feasibility of policy transfer depends on the comparability of policymaking rules and socioeconomic conditions faced by each government. We use this approach to frame the case studies of health, education, and gender equity in Chapters 6–8, and reflect on its value in Chapter 9.

Agency-centred policy learning: policy analysis, policy cycle management, and lesson-drawing

In policy analysis textbooks, learning happens when analysts help their clients identify policy problems and choose solutions (see Bardach and Patashnik, 2020; Meltzer and Schwartz, 2019; Mintrom, 2012; Weimer and Vining, 2017; Dunn, 2017; compare with Bacchi, 2009; Stone, 2012). There are five common steps:

1. 'define a policy problem identified by your client;
2. identify technically and politically feasible solutions;
3. use value-based criteria and political goals to compare solutions;
4. predict the outcome of each feasible solution;
5. make a recommendation to your client' (Cairney, 2021a: 12).

To some extent, studies of policy analysts warn readers against too-high expectations for their influence in a large, complex, and competitive policy process (Radin, 2019; Brans et al., 2017; Thissen and Walker, 2013). Still, a key focus is on how to maximize the training and effectiveness of a policy analysis profession (Geva-May, 2005), such as by expanding methods and skills (Radin, 2019: 48). These accounts incorporate policymaking dynamics to help analysts adapt to their environments. For example, an analyst might use their knowledge of the 'rules of the game' to describe an option's political feasibility, or research socioeconomic conditions to predict its technical feasibility.

Such advice has close parallels with policy cycle and stage-based studies inspired by Lasswell's (1956) desire to foster links between policy analysis and policy process research (Weible and Cairney, 2019). For example, Wu et al. (2017: 9) describe 'the public policy process' from the perspective of people seeking to *manage* its 'five vital activities: agenda-setting, formulation, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation'. Further, 'one of the primary purposes of evaluation is, or at least should be, policy learning whereby policy actors learn about what works and why' to foster 'further improvement in programs' (2017: 132). This approach invokes the classic idea of evaluation as a *functional requirement* to update policy-relevant evidence to inform policy change.

Rose adopts a similar practical focus to 'lesson-drawing'. He identifies the requirements of a successful process, in which: the policy to be considered for importation is not unique to another country; a government has sufficient resources to import it (such as information on how and why it works); the policy will work as intended if implemented, and; it does not mark a radical departure from the importer's original policy (Rose, 1993: 132). His ten-step guide includes: learning the language of policy processes; securing policymaker attention; researching 'where to look for lessons'; learning 'by going abroad'; producing a model to describe how and why a programme works; turning it 'into a lesson fitting your own national context'; deciding 'whether the lesson should be adopted' and 'whether the lesson can be applied'; simplifying the lesson's message, and; evaluating the success of your lesson-drawing process (Rose, 2005).

The common theme to these three accounts is that they use an agency-focused lens to interpret policymaking dynamics. Policy analysis texts describe individual actors with the skills to navigate and be effective within policy processes. Policy cycle approaches describe stages from the perspective of actors with the strategies, skills, and 'policy acumen' to manage them (Wu et al., 2017: 142–144; 7).

Both have parallels with Rose's advice, in which the aim is to identify solutions worth adopting and develop the skills to recommend their adoption successfully. Policymaking environments matter, but agency is the central focus.

Context-centred policy learning: bounded rationality and complex policymaking environments

Policy process research situates learning within a wider context. First, it describes 'bounded rationality' and the consequences of the inability to gather information comprehensively, understand it, and use it to produce a logical and consistent account of policymaker aims (Simon, 1976). Instead, individuals use informational shortcuts, combining cognition and emotion to prioritize and interpret a limited amount of evidence to make choices (Cairney and Kwiatkowski, 2017; Lewis, 2013; Kahneman, 2012; Gigerenzer, 2001). Some limits relate to *uncertainty*, or low confidence in one's knowledge of a policy problem, which can be somewhat addressed by relying on trusted experts (Zahariadis, 2007). Other limits relate to *ambiguity*, or the ability to support more than one interpretation of a policy problem. To resolve ambiguity, actors exercise power to generate attention and support for one interpretation at the expense of others (Schneider and Ingram, 1997; Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; Cairney et al., 2016). As such, learning is part of a political process: the nature, meaning, and framing of policy problems—and therefore the policy relevance and value of evidence—is contested (Dunlop and Radaelli, 2013; 2018; Witting, 2017; Cairney, 2016).

Second, it describes the role of policymaking environments as constraining and facilitating action. While some aspects can be anticipated and addressed by skilful actors, others provide limits to agency that cannot be overcome:

- *Limited attention.* Policymakers must ignore almost all of the policy problems for which they are formally responsible. They pay attention to some, and delegate most responsibility to civil servants or other organizations. Policy-making organizations have more resources than individuals, but also develop standard operating procedures to limit their search for information (Koski and Workman, 2018). For example, bureaucrats rely on other actors for information and advice, and they build relationships on trust and information exchange (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; Jordan and Cairney, 2013).
- *Limited choice.* Policymakers inherit organizations, rules, and choices. Most rules are 'path dependent' and 'new' choices are revisions of the old (Rose, 1990; Pierson, 2000; Hogwood and Peters, 1983).
- *Limited central control.* Policy may appear to be made at the 'top' or in the 'centre', but *in practice* policymaking responsibility is spread across many levels and types of government (Cairney et al., 2019). For example, actors

often make policy as they deliver, and policy outcomes appear to ‘emerge’ locally despite central government attempts to control their fate (Ostrom, 2007; Lipsky, 1980; Geyer and Cairney, 2015).

- *Limited policy change.* Most policy change is minor, made and influenced by actors who interpret new evidence through the lens of their beliefs. Governments tend to rely on trial-and-error based on previous agreements rather than upon radical policy change. Policymakers select major new solutions only during infrequent windows of opportunity (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Lindblom, 1979; Kingdon, 1984).

Table 2.1 connects policy analysis and policy process research insights to connect these limits to practical responses. Column 3 focuses on agency, strategy, and how to use judgement to respond to each issue. Column 4 identifies the qualifications that should accompany such advice. Overall, it presents two sides of the same coin: here are your strategic options, but their success is limited by factors such as limited attention to issue and receptivity to evidence, the possibility that a successful strategy in one venue fails in others, and the infrequency of opportunities to propose major policy change.

Policy process studies relate these limits to a variety of terms—including institutions, structures, systems, or environments—in different ways (Cairney, 2013; John, 2003: 488; Heikkila and Cairney, 2018; Ostrom, 2007). However, we can synthesize insights from these studies to clarify common elements of their story. Then, we can compare take-home messages for policy analysts (bullet point 1) versus policy process researchers (bullet point 2).

First, there are many policymaking ‘centres’, or venues of authoritative choice spread across many levels and types of government. Many policymakers and influencers operate across different policymaking scales or venues.

1. Develop strategies to find out where the action is and tailor your analysis to different audiences.
2. There is no straightforward way to influence policymaking if multiple venues contribute to policy change. It is not even possible to ‘map’ multi-level responsibilities comprehensively (see Chapter 4).

Second, each venue has its own ‘institutions’, defined as the rules and norms of political systems and policymaking organizations. Some rules are formal, written, and well understood, such as written constitutions or legislation. Other ‘shared prescriptions’ are informal, unwritten, and, existing ‘in the minds of the participants’, they are sometimes ‘shared as implicit knowledge rather than in an explicit and written form’ (Ostrom, 2007: 23). Accounts of their causal effect vary markedly, including: rules akin to fixed structures; the standard operating procedures that are reproduced even if participants change; the language or norms

Table 2.1 Limited agency, possible responses, and unresolved issues

Insights	Issues	Responses	Unresolved issues
Bounded rationality undermines comprehensive 'evidence based' policy learning.	Policymakers have a broad view about what counts as good, policy-relevant evidence.	Produce rich descriptions of problems and solutions based on many forms of knowledge.	The demand for evidence is more important than supply.
	Policymakers use cognitive shortcuts to ignore almost all evidence. Evaluation evidence has a limited impact on policy learning.	Minimize the cognitive load of information, frame evidence to help interpret a problem, and reduce uncertainty about the effect of solutions.	The audience for evidence is unresponsive to most evidence.
Limited choice.	Policymakers inherit organizations, rules, and choices.	Promote the fit between current practices and new solutions.	Inheritance seems more important than choice.
Limited attention.	Policymakers must ignore or delegate responsibility for most problems.	Tell a story of an important, urgent and solvable problem.	Policymakers will ignore most stories.
	Bureaucrats rely on their networks for information and advice.	Engage for the long term to form relationships with many types of policy maker and influencer.	Few actors have the resources to invest.
Limited central control.	Policymaking is shared across many types of government.		The same strategy can succeed in one venue and fail in others.
	Policy outcomes often seem to 'emerge' locally.	Understand the local rules and context in which a new measure would be introduced.	A full understanding of context is unlikely.
Limited policy change.	Most policy change is minor, based on existing beliefs and trial and error.	Build incremental strategies into recommendations.	Actors achieve major policy change rarely.
	A 'window of opportunity' for major change is infrequent and unpredictable.	Be ready to propose ambitious but feasible solutions.	Actors do not open windows; they can be decades apart.

Source: adapted from Cairney et al., (2018)

passed on to others via socialization; practices informed by an interpretation of many possible rules, or; ideas communicated and related to shared interests (Cairney, 2020a: 92).

1. Learn the rules of evidence gathering in each relevant venue: which type of department or unit takes the lead on policy consultation, how do they understand the problem, and how do they use evidence?
2. There is no straightforward way to foster policy learning between political systems if each is unaware of each other's unwritten rules. Researchers could *try* to learn their rules to facilitate mutual learning, but with no guarantee of success.

Third, each venue fosters its own relationships between policymakers and influencers. Examples include networks of like-minded specialists in 'epistemic communities' (Haas, 1992; Dunlop, 2017), advocacy coalitions in subsystems (Sabatier and Weible, 2007), and 'policy communities' of civil servants and interest groups (Jordan and Maloney, 1997).

1. Form alliances with policymakers and influencers in each relevant venue.
2. The pervasiveness of policy communities complicates policy learning because the boundary between formal power and informal influence is not clear. The power to make policy can even shift from one community to another (Dudley and Richardson, 1996).

Fourth, well-established 'ideas' tend to dominate discussion (Hall, 1993; Cairney and Weible, 2015). Some accounts treat ideas as structures that constrain or facilitate debate (Cairney, 2020a: 189), such as influencing levels of receptivity to new solutions (Kingdon, 1984).

1. Learn which ideas are in good currency. Tailor your advice to your audience's beliefs.
2. The dominance of different ideas precludes many forms of policy learning or transfer. A popular solution in one context may be unthinkable in another.

Fifth, many 'policy conditions' (such as historic-geographic, technological, social, and economic factors) command the attention of policymakers and are out of their control. Further, routine events and non-routine crises prompt policymaker attention to lurch unpredictably (Cairney, 2020a: 96).

1. Learn from studies of leadership in complex systems (Avolio et al., 2009) or the policy entrepreneurs who find the right time to exploit events and 'windows of opportunity' to propose solutions (Cairney, 2018; Mintrom, 2019).

2. The policy conditions may be so different in each system that policy learning is limited and transfer would be inappropriate. Events can prompt policymakers to pay disproportionately low or high attention to lessons from elsewhere, and this attention relates weakly to evidence from analysts.

Table 2.2 summarizes this comparison of insights. Policy analysis approaches highlight strategic responses (column 3), while policy process explanations highlight the limits to strategy (column 4). While an agency-centred process is conceivable, the dynamics and outcomes of policymaking environments are out of the control of individuals.

Table 2.2 The limits to agency-centred policy learning

Insights	Issues	Responses	Unresolved issues
The policymaking environment constrains and facilitates the role of agency-centred policy learning.	There are many policymakers and influencers spread across government.	Identify the key venues for authoritative choices.	It is difficult to know (a) from which venues to learn, and (b) which venues will seek to learn.
	Each venue has its own institutions, or formal and informal rules of policymaking.	Learn the written and unwritten rules of each relevant venue.	Learning rules is a long term (and often infeasible) process, not conducive to timely policy learning.
	Each venue has its own relationships between policy makers and influencers.	Build trust and form alliances within networks.	Trust formation is a lengthy commitment. Network informality increases uncertainty about who seeks lessons.
	Each venue is guided by ideas regarding policy problems and the feasibility of solutions.	Learn the language that actors use to frame problems and solutions.	Dominant beliefs and language rule out many lessons as politically or technically infeasible.
	Policymaker attention is driven by changes in socioeconomic factors and events.	Present solutions during periods of high attention to problems.	Different policy conditions undermine comparability. Actors do not cause the events that create opportunities.

Source: adapted from Cairney et al., (2018); compare with Harris et al., (2018: 1098)

Research on policy learning and transfer reflects this focus on context

Policy learning research emphasizes this cautionary tale for analysts. Indeed, some researchers reject the phrase ‘policy learning’ altogether because it provides a misleadingly rationalist account of the use of evidence for policy (Erasmus University Beleidsclub, 12th November 2020). Certainly, analysts will become disheartened if they assume that policy learning is epistemic and facilitated primarily by skilful analysts and knowledgeable experts (Dunlop and Radaelli, 2016.) There are *some* cases in which expertise is key, but studies highlight a tendency for governments to use expertise and evidence symbolically, which exaggerates the appearance of agency-driven policymaking (Boswell, 2009; 2018). Otherwise, key reviews find a minimal direct impact of policy learning on policy change (Moyson et al., 2017: 173). These studies show that learning takes place collectively in:

- *organizations*, to translate new information into organizational routines (Levitt and March, 1988), facilitated by norms of behaviour such as administrative traditions that influence their motive and ability to learn (Painter and Peters, 2010);
- ‘*advocacy coalitions*’, in which people learn through the lens of their beliefs;
- *systems*, in which many groups of actors cooperate and compete to establish the rules of policy analysis;
- *environments* that constrain or facilitate their action (Moyson et al., 2017: 163–164; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Dunlop and Radaelli, 2017).

Further, policy actors do not simply learn by *receiving* information. They *generate* learning by engaging with information in a social and political context (Freeman, 2006: 379). They share knowledge by telling stories of what they learned and how it affects the wider group, contributing to cognitive or behavioural change (Heikkila and Gerlak, 2013: 488–492). Change relies on a wide set of factors, including the *rules of collective action*, producing decentralized and dialogue-driven versus centralized and authority-driven learning, *social dynamics*, such as levels of trust among actors, and *external factors*, such as the political pressures that prompt actors to learn more or less urgently (2013: 496–500).

In that context, Dunlop and Radaelli’s (2013; 2018) review of policy learning describes four categories based on the relative (a) levels of uncertainty about a policy problem, and (b) power of actors:

1. *Learning epistemically*. In this scenario, there is high uncertainty and an ‘authoritative body of knowledge and experts who are willing and able to interact with policymakers and take a proper role in the policy process.’

Learning requires the scientific and ‘soft’ skills of researchers, and willingness and ability of policymakers to acquire new knowledge (2018: 259).

2. *Learning from reflection.* Uncertainty is high, but we cannot rely on expert authority. Or, ‘there is a predisposition to listen to what the others have to say and to re-consider one’s preferences.’ People use deliberative techniques to (a) combine their diverse forms of knowledge and (b) encourage cooperation by agreeing on the social norms that guide dialogue (2018: 260).
3. *Learning as a by-product of bargaining.* There is low uncertainty because policy actors have ‘a repertoire of solutions, algorithms, or ways of doing things’. Many ‘interdependent’ actors—including ‘decision-makers, interest groups, and civil society organizations’—focus on how to bargain effectively (2018: 261). They learn (a) each other’s preferences, (b) which strategies work best, and (c) the cost of disagreement.
4. *Learning in hierarchies.* Uncertainty is low and the authority of some actors is high. Subordinate actors learn that they are subject to the ‘shadow of hierarchy’: rules and norms limit their options. Powerful actors learn about the levels of compliance they can achieve (2018: 263).

These categories help form different narratives of learning. Learning can have a cooperative purpose, to acquire new knowledge and skills to solve a policy problem, with the help of analysts encouraging people to learn together (Dunlop et al., 2018: 6; Ingold and Gschwend, 2014). Or, it can be competitive, to enhance knowledge on how to defeat opponents (Dunlop et al., 2018: 6; Dunlop and Radaelli, 2018: 256; Sabatier et al., 1987). Therefore, the context and rules of this game are more central to an explanation than individual actors. Indeed, if analysts only anticipate an epistemic and cooperative mode they will be ineffective in a system characterized by competition and bargaining (Dunlop, 2017c).

These ideas inform the study of policy transfer. Rose’s (2005) how-to-do-it focus is unusual. Most studies explain the outcome of processes in which the import and export of ideas or programmes plays *some* role (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000: 5; 1996: 344; Rose, 2005; Dussauge-Laguna, 2012: 317; Heichel et al., 2005; Benson and Jordan, 2011). Skilful analysts, entrepreneurs, or experts in epistemic communities *might* influence the transfer of a policy solution. However:

1. *There are many actors involved.* Most are regular participants in policy processes (Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996: 345). Other actors include: supra-national organizations, multi-national corporations, and national or subnational governments operating at different levels (Benson and Jordan, 2011; Stone, 2010; Haas, 1992; Holzinger and Knill, 2005; McCann and Ward, 2012; Keating and Cairney, 2012).
2. *Transfer is often driven by pressure.* Transfer can range from voluntary to coercive. Pressures include: loans from international organizations

conditional on policy reform, international obligations, pressure from government on another, the economic or behavioural spillovers of action elsewhere, or a perceived need to keep up with powerful neighbours (Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996: 348–349; Benson and Jordan, 2011: 370; Keating and Cairney, 2012).

3. *The outcome relates weakly to policy analysis.* Transfer can describe a well-researched decision to import the aims and institutions of another government, or the quick decision to pursue a vague idea (Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996; Page, 2018: vii). It is difficult to relate transfer to a successful exporter or motivated importer of a specific solution (Stone, 2017: 55). Studies focus more on importing policymakers making sense of a potential solution in new contexts, to foster its ‘translation’, ‘mutation’, or ‘transformation’, often over a long period of time (Stone, 2017: 64–65; Freeman, 2009; Stone, 2012; Park et al., 2014; McCann and Ward, 2012: 326–327; 2013: 10).

In other words, policy learning and transfer are not unique, rationalist, forms of policy processes. Rather, they form one part of a contested and competitive policymaking process involving multiple actors across many levels or scales of government (James and Lodge, 2003).

Models of policy learning and governance: whose evidence and participation counts?

There is a strong connection between rationalist accounts of policy analysis and ‘evidence based policymaking’ (EBPM) (Cairney, 2016). In both cases we can accentuate what some EBPM supporters (usually the *suppliers* of research evidence), seem to seek: to maximize their impact by (1) establishing a ‘hierarchy of evidence’ based on research methods, and (2) engaging with a small group of policymakers to process policy from a single government via well-defined and orderly stages (2016: 52–53). Few researchers pursue such a naïve vision. Still, if we treat this description as an ideal-type position, we can identify two key tensions in the politics of policy learning (Cairney, 2022):

1. Whose evidence counts during policy learning?

In health research in particular, a hierarchy of evidence quality refers to the methods to produce evidence: the systematic review of randomized control trials (RCTs) is at the top, expert knowledge is at the bottom, and experiential knowledge does not feature. In subfields of social work, policing, and education research we can find greater value attached to experiential knowledge among service users and practitioners (Dobrow et al., 2006;

Fleming and Rhodes, 2018; Nutley et al., 2013; Stoker, 2010; Petticrew and Roberts, 2006: 57–68).

These divisions seem less stark in studies of policy analysis, since the most common advice is to be *pragmatic*, to recognize time constraints, and *eclectic*, to piece together any usable or policy relevant information (Dunn, 2017: 4; Weimer and Vining, 2017; Bardach and Patashnik, 2020). Nevertheless, the same underlying issues remain. They relate partly to contrasting beliefs about the role of scientific knowledge in policy: to seek widely generalizable conclusions on ‘what works’ or treat each case or experience as unique (Boaz et al., 2019). They also expose the political nature of knowledge production, such as when policy actors seek to depoliticize policymaking by describing it as ‘evidence based’, refer to a policy’s technical nature to prioritize a small group of experts, and use evidential hierarchies to exclude most sources of potential evidence (Althaus, 2020; Smith, 2012; Cairney, 2020: 168). These issues are distinct from, but often conflated with, a tendency of policymakers to use evidence selectively (often criticized as ‘policy based evidence making’) (Cairney, 2019).

2. Whose participation counts during policy learning?

This use of evidential hierarchies to limit participation intersects with modes of governance, in which policy designers may seek to:

1. *centralize* power to maximize a single government’s effectiveness and accountability;
2. *localize* to delegate responsibility and share accountability with multiple governments;
3. *collaborate or co-create*. This approach could encourage ‘collaborative governance’ among many levels and types of government (Ansell and Gash, 2008; Torfing and Ansell, 2017), the co-production of public services by policymakers and service users (Durose and Richardson, 2015), or the more expansive ‘co-creation’ of policy design by ‘a plethora of public and private actors’ (Ansell and Torfing, 2021: 216; Ferlie, 2021).

In practice, many actors may seek a pragmatic mix of governance approaches. However, to do so uncritically ignores the extent to which they complement or undermine each other. Alternatively, identifying ideal-types allows us to explore those tensions. As Table 2.3 shows, if we combine different answers to both questions—*whose evidence and participation counts?*—we find the potential for very different models of policy learning. At one extreme is highly centralized government and hierarchical evidence production to aid relatively exclusive epistemic learning, in which central governments use evidence from RCTs to roll out uniform policy interventions across regions. At the other is decentralized and collaborative governance and evidence sharing, in which there is no assumption

Table 2.3 Two ideal-type modes of policy learning

	Centralized and hierarchical learning	Decentralized and collaborative learning
The main story.	Evidence-based policy learning requires central governments to take responsibility to learn ‘what works,’ using data from international RCTs.	Decentralized policy learning requires collaboration across many levels of government, and the coproduction of policy with stakeholders and citizens.
How should you gather evidence of effectiveness and best practice?	Use a hierarchy of evidence and evidence gathering, with systematic reviews and RCTs at the top.	Co-create principles of good practice which value reflexive learning via deliberation. No hierarchy of evidence.
How should you ‘scale up’ from evidence of best practice?	Introduce the same intervention in each area. Require fidelity, to administer the correct dosage and measure its effectiveness.	Tell success stories based on your experience, and invite other people to learn from them.
What aim should you prioritize?	The correct administration of the same intervention.	Collaborative principles such as decentralization and respect.

Source: adapted from Cairney (2017)

that governments necessarily take the lead; many actors share knowledge to foster reflexive learning and work together to create the rules of collaboration and the policy designs that follow.

Governments may seek the best of both worlds, and some have developed ‘improvement method’ models to foster continuous learning by local ‘collaboratives’ (Cairney, 2017; Cairney and Oliver, 2017). However, they do not resolve tensions associated with very different approaches to evidence gathering and governance. Nor does a tendency for governments to support co-production and collaboration *in principle* without defining terms and considering how they relate to other priorities (see Chapters 6–8).

For example, there are different motivations behind the coproduction of research to inform policy, including to improve research, improve its use, or foster ownership and inclusion (Oliver et al., 2019: 2). There are also multiple aims and approaches associated with coproducing policy, such as to foster collaboration between semi-autonomous governments, emancipate service users from overly paternalistic public services, encourage new voices to challenge existing social and political hierarchies, or pay lip service to this idea while protecting the status quo (Bevir et al., 2019; Weaver, 2019; Smith, 2012). This process can

be government-centric and focus on specific services, or more open to non-state leadership and innovation to inform the redesign of entire systems. [Ansell and Torfing \(2021: 212–217\)](#) describe the latter as ‘co-creation’ (but others do not), while [Ferlie \(2021: 306\)](#) notes its alleged but unfulfilled potential to address ‘wicked’ problems (Chapter 1).

Overall, terms such as co-creation are ‘magic concepts’ whose attractiveness derives initially from their ability to mean different (but almost always positive) things to different people ([Voorberg et al., 2015](#); [Pollitt and Hupe, 2011](#); [Boswell, 2022](#)). They mean very little before people make sense of them in practice, and only then do researchers and practitioners find major deficiencies ([Dudau et al., 2019: 1579](#)). As such, an uncritical commitment to many different evidence-based and coproductive approaches makes it difficult to know how governments will seek to learn in practice: who exactly would be responsible for policy learning, and what exactly would they do? Further, if many ‘centres’ contribute to policy, would each centre support the same understanding of the process?

Three questions to facilitate learning and transfer

How can these insights help the IMAJINE project facilitate policy learning to foster ‘spatial justice’ and reduce ‘territorial inequalities’ across the EU ([Cairney et al., 2018](#))? We generate three guiding questions for research *and* practice.

Q1. What is the evidence for one government’s success, and from where does it come?

An exporting government’s reputation for success often prompts attention to the prospect for policy change elsewhere. Or, an importing government seeking lessons will often identify a small number of relevant and successful governments from which to learn.

From a policy analysis perspective, these reputations relate to initial impressions to be examined with further research. If so, first, importing governments should rely on multiple sources, including government-commissioned but independent evaluations, international benchmarks, and scientific reviews subject to peer review. These evaluations should use a range of methods, from routine evaluations to counterfactual comparisons, to ask if another solution would have been more successful. Second, they should identify how to describe success. We may be identifying ‘good practice’ based on positive experience, ‘promising approaches’ but unsystematic findings, ‘research-based’ or ‘sound theory informed by a growing body of empirical research’, or ‘evidence-based’, when ‘the programme or practice has been rigorously evaluated and has consistently been shown to work’ ([Perkins 2010](#), in [Nutley et al., 2013: 9](#)).

However, policy process research suggests that policy actors debate what counts as good evidence, draw on an eclectic mix of evidence sources, and use evidence

to support their beliefs about the value of a policy choice. The transfer process accentuates these practices when supporters of the exporting government have an incentive to declare success, or importing governments emphasize learning from other governments rather than from their own failure (Cairney, 2019). Further, modes of governance (described above) affect the use of evidence: centralized government is conducive to gathering randomized control trial evidence on a well-defined policy to be adopted uniformly, while decentralized governance is more conducive to the inclusion of evidence from stakeholders, users, and practitioners (Cairney, 2017). Overall, the evidence of success cannot be separated from the analysis of that success in a political and policymaking context (McConnell, 2010; Compton and 't Hart, 2019).

Q2. *What story do exporters/ importers of policy tell about the problem they seek to solve?*

Analysts need to examine the agenda setting process that leads policymakers to define the policy problem and narrow their range of feasible solutions. They also need to identify the extent to which new policy instruments reinforce or contradict existing policies in the exporting and importing countries (Cairney, 2021a). This step is crucial to comparability, since the exporting/importing governments may have very different ways to (a) understand issues as problems, (b) identify feasible solutions, (c) determine what policy success looks like, and (d) relate it to existing policy.

However, policy process research highlights our limited ability to understand the motivations of each government in relation to the selection of a new policy solution. Nor is it straightforward to produce a comprehensive map of existing policy instruments and relate it to each policy change (Chapter 4).

Q3. *Do they have comparable political and policymaking systems?*

Analysts can relate comparability to the nature of *political* systems in a relatively straightforward way, identifying their formal rules, divisions of power, political parties, levels of government, and courts. However, policy process research focuses on *policymaking* systems: the actors, institutions, networks, ideas, and socio-economic conditions that influence how policymakers define problems, and the technical and political feasibility of solutions.

Table 2.4 summarizes how to use these insights to think systematically about the evidence for policy success, how governments frame problems and solutions, and political and policymaking comparability.

However, Tables 2.1 to 2.4 combine to project an overall sense of complexity that could be overwhelming to policy analysts and serve primarily to explain limited progress. This problem is particularly acute in relation to territorial inequalities. As Chapter 1 describes, there is high policymaker *commitment* to ideas such as spatial justice, and to reduce territorial inequalities, but low *agreement* about what these terms mean, and low commitment to the task. There is limited scope for learning unless policymakers define their task and relate it clearly to specific issues

Table 2.4 Guiding factors for theory-informed policy learning and transfer

To foster policy learning	Potential obstacle	Practical response or guiding question
Identify the evidence for policy success.	Exporting governments are motivated to declare success.	Use a range of sources to help identify, define, measure, and contextualize success.
	It is unclear how long to wait to declare success.	Clarify success, from promising new strategies to programmes that have worked as intended when implemented.
	Choices on evidence sources relate strongly to modes of governance.	Identify the relationship between sources of evidence and the governance principles underpinning policy delivery.
Tell success stories.	Policymakers in exporting/importing governments may define the policy problem, identify what is a feasible response, and gauge success in different ways.	Identify how policy actors define the issue as a policy problem. Identify how they limit their focus to policy solutions. Ask key actors what policy success would look like.
Establish comparability: 1. Political systems	Identify relevant features of each system, including: federal or unitary; presidential or parliamentary; uni- or bi-cameral; the role of the judiciary; the role of direct democracy; electoral and party systems; group-government relations; bureaucratic structures.	
2. Policymaking systems	Actors	Identify which venues are responsible for this policy.
	Institutions	Identify the key formal and informal rules in each authoritative venue.
	Networks	Identify the role of networks in making and delivering this policy.
	Ideas	Establish if exporting and importing governments have the same beliefs about problem definition and feasible solutions.
	Socioeconomic context	Establish if policymakers are responding to the same conditions and events.

Source: adapted from Cairney et al. (2018)

and sectors. The cautionary tale is that ambiguity helps generate wide rhetorical support but not substantive progress (Cairney and St Denny, 2020). Yet resolving this ambiguity is easier said than done, not least because there are very different approaches to do so: one involves centralization and the swift formalization of aims; another involves decentralization and the use of ambiguity to foster continuous deliberation (Cairney, 2021c).

Conclusion

Classic accounts of policy analysis put agency at centre stage when describing policy learning. They incorporate context into this analysis: define the problem for your client, learn the rules of the game, show how structural factors inform your predictions of each solution's impact, and make an informed recommendation on that basis. In comparison, policy process research is more likely to situate this kind of agency behind the scenes. In a highly crowded and competitive political system, analysts face high uncertainty and ambiguity, there is contestation by many actors to define the policy problem, the rules of the game are often unwritten and ill-understood, policy inheritance seems more important than new choices, the audience is more important than the analyst, the same strategy can succeed with one audience and fail with another, and opportunities to secure policy change can be decades apart.

We can combine both narratives to inform theory-guided policy learning and transfer, but they offer very different guidance. Find the right audience for your analysis, but recognize that multiple venues contribute to policy change. Learn the rules of evidence use in each venue, but it could take years to learn the unwritten rules and assumptions in multiple venues. Form alliances in networks, but note the blurry boundaries between formal policymaking power and informal influence, as well as the potential for authority to shift between venues. Learn which ideas dominate each venue, but accept that some ideas may rule out your preferred solution. Learn from entrepreneurs on how and when to act, but accept that your environments provide few windows of opportunity.

Most importantly, the idea of rationalist evidence-based policy learning, driven by analysis within a single centre of government, seems at odds with policymaking reality and normative models of collaborative learning. What we call 'policy' is actually a combination of many policy instruments, each subject to contestation, and often selected in different levels of government. Governments deal with such contestation by seeking to centralize policymaking and close off discussion, decentralize and seek widespread collaboration, or often an inconsistent mix of approaches.

As Chapters 3 and 4 describe, spatial rescaling and the spread of policymaking responsibilities precludes a simple process based on a single source of learning and

transfer. Policy mapping exercises are useful for analysis, but also amplify these problems. The responsibility for policy to reduce territorial inequalities is spread across many levels and types of government, each using their own ideas, rules, and networks to make sense of policy problems. As such, we should treat policy learning as a contested and contingent, rather than a rationalist and straightforward, process.

3

Mapping Responsibilities to Reduce Inequalities Across the EU

Introduction

Chapter 3 examines our ability to map policymaking responsibilities in relation to inequalities. Our aim is to identify the key policy instruments to reduce inequalities to inform a subsequent discussion of the governments (or other bodies) responsible for their use. This work is essential to understanding how policymakers, across multiple sectors, take and share responsibility for the reduction of territorial inequalities in European Union states and regions. It is also essential to policy learning and transfer, since we expect different political systems to distribute those responsibilities in different ways, presenting a complicated landscape in which regions may learn from states and vice versa.

However, it is not possible to reduce this exercise to a technical report with a clear blueprint for policymakers. Chapter 2 shows that any mapping exercise on the instruments to address ‘wicked’ issues will identify inescapable policy *and* policymaking complexity. The number and range of relevant policy instruments could become overwhelming. Further, multiple chapters in this book show that the division of responsibilities for, and the use of, policy instruments is a contested process that connects to competing narratives on the role of each level or sector of government. Consequently, the responsibility for any policy mix—or collection of instruments to address inequalities—cannot simply be deduced from a written list of formal responsibilities. Rather, it results from the formal rules regarding who is responsible for their use in theory, *and* informal, unwritten rules on who has influence in practice.

There is some scope to encourage policy coherence through cooperation and learning, but also to identify a rudderless policy agenda over which no government has full understanding or control. Therefore, mapping exercises could be used carefully in discussion with policymakers and stakeholders to make sense of inequalities policies in their context, but largely to encourage reflection, debate, and collaboration rather than produce one solution. These exercises highlight scenarios in which joint action may be possible, but subject to high uncertainty about which mix of policy instruments to use, whom to hold responsible for their use, and how best to foster collaboration inside and outside of government.

In that context, first we discuss how researchers conceptualize the use of policy instruments and tools. There is a long list of potentially relevant instrument types, which tend to be categorized broadly in relation to tax and spending, regulation, public services, and information sharing. Second, we identify insights from multi-level policymaking research to highlight the extent to which they capture formal responsibility and informal influence. For example, EU and state authorities often encourage rather than compel action, while sub-state governments often rely on delegated authority or only have the formal authority to act if a policy problem can be defined in a particular way (to identify a policy instrument's primary purpose).

Third, we introduce a series of illustrative tables to inform the book's case study chapters (5–8). Initially, each *individual* case study helps to envisage different ways to address inequalities in relation to multi-level policymaking and intersectoral strategies, including:

- *Regional government.* Comparing how sub-state governments combine their limited responsibility for policy instruments related to inequalities—including public service provision, and fiscal and welfare measures—to produce region-specific models of welfare (Chapters 4 and 5);
- *Health equity.* Health in All Policies (HiAP) is the World Health Organization led vehicle for health equity policy and policymaking. HiAP focuses primarily on the prevention of non-communicable diseases (NCDs). We exploring how to deliver HiAP policies, by identifying so-called *upstream*, *midstream*, and *downstream* measures, and policymaking, by fostering intersectoral action (Chapter 6);
- *Education equity.* Comparing the instruments to promote different education equity strategies, described as *neoliberal* versus *social justice* approaches (Chapter 7);
- *Gender equality and mainstreaming.* Mapping the policy instruments that could address gender inequalities, noting that this list is unusually long when governments support mainstreaming rather than targeted strategies (Chapter 8).

Chapter 5 starts from a territorial perspective, using illustrative examples to examine how territorial governments address inequalities. Chapters 6 to 8 start from a sectoral perspective, using illustrative examples of multi-level responsibilities—to address health, education, and gender equity—to foster and reflect on policy learning. In this chapter, our wider aim is to reflect on the overall impact of multi-level and multi-sectoral policymaking on inequalities strategies. An overall sense of policy coherence requires many levels of government to contribute to a common aim *and* relate it to multiple sectors and inter-sectoral initiatives. Yet by exploring how to identify relevant policy instruments in each context, we show that it is difficult to visualize their intersecting responsibilities, far less know how they are

used in different countries. Therefore, this mapping exercise helps to qualify even more the idea that governments can simply learn from each other's inequalities strategies.

Categorizing policy tools and instruments

What exactly do we mean by 'mapping' policymaking? Initially, mapping means identifying the distribution of policymaking responsibilities. However, we need to go further to ask what exactly they are responsible for doing. To that end, we use insights from policy studies to identify responsibility for policy 'tools' or 'instruments' (Cairney, 2020: 20–22). They can be categorized broadly in relation to their intended action or effect. For example, Hood and Margetts (2007: 5–6) identify four types of policy tool:

1. *Nodality*. Providing a central hub for information sharing to aid policy development and delivery;
2. *Authority*. Regulating individual, social, or company behaviour (such as via legislation);
3. *Treasure*. Gathering and distributing the fiscal resources to support policy decisions;
4. *Organization*. Providing other resources such as the staff, buildings, and technology necessary for public services.

When considering responses to inequalities, we also need to identify a government's substantive contribution to policy change beyond their rhetorical commitments, since there is high contestation to determine the balance between state, market, and individual action (Chapter 1). Their use of different tools reflects their beliefs on the role of the state in addressing issues such as inequalities (Hughes, 2017). For example, the state can play a *minimal role*, such as to provide a last resort or 'safety net' welfare state combined with the use of public education and exhortation to influence behaviour. Or, it can play a *maximal role*, combining an ambitious strategy with high redistribution, regulation, funding, and expansive public services (Cairney and St Denny, 2020: 18).

This range of possibilities reflects the definition of the policy problem, such as its 'wicked' nature and salience, the risk of action or inaction, and the potential for cross-party consensus (McConnell, 2010: 154–159; Newman and Head, 2017; McConnell, 2018; Newman, 2019). It also reflects, more generally, the policymaking context of liberal democracies (Lowi, 1964): the most technically feasible instruments to address inequalities may be *redistributive* (to visibly tax some populations to fund others), but more politically feasible options are usually *distributive* (to fund services or populations), *regulatory*, or *exhortative*.

As such, policy analysts may identify an ‘optimal’ policy design from a technical perspective, and receive a vague welcome from governments, but find that the design has little influence on actual policy.

Using a larger number of categories of policy instrument also has value because it reminds us of the complexity of policy mixes. We can identify a large number of policy instruments that often combine to produce a mix of old and new responses, including:

- taxation and tax expenditure: how much to raise and from whom, and which activities, organizations, or people should be exempt from taxation;
- public expenditure: the balance between capital and current spending, the distribution across policy sectors, and spending on specific populations;
- economic incentives or disincentives: taxing some products to discourage their use, or subsidizing products to encourage activity;
- linking spending and benefits to entitlement (e.g. to social security) or behaviour (e.g. seeking work);
- regulations backed by (a) enforcement with harsh penalties or legal sanctions, (b) standards to encourage behavioural change, or (c) voluntary agreements to encourage businesses or individuals to regulate themselves ([Lodge and Weigrich, 2012](#); [Baggott, 1986](#));
- public services: universal or targeted, free or with charges, delivered directly or via non-governmental organizations in quasi-markets;
- public education, advertising, or promotion;
- establishing or reforming policymaking units or departments;
- behavioural instruments, to ‘nudge’ behaviour ([John, 2011](#); [Pykett et al., 2017](#));
- the ‘tools of policy formulation’, including commissioning research and funding to give advice on policy ([Jordan and Turnpenny, 2015](#));
- modes of governance, such as when governments seek to ‘coproduce’ policy with citizens rather than simply stipulate their behaviour ([Durose and Richardson, 2015](#); [Durose et al., 2017](#)).

This analytical exercise, to list instruments, shows that what we call ‘policy’ is really a ‘policy mix’ of instruments adopted by one or more governments. A key feature of policy studies is that it is difficult to define or identify exactly what policy is, and this uncertainty is exacerbated by a tendency for governments to add new instruments to the pile without considering the overall impact ([Peters et al., 2018](#): 8). It is difficult to know how exactly this collection of instruments will interact: ‘the overall effect of a succession of individual policy changes is “non-linear”, difficult to predict, and subject to emergent outcomes, rather than cumulative’ ([Cairney, 2021](#):105, citing [Spyridaki and Flamos, 2014](#); [Munro and Cairney, 2020](#)).

This problem is magnified by the ambiguity of policy problems such as territorial inequalities, because it is not clear what the policy problem is, how to solve it, who is responsible, and what has been the impact of policy in the past. Instead, case studies of public policy tend to piece together a story of policy based on (a) the adoption of some instruments rather than others, (b) the overall policy mix produced by multiple government departments and multiple levels of government, and (c) its unclear impact on policy problems.

Conceptual and practical issues with policy mapping

Our previous research shows one way to map then reflect on policymaking responsibilities. Cairney et al. (2019) focus on the potential for policy instruments to contribute to energy equity or a ‘just transition’ to a more sustainable energy system in the UK. This example demonstrates the cross-cutting nature of policy strategies when they involve inequalities: measures to foster more sustainable energy production and use intersect with measures to anticipate the consequences, such as in relation to taxation, social security, and housing measures to address fuel poverty, and transport reforms to support shifts of behaviour (Table 3.1).

This example helps to identify three key distinctions to guide further analysis:

1. *Direct versus indirect competences.* As Table 3.1 shows, policy instruments can be divided according to the measures (a) designed directly to cause policy change, including regulations and subsidies to promote renewables and discourage fossil fuel use, and (b) with a major impact on outcomes, such as rules on state aid for companies and local planning laws.
2. *Formal responsibility versus informal influence.* The formal division of responsibilities does not account for the informal use of power, interplay between levels, and role of intergovernmental relations. Policymaking issues include: an overlap and sharing of responsibilities when no level of government claims exclusive powers; a tendency for EU bodies to promote rather than enforce action; the delegation of EU and UK responsibilities to a devolved government, overseen by the UK; and, the role of non-governmental action (including the choices of energy companies), over which governments only have some control.
3. *Functional requirements versus actual practices.* Policymakers and designers need some level of central control or multi-level collaboration to pursue a coherent policy mix, but face the potential for *policy incoherence*, when many selected instruments undermine or contradict each other, and *policy conflict*, when one level of government challenges or subverts the policies of another.

Table 3.1 Distribution of energy decision-making competences (select examples)

Level	Direct Competences	Indirect Competences
EU	Internal energy market (gas and electricity). Security of energy supply. Promotion of renewable energy. Regulation of biofuels. Promotion of energy efficiency/energy efficiency standards.	State aid regulation. Competition law. Free movement law. Greenhouse gas emissions trading. Water quality. Environmental Impact Assessment Structural funding and strategic funding.
UK	Ownership of resources (coal, gas, oil, gas storage rights vested in the Crown). Regulation of energy markets. Licensing of energy companies. Security of energy supply. Energy taxation, subsidies, grants. Energy efficiency subsidies/grants.	Competition law. Financial services regulation. Intellectual property and commercial law. Climate change laws. Social security fuel payments. Workplace health and safety. R&D funding.
Devolved	Promotion of renewable energy. Promotion of energy efficiency. Fuel poverty support systems. Electricity and gas installations consents. Onshore oil and gas licensing. Nuclear waste storage.	Crown estate (seabed use/storage rights). Property law (access to land/subsoil; nuisance; servitudes and wayleaves). Environmental emissions and water quality. Housing law/building regulations. Transport policies.
Local		Land-use planning.

Source: adapted from Cairney et al. (2019: 460).

Territorial inequalities strategies in a multi-level context

As Chapters 4 and 5 suggest, the roles and responsibilities of regional governments are uncertain and contested, to the extent that no consistent terminology exists to describe sub-state, meso, regional, or national action. This level of contestation, and the complexity of distributed responsibilities, precludes a full map of responsibilities. Rather, we draw on illustrative examples to highlight the potential for policy tools to address economic inequalities.

Table 3.2 presents a range of policy tools which can be deployed by policymakers seeking to attenuate inequalities (using the categories of Hood and

Table 3.2 Policy tools to address economic inequalities

	Nodality	Authority	Treasure	Organization
Taxation	Monitoring of tax income. Gathering data on social indicators (e.g. poverty). Public awareness campaigns. Naming of taxes/relevant public bodies. Anti-tax evasion campaigns.	Variation of tax rates, eligibility. Vertical and horizontal integration of tax systems. Regulation of foreign trade/tariffs. Categorization of behaviour etc. to carry fine penalty.	Taxes on income. Taxes on wealth and inheritance. Value Added or Sales Tax. Business and environmental taxes. Land and property taxes. Vehicular taxes. Levies and duties on certain products, services, and items (e.g. gambling). Fines and penalties.	Creation of bodies to administer tax system. Revenue collection. Collection of fines.
Social assistance	Labelling of social security benefits/relevant public bodies. Take-up campaigns Anti-fraud campaigns. Charters of citizens' material rights.	Variation of pension eligibility and amount. Variation of eligibility and levels of social security payment. Action against tax evasion and social security fraud. Regulation of private pensions. Regulation of private providers of care.	Social security (unemployment, inability to work etc.). Pension distribution Funding of adult and child social care.	Administration of social security system. Administration of pensions. Devolution of powers to other parts of state.

Continued

Table 3.2 *Continued*

	Nodality	Authority	Treasure	Organization
Service charges	Monitoring of effects of charges.	Criteria for financial support for students/service users.	Subsidization of e.g. prescriptions. Levy of tuition fees for higher education. Charges for health services (e.g. dentistry).	Administration and collection of charges and penalty fines.
Active labour market	Recruitment campaigns. Setting of recommendations.	Regulations around conditionality. Job guarantees. Eligibility for and regulation of apprenticeships.	Vocational training. Counselling and related services. Funding of apprenticeships.	Carrying out of training. Respective roles of different parts of the state.
Minimum Income Guarantees	Public awareness of availability of minimum income guarantees. Monitoring of citizen entitlement to component entitlements	Interaction with other elements of state support. Minimum wage.	Citizens or Universal Basic Income. Minimum wage top-ups and tax credits. Collection of fines against businesses for non NMW payment.	Creation of bodies to oversee and administer Minimum Income Guarantee

Source: author's own, informed by Chapter 5

Margetts, 2007: 5–6). We use it to demonstrate the general difficulties inherent in categorizing the instruments relevant to addressing inequalities. It lists the instruments of revenue generation (mainly taxation, but also financial penalties) and of spending on social security or welfare (such as pensions and unemployment benefits). Nodality or information sharing includes the monitoring and sharing of data on social indicators, such as unemployment and poverty, and public awareness campaigns. Authority includes regulations to determine the eligibility for state support for individuals and organizations, and punishments for not following rules on taxation. Treasure describes measures to levy taxes and distribute funding, including the ability to fund and/or deliver public services and social programmes. Organization includes the potential for creating government bodies to encourage or enforce collaboration between different parts of the tax and social security systems, such as the collection of penalty fines, or the distribution of pensions. The overall policy ‘mix’ covers a large range of instruments related to the attenuation of economic inequalities.

This complexity is heightened when we incorporate the question of multi-level competences, such as to consider the role of ‘meso’ level governments which must operate within the constraints of a nationally determined economic and social context. Territorial governments have defined sectoral competences which may not map easily onto a contested and ill-defined set of problems such as inequality. Some responsibilities, such as taxation and welfare, may be overtly redistributive, while others can also have redistributive effects. Sub-state governments may have to exercise some imagination to bend sectoral policies in order to combat inequality. They also work within a multi-level context—which they have only a limited role in shaping—to make sense of their own territorial inequalities strategies as well as to learn from others. Throughout this process there is a high potential for policy incoherence, particularly where regional and national level interests may not align, or where political leadership differs. Further, many relevant policy instruments have an indirect, but crucial, impact on others, such as spending cuts imposed by the national level which may create social consequences that regional governments are responsible for tackling. They are also caught in a dilemma between enhancing economic competitiveness and advancing social equity, rhetorically straddling the two with formulas such as socially-inclusive growth.

Health in All Policies: the need for intersectoral action

Chapter 6 adds two layers of complexity to this analysis. First, it extends the focus from multi-level to multi-sectoral policymaking, to consider how different governments might contribute to intersectoral action. Most HiAP-friendly measures

tend not to be in the gift of health departments, since strategies warn against centring health services. Instead, they identify the ‘social determinants’ of inequalities, related to factors such as income and wealth, education, housing, and social and physical environments.

Second, it examines an attempt by HiAP advocates to support some policy instruments and reject others. Advocates identify an important but often-unclear distinction between three kinds of policy intervention to address inequalities: *upstream* describes measures with a potential impact on whole populations; *midstream* can relate to organizations, vectors for risk, or at-risk groups; and *downstream* to influence individual choices (Cairney et al., 2021b: 7). There are comparable distinctions between different types of ‘preventive’ work to reduce inequalities: *primary* relates to whole population measures to prevent harm (akin to population-wide inoculation), *secondary* to predict and prevent harm among at-risk groups, and *tertiary* to prevent a bad situation getting worse among affected groups.

It is not straightforward to define these concepts or to relate them to specific policy instruments, particularly when they relate to non-health sector measures. In that context, Table 3.3 tentatively describes some examples of policy interventions that could help to realise this agenda. ‘Upstream’ could apply to general policy measures such as to redistribute income, and specific measures such as regulations on population behaviour (including a ban on smoking in public places). Further, Hood and Margett’s (2007) categories help to identify a range of existing measures, from health impact assessments (*nodality*) to clean air regulations (*authority*) and pay-increases for public health professionals (*treasure*). Upstream measures tend to relate more to *treasure* and *authority*, while *nodality* is a feature of more individual-focused advice such as via health education messages to influence ‘lifestyles’.

Education equity: neoliberal and social justice approaches

Chapter 7 accentuates this focus on the allegedly good versus bad use of policy instruments. Cairney and Kippin’s (2021) review of education equity policymaking identifies the competition for dominance between ‘neoliberal’ versus ‘social justice’ paradigms. Neoliberal interventions relate education to economic growth, and ‘emphasize individual student motivation, quasi-market incentives such as school vouchers, and limited state spending in favour of private for-profit provision’ (Cairney and Kippin, 2021: 4; Rivzi, 2016). In contrast, a ‘rights-based, social justice argument calls for universal investment in quality education’ for wider emancipatory purposes (Klees and Qargha, 2014: 330), and includes measures such as redistributive funding arrangements, a curriculum fostering diversity

Table 3.3 Health in All Policies policy instruments

	Nodality	Authority	Treasure	Organization
Measures more relevant to whole population, primary prevention or 'upstream' agendas.	Health impact assessments (HIAs) at all levels of government. Information sharing to aid intersectoral working.	Clean air and pollution standards. Environmental regulation. Legal duty on different governmental sectors and agencies to pursue HIAP. Public health legislation. Building health into planning regulations. Regulation of unhealthy products. Pedestrianization of cities and towns. Bans on smoking in public places. Social housing standards.	Tax and spending to redistribute income and wealth and reduce poverty. Funding for: leisure and health service provision; preventive health services; public health; early years education; early intervention services; biowaste and pollutant disposal; social housing; public transport. Clean energy subsidies. Increase minimum wage. Taxes on unhealthy products (e.g tobacco, alcohol, high sugar or salt products).	Collaboration between different levels and centres. Collaboration with civil society and private sector Creation of organizations or positions to promote HIAP. Establishing bodies to encourage coproduction. Creation of HIAP taskforces and dedicated bodies within government.

Continued

Table 3.3 *Continued*

	Nodality	Authority	Treasure	Organization
Measures more relevant to midstream or downstream agendas, or secondary and tertiary prevention.	<p>National nutrition guidelines.</p> <p>Promotion of active travel.</p> <p>Promotion of healthy lifestyles.</p> <p>Anti-tobacco, alcohol, drugs public information campaigns.</p> <p>Health awareness campaigns.</p> <p>Promotion of HiAP across government.</p> <p>Local needs assessments.</p> <p>Consumer education.</p> <p>Policy process indicators.</p> <p>Encouragement of health behaviours in at-risk groups.</p> <p>Monitoring of social inclusion.</p>	<p>Incentives or voluntary agreements for: food manufacturers to reformulate products (e.g. reduce salt); alcohol companies to limit advertising.</p>	<p>Increase number of qualified professionals in acute healthcare.</p> <p>Temporary homelessness provision.</p> <p>Subsidize healthy food in deprived communities.</p> <p>Healthy eating schemes in schools.</p>	<p>Creation of local healthy food taskforces in 'food deserts'.</p>

Sources: author's own, using information from *Cairney et al., 2021b*.

and anti-racism, and widened parental and community involvement in school governance (Cairney and Kippin, 2021).

Therefore, Table 3.4 identifies the kinds of policy tools which could be categorized as one or the other. This assignment is difficult in many cases, since a common ‘social justice’ argument is that some neoliberal measures (e.g. test-driven performance management) undermine others (e.g. to mainstream education provision rather than establish special educational needs provision) (Chapter 7). In other words, a ‘social justice’ approach may be as much about the *absence* of some tools as the *presence* of others, or the relative weight given to each.

Gender equity: mainstreaming policy and policymaking

Chapter 8 completes this focus on multi-level and multi-sectoral issues by exploring a strategy to consider equality at all times. Gender mainstreaming (GM) involves the pursuit of equality in relation to ‘all policies at all levels and at all stages’ (Council of Europe, 1998). As such, it is difficult to identify a manageable number of policy instruments if the aim is to consider gender in every policy. Instead, Table 3.5 demonstrates a non-exhaustive, yet extensive, array of policy instruments which can be directed towards gender equality. Information sharing tools encompass a wide range of activities, centred around the understanding and monitoring of gender equality. Regulation can be directed towards goals such as enforcing gender quotas, legal sanctions on certain activities to protect women, and procurements standards which feature gender equality standards (Cairney et al., 2021a).

As in health and education, gender equality research focuses on the limits to ‘soft’ policy tools to share information and encourage change versus the ‘hard’ tools to regulate behaviour. While the latter may enjoy more technical feasibility, the former are more politically feasible. Softer measures have been supported increasingly at the EU level, but with important variations across countries, from the ‘maximal’ approach in Sweden to ‘minimal’ approach in the UK (Chapter 8).

As Chapters 6 to 8 explore, it may be relatively simple to identify what policymakers might learn when comparing different approaches to equity. However, it does not capture the key dynamics that might explain *how* they learn and respond to lessons. First, policy tends to be made in informal ‘policy communities’ with their own logic, which undermines the likelihood of routine joined-up policy learning. Second, central government may hold a regional or devolved government responsible for its own equity strategy while retaining power over the measures most likely to fulfil it. Third, the generally low status of most inequalities undermines the likelihood of sustained high attention to translating a broad strategy into other sectors. Finally, a relative commitment to centralization or decentralization (and policy coproduction) will influence who learns what and

Table 3.4 Education equity policy instruments

	Nodality	Authority	Treasure	Organization
'Neoliberal' equity instruments	<p>Student performance measurement.</p> <p>School performance measurement.</p> <p>Teacher performance monitoring and target-setting.</p> <p>Publication of school rankings to encourage competition between schools.</p> <p>Test based accountability.</p>	<p>Regulations to ensure parental school choice.</p> <p>Rules on student selection, tracking, and school year repetition.</p> <p>Sanctions for 'poor' school performance.</p> <p>Establishing quasi-markets to encourage of competition between schools.</p>	<p>School choice vouchers</p> <p>Incentivized teacher pay.</p> <p>Private sector sponsorship of schools and students.</p> <p>State funding of private schools and private school places.</p> <p>Equal per-pupil funding.</p>	<p>Charter or 'Academy' schools.</p> <p>Privatization and contracting out of services.</p> <p>Direct school management.</p> <p>Public-Private partnerships.</p> <p>Enhancement or creation of inspectorate.</p>
'Social Justice' instruments	<p>Promotion of multiculturalism and anti-racism.</p> <p>Encouragement of parental and community involvement.</p> <p>Identification of students with developing and potential learning difficulties.</p> <p>Narrative rather than statistical presentation of feedback for students.</p>	<p>Regulations to prohibit school selection or tracking.</p> <p>Limits on private schools.</p> <p>Limitations on testing and ranking students and schools.</p> <p>Inclusion of multiculturalism and anti-racism in curricula.</p> <p>Affirmative action recruitment and admissions.</p>	<p>Unequal, redistributive pupil funding.</p> <p>Redistributive school funding.</p> <p>Well-funded early years education.</p> <p>Wider fiscal measures to redistribute income, address poverty, or provide direct support for learners (e.g. free school meals).</p> <p>Well paid teachers in state schools.</p> <p>Support for adult education.</p>	<p>Parental involvement in school governance.</p> <p>Wider support facilities for learners.</p> <p>Organizations to foster collaborative governance.</p> <p>Language classes for migrant students and parents.</p>

Sources: *Cairney and Kippin, 2021*

Table 3.5 Gender mainstreaming policy tools

	Nodality	Authority	Treasure	Organization
Policy instrument	<p>Gender impact assessments.</p> <p>Formalized inclusion of women's groups in the policy process.</p> <p>Gender equality reviews of policies.</p> <p>Gender awareness raising campaigns.</p> <p>Gender based analysis across all areas of government.</p> <p>Consultations with stakeholders on the development, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of gender-equality policies.</p> <p>Consultations with stakeholders with a view to integrating a gender perspective into all general policies in all stages of the policy cycle.</p> <p>Gender delineated government statistics</p> <p>Sharing policy insights, developing new programmes, and producing joint research with international neighbours.</p> <p>Promotion of healthier gender norms.</p> <p>Pay surveys.</p>	<p>Gender equality duty for public bodies.</p> <p>Equality legislation.</p> <p>Ensuring the equal presence and contribution of women and men in all government programmes and activities.</p> <p>Gender equality legislation.</p> <p>Criminalization of purchasing sex.</p> <p>Equal treatment legislation.</p> <p>Domestic violence laws and enforcement.</p> <p>Anti-human trafficking regulations and sanctions.</p> <p>Quotas for equal leadership on public bodies.</p> <p>Measures to combat harassment of women.</p> <p>Pay equality regulations.</p> <p>Procurement standards driven by gender equality.</p>	<p>Gender budgeting at different levels of government.</p> <p>Sensitivity training for all public officials.</p> <p>Gender neutral parental leave.</p> <p>Provision of sanitary products</p> <p>Funding of organizations which help women exit sex work.</p> <p>Expansion of free childcare provision.</p> <p>Gender equal pensions.</p> <p>Family tax credit and other benefits.</p> <p>Access to contraception.</p> <p>Access to abortion services.</p> <p>Sponsorship of women's shelters and other organizations.</p> <p>Rehabilitation services for domestic abusers.</p>	<p>Creation of government departments, agencies, or units to oversee progress towards gender equality and implement measures</p> <p>Creation of gender equality minister and ministry.</p> <p>Identification of 'gender champions' within organizations.</p> <p>Institutional change initiatives.</p> <p>Gender equality officer involvement in policy implementation.</p>

Sources: Cairney et al., 2021a; EIGE, 2021., Swedish government, 2021

how. As such, these and subsequent tables may describe multi-level and sectoral responsibilities but not how policymakers and stakeholders make sense of them in collaboration with each other and other levels of government.

Conclusion

A focus on mapping policymaking responsibilities is essential to understanding multi-level policymaking and encouraging policy learning. However, it also exacerbates the policymaking difficulties outlined in Chapter 2, which shows that policy learning looks manageable on paper but is not feasible without more in-depth analyses of wider considerations: how do they define the problem, how can we demonstrate success from which to learn, and how comparable are their political and policymaking systems? These issues are already exacerbated by high levels of policy and policymaking ambiguity, in which the interpretation of aims such as equity, and problems such as inequalities, is highly contested. In addition, there is high uncertainty about who is responsible for what, exacerbated by contestation to assign policymaking responsibilities—to address these problems—across different levels and types of government.

These difficulties help to identify general reasons to expect a disconnect between high rhetorical support to foster spatial justice and reduce territorial inequalities but low progress in defining the problem and assigning responsibility. Chapter 1 describes the hope among policymakers and stakeholders that ‘multi-level governance’ can address territorial inequalities, by encouraging many levels and types of government to cooperate to reduce the size of the policy problem. However, studies of multi-level policymaking describe how it exacerbates policy problems if it is not clear who is responsible for policy instruments and outcomes (Chapter 2), and no agreement on how to resolve the problem (Chapter 4). In theory, policymakers seek to identify (1) which policy tools and instruments are most relevant to inequalities, and (2) which level or type of government has responsibility for each instrument. In practice, both aspects remain uncertain and contested.

Case studies of multi-level and multi-sectoral policymaking further complicate matters by identifying many different ways to map formal responsibilities and struggling to account for the informal powers that are not described well in the public record. Further, while we can produce simple and manageable tables to summarize levels of responsibility in one country (explored in Chapters 6 to 8), it is relatively difficult to compare them across multiple countries, each with its own rich narrative about the use of policy responsibilities in practice. In other words, a detailed process of mapping multi-level policy instrument responsibilities amplifies a sense of policymaking complexity rather than providing a model for action.

We explore these issues further in Chapters 4 and 5, which show how different governments make sense of inequalities in relation to territory, and Chapters 6 to 8, to explore how they foster multi-level and intersectoral strategies to reduce health, education, and gender inequalities.

4

Contesting the Scale at Which Inequalities Policies Should Be Solved

Introduction

While Chapter 2 identifies a general way to understand policy learning in multi-centric systems, it does not identify the dynamics specific to the problem of inequalities or to policymaking across the EU. The next step is to identify key developments in relation to spatial politics and policy making rescaling in EU member states and regions. It highlights the following policy analysis debates and their impact on the distribution of policymaking responsibilities.

First, *should nation states take primary responsibility for population welfare and solving inequalities?* Nation states have tended to control the economic policy instruments to redistribute resources, with subnational action restricted to local planning and public service delivery. Rescaling debates have challenged this division of labour. European states have seen the rise of a 'regional' level of government with greater powers to address inequalities.

Second, *what should be the role of regions in addressing inequalities?* The role of regions and regional governments is contested. Regions can be spaces of economic competition, social solidarity, and/or spatial identity and new sources of political mobilization. Classical theories of federalism argued that redistributive functions should be allocated at the highest level, to harness resources and avoid the race to the bottom. This is no longer tenable, as distributive issues arise at all levels and in relation to all functions. The boundaries of decentralized units are contested, since they determine who benefits from, and contributes to, local communities of solidarity.

Third, *what kinds of regional policymaking are possible?* A technocratic focus on multi-level governance may seek an optimal division of powers. Yet, continuous contestation on rescaling suggests that there is no one best way to organize policymaking responsibilities. Rather, we identify the many ways in which different definitions of inequality, approaches to social groups, and expectations for rescaling have influenced regional approaches. At the local and regional level, there are many different manifestations of territorial policy communities, in which the balance of influence between capital, labour, and social interests varies. These differences need to be accommodated when governments seek to learn from each other.

Should nation states take primary responsibility for welfare?

Since the nineteenth century, there has been a persistent paradigm in which modernity is associated with territorial integration, so that localized systems dissolve in the face of unifying pressures (Durkheim, 1964; Finer, 1997; Parsons, 1971). The outcome was the nation state. This is paradoxical because the nation state itself is a highly territorialized and bounded form of polity and regulatory system.

It was in this territorial context that welfare states were born, linked to the inclusion of all citizens within the welfare net and the exclusion of outsiders. State-wide social provision gradually displaced the local systems of social welfare that had focused on small communities and the obligation to relieve distress, and were frequently linked to charitable or religious bodies. In the modern welfare state, 'universalism' and equity are key principles, but applied only within this delimited space. There are a number of reasons why social welfare should have become associated with the nation state.

First, there are top-down and bottom-up pressures for national integration. Some have argued that states were built essentially for war and that the surplus revenues generated by its extractive apparatus were then available for domestic spending, especially on welfare services that could increase the supply of fit soldiers. Other explanations focus on the twin themes of inclusion of social groups and exclusion of outsiders through boundary-building. The former includes the incorporation of the working class as industrial militancy threatened political regimes. Welfare is then a result of bottom-up pressures, depending on the mobilization of working class interests, the success of class-based parties, and the degree of industrial militancy. In the Germany of Bismarck, conciliation of the working class was combined with military needs and the task of building loyalty to the newly-formed empire and nation. For trades unions and socialist parties, the national level provided the framework to unify their efforts and to confront and tame capitalist interests.

During the twentieth century, class compromises were facilitated by both sides being locked into the same boundaries with few opportunities for exit (Rokkan, 1999; Bartolini, 2005; Ferrera, 2005). Macro-economic stabilization, taxation, market regulation, and welfare compensation were all conducted at the same level. Positive-sum forms of politics could give business stability and public goods like infrastructure and an educated work force, while labour gained social protection. This was the basis for the so-called Keynesian welfare state, in which the state could guarantee economic stability and full employment, while capital could make profits and labour enjoy social protection and public services. At the limit, this took the form of corporatist social pacts among the state, capital, and labour while elsewhere the compromise was more implicit.

Second, nation states became sites of territorial inclusion, identity, and social citizenship. From the 1960s, centralized macro-economic policies were increasingly accompanied by a commitment to territorial equalization through regional policies aimed at enhancing the performance of underperforming regions. While these policies were spatially targeted, the aim was to equalize conditions across the national territory, at which point intervention could be ended. Measures included investment subsidies and tax breaks, infrastructure provision, and pressures on business to relocate to development areas. Gradually, in an effort to tie local actors, these were institutionalized through special agencies and corporatist bodies representing government and both sides of industry, including modernizing elements known in France as *forces vives*.

Welfare was linked not merely to the state, but specifically to the *nation* state, as the nation was understood as a community of shared interest and affective solidarity. It is not just that national solidarity can underpin social solidarity. It can equally work the other way around, as in Bismarck's programme to generate a German national identity beyond class loyalties. This may be expressed in a purely instrumental way; it is merely a convenient fact that the nation is available as a source of solidarity and therefore welfare. It has been argued that solidarity is stronger among more homogeneous communities, although the argument is contentious (Keskinen et al., 2019). Some deploy a more directly normative argument that we owe obligations to co-nationals that we do not to other people (Miller, 1995). That, however, has always been problematic for those on the left and of cosmopolitan persuasion, who warn that welfare nationalism can easily morph into 'welfare chauvinism', excluding immigrants and those perceived to be outsiders.

Another key concept is social citizenship, presented by T.H. Marshall (1992), writing after the Second World War, as a third generation of citizenship and rights, after the civil and the political. So strong was the assumption that all three sets of rights would be embodied in a territorial nation state that Marshall and others barely mentioned the matter. With social benefits and public services being defined as rights, moreover, there came the assumption that these needed to be equalized across the territory of the nation state, displacing territorialized systems of allocation and distribution.

Not only have welfare states been focused on the nation state; they have also tended to be centralized (Banting, 2006; Banting and Kymlicka, 2017; Greer, 2006). Especially after the Second World War, European states sought to expand welfare and service provision against the reluctance of conservative local elites fearful of the costs. In contrast to twenty-first century states imposing austerity, they encouraged spending, underwriting it with national resources. Many states also undertook reforms of local government to undercut older elites tied to clientelistic and distributive politics and to facilitate the emergence of more professional leadership.

Third, centralization is supported by a recurrent fear of the 'race to the bottom.' It describes the negative effect of localities trying to undercut each other, such as by reducing their standards. The fear is that it may occur if redistributive policies (including spending and taxation) are decentralized to local and regional levels. If markets operate on a state-wide basis, while social compensation is local, business may be able to shop around for jurisdictions offering the least onerous regulation and lowest taxes (Obinger et al., 2005). This may include subsidies for investors, as happens widely in states and cities in the United States. Wealthy individuals will also have incentives to relocate to low-tax jurisdictions, while the poor may migrate to those with the most generous social benefits. Regions and localities will thus compete to lower taxes, environmental standards, and social overheads to attract capital and wealthy taxpayers. This will increase disparities between regions, as some have the resource endowments to compete while others are left behind. It will also exacerbate intra-regional inequalities, as sectors and social groups with the highest productive potential will be favoured in an effort to attract capital.

For neo-liberals, such tax and regulatory competition is welcome as a means of enhancing efficiency and eliminating waste (Ohmae, 1995). For social democrats, it is a serious threat and it was long a staple of social democratic theory and practice that centralization was necessary for equality. However, empirical evidence for the race to the bottom is, at best, mixed. It is not obvious that a low tax/ low service environment is the best way to attract capital, but it is certainly true that mobility and exit opportunities are greater in a loosely bounded territory like a city or region than from a state.

In most states, the central level has a greater fiscal capacity, including personal income and business and consumption taxes, to ensure equity among citizens. Central control of taxation also insures localities against the risk of economic shocks harming some parts of the state more than others. All this explains why it has become a central tenet of fiscal federalism theory that redistributive activities should be concentrated at the highest level of the federation (Oates, 1999). Government-funded pensions, unemployment benefits, and cash payments for families and the poor are typically state wide. Social services not involving monetary transfers are usually organized locally. Such policies tended to be premised on the idea of a stable social structure characterized by households headed by a male breadwinner. Known social risks included old age, family needs, and periodic unemployment. There was a focus on income support and the expansion of universal public services.

In summary, market regulation and redistribution were seen as matters for the nation state, where social forces could reach a compromise and national feelings of solidarity could be mobilized. Market-making and market-correction were at the same level (Bartolini 2005). This in turn served to 'foster system maintenance by generating loyalty and reducing exit via the consolidation of a shared system

of norms that compel the components of the system to stay within it beyond their mere instrumental and selfish calculations' (Bartolini 2005: 179).

These arguments inform an ideal type of the national welfare state rather than a description of complex reality. While social citizenship recognized the equality of citizens in principle, welfare states in practice rarely identify the recipients purely as individuals. Benefits are allocated to individuals based on their status, as unemployed, or parents, or students, or farmers, or residents of particular places, or pensioners, and so on. The basis of effective redistribution may be class, age, gender, location, and other factors. Welfare regimes are also highly conditioned by citizenship regimes and citizenship and residence status. Some states depend on insurance-based provision, with people having to accumulate entitlements, while others offer publicly-funded services and income-support programmes. These have been widely debated in the literature on the worlds of welfare (Esping Anderson, 1990).

Yet the key features of the post-war welfare settlement can be identified. First was a national framework for macro-economic stabilization and sectoral policies intended to sustain high levels of employment. Second was a strategy for spatial development intended to integrate lagging regions into the national division of labour. Third was a national system of social welfare based largely on equal entitlements irrespective of place of residence and focused on old age security, families, and occasional unemployment. Fourth was a pattern of local social provision, largely under national guidelines but allowing for variation. All were underpinned by, and in turn sustained, shared national identity.

Revisiting, restructuring, and rescaling the welfare state

Over recent decades, this model has come under strain both on the functional and territorial dimensions. Economic planning and intervention have been scaled back in favour of market-driven approaches. Keynesian demand management gave way to monetarism and inflation-targeting. Sustained high levels of unemployment have strained welfare budgets, exacerbated by a return to fiscal orthodoxy which has ushered in fiscal austerity as the response to deficits. Spending on regional development policies has been radically cut back.

Welfare states have had to respond to changing employment and household patterns and the emergence of new social risks. Increasing female employment, itself a response to both economic and social change, has raised questions about the balance of workplace and family responsibilities and the gendered division of labour. There has also been, in many countries, a move back to older ideas about the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor. The latter are portrayed as authors of their own misfortunes and subjected to penal forms of welfare including sanctions for non-compliance. This conception of who is and is not deserving is a political construction and, accordingly, varies by time and place (Schneider and Ingram,

2005). Systems of social protection designed for the male, regularly employed industrial workforce may leave large sections of the population in precarious employment without full benefits, creating a two-tier system of entitlements. Migration has posed further challenges to labour markets and social inclusion, with migrants often being left in the second tier (Ulceluse et al., 2020).

The old distinction between redistributive versus universal, efficiency-based policies has also come into question. Regulation, allocation, and finance in housing has long been the subject of contested distributive politics. Education and health may be universal in principle, but they contribute to unequal impacts on the life chances of different groups of the population (Chapters 6 and 7). There is an old argument about whether the universal or selective provision of benefits is more effective in reducing inequalities. Selective distribution can more overtly favour the poor, but it may undermine support for social welfare by encouraging the better off to opt out, leaving public services as residual. Development policy benefits some more than others. It can also have negative effects on some communities, in the form of residential displacement, higher housing costs, and the loss of old sources of stable employment. Similarly, the distinction between economic and social policies is breaking down. The provision of affordable child care has become a concern for reasons both of economic efficiency (allowing fuller employment) and social justice (equal opportunities for women). The end of stable, full employment has posed questions as to the working of labour markets and access to jobs. Policies of activation (or active labour market policy) have been developed to fit individuals to job opportunities, again spanning the economic and social dimensions of policy. More generally, there have been efforts to redefine and reorient welfare policy by casting it as ‘social investment’, with a positive economic payback, rather than as a fiscal burden (Hemerijck, 2012).

Rescaling the state: globalization and the ‘new regionalism’

In recent decades, these changing understandings of welfare have become connected to policy making rescaling. A process of spatial rescaling has challenged the links among territories and functions and raised fundamental questions about the concept and the practice of the national welfare state. As the fields of economic management and social welfare have restructured functionally, many have also migrated to new spatial levels rather than—as often predicted—signalling the end of the nation state or the borderless world under the pressure of globalization (Badie, 1995; Fukuyama, 1992; Keating, 2013). There was not so much a deterritorialization as a reterritorialization at new levels, above, below and across the state system.

The best documented case concerns economic change, no longer to be understood within a national context. Mobile capital, international supply chains, and free trade have created elements of a world economy. At the continental

level, the European Single Market created a new, integrated economic space. Simultaneously, there was a new emphasis on the importance of local and regional territories to economic change and growth. Differences in development can no longer be attributed to proximity to natural resources or markets but are rooted in differences in social structures and practices, which encourage or inhibit innovation and dynamism (Scott, 1998). In a further move, regions and localities, from being locations of production, came to be seen as production systems with their own internal coherence and capacity for adaptation (Crouch et al., 2001). States moved away from the centralized regional development policies pioneered in the 1960s to bottom-up approaches based on endogenous development and the encouragement of local innovation and enterprise. For some, *comparative* advantage, in which regions each have their place in a national spatial division of labour, gave way to *competitive*, or *absolute*, advantage in which regions compete in global markets (Scott 1998). Others have questioned the idea of inter-regional competition, which reifies territories as actors and may provide excuses for governments to disengage from responsibility (Bristow, 2005; 2010). It is clear, however, that the idea of regions as economic entities with their own interests and engaged in competition with each other has a grip on the political imagination.

While one version of the ‘new regionalism’ (Keating, 1998) focuses on economic change and competition, sometimes to the point of functional reductionism, regions can also emerge as sites of social solidarity. Economic development policies, put forward as being in the interests of the whole population, rarely benefit everyone equally. Indeed, by displacing some activities and populations, they may have negative effects. Modernization may disrupt older social structures and cultures. Opposition to plant closures and economic restructuring is often local in focus. There may be concerns about the privatization of public space or the commodification of lands rather than focusing on their broader value. These movements can widen from specific sites to a wider regional consciousness and shared interest. Similarly, environmental movements move from a local to a global perspective. Social movements may also mobilize about the local distribution of public services.

Pressure towards rescaling had a particular impact in a Europe where historic identities and structures have, in many places, survived the homogenizing effects of the nation state. Older identities have been revived, modernized, and, where necessary, invented to construct new political communities and invest them with meaning. Regionalism, often dismissed in the mid-twentieth century as archaic and backward-looking, has been reinvented as an aspect of modernization (Keating, 1998). In some places, this takes the form of nationalism, or the claim that a distinct self-referential community exists and that it has the right to self-determination or secession. This political rescaling is highly uneven in its incidence but can invoke the very principles of common identity and affective solidarity that the nation state did in its heyday, so providing an alternative locus

for redistributive politics. Indeed such communities may be more solidaristic than that of the embracing state (this argument can also be found in non-European spaces such as Quebec, Noël, 1999). This is not because some communities are inherently solidaristic, nor because individuals in some places are more altruistic than in others. It is rather that re-emerging regional (or, in many cases, *national*) identities are being constructed precisely around conceptions of solidarity (or welfare regionalism) in opposition to the neo-liberal state. Identity is a frame for historic or reinvented themes of community, invested with new meaning in relation to contemporary economic and social challenges.

Can regions address inequalities?

The meaning—and possible role—of new regionalism is contested, emphasizing variously economic competitiveness, social solidarity, identity, and self-determination (Keating, 2017). Much the same is true, of course, of the European Union project as an instance of rescaling and attempting a new territorial fix. Indeed, the opening of the European market enhances competitive pressures and removes various protectionist devices used to defend national producers. Investors can exit the community of solidarity while retaining the advantages of the wider market. Faced with the possible exit of the contributors from the system, national welfare states may end up with impossible burdens (Bartolini, 2005). Since the 1980s, European competition rules have extended to sub-state levels, thus undermining regional protectionism and triggering fears of another race to the bottom. They have also reduced the capacity of states to subsidize regional enterprises, further eroding the old strategies of integrating regions into national markets. On the other hand, European competition rules have restrained the race to the bottom by preventing wealthy regions using public resources to outbid poorer ones in subsidizing inward investments.

The EU's own approach to regions and 'territorial cohesion' reflects the same dilemmas between the economic and social. It used to insist that cohesion policy is strictly economic but there was always a persistent ambivalence as to whether this aims only at market-building or also at social compensation (Piattoni and Polverari, 2016). The response of states, regions, and the European Commission to this realization is to seek formulas like socially-inclusive growth or environmentally-sustainable growth. These are unexceptionable in principle but their operationalization and realization involve difficult choices and trade-offs.

Institutional rescaling: contesting the new role of regions

Faced with these trends, European states have sought to restructure their systems of government and administration to regain leverage over policy fields that

have escaped their control. This extends to the supranational European Union as well as to sub-state levels, described variously as regional or national, local, and intermediate or ‘meso’ levels. Key economic competences to do with market-building, regulation, and monetary policy, have been taken up to the European level, along with environmental concerns. Other competences have shifted to cities and regions. These include spatial planning and economic development, but also matters with distributive implications.

One approach to this rescaling agenda is to emphasize *functional roles and requirements*. There is a tradition, based on functional determinism, which has argued that the territorial structures of government are the product of functional imperatives based upon efficiency (Alesina and Spolaore, 2003; Ohmae, 1995). Such arguments are teleological; they explain change by reference to its effects without identifying its social and political causes.

Yet rescaling is an intensely political process, since altering the functional and spatial boundaries of economic, social, and political arenas affects the balance of power and resources. Therefore, another more realistic approach is to relate the outcomes of rescaling to competing ideas which were more or less influential over time.

For example, the political left, committed to state economic planning and to the post-war welfare settlement, was long wary of decentralization, fearing a race to the bottom and the fragmentation of national solidarity. Nevertheless, from the 1970s, sections of the left rediscovered historic localist and regionalist traditions and moved towards decentralization. Especially where they had spent long periods in opposition at the national level (as in Italy and France), the centre-left parties used local government as policy laboratories, pioneering ideas that were later taken up at national level.

Similarly, there are competing traditions and approaches in conservative thought: neo-liberalism, which might be expected to favour decentralization to encourage competition and limit government, usually needs a strong and centralized state to overcome obstacles to its implementation. These considerations also intersected with intellectual debates on government structures. During the 1960s, many favoured large units to plan over wider areas, to roll out national services where small local governments had lacked the professional and financial resources, and to realize supposed economies of scale. From the 1980s, public choice theories favoured small and fragmented local governments, which would compete for residents and business, and purchase services rather than providing them directly.

In that context, regions are now clearly more than a convenient scale for the management of public services. Regions have been widely used as the scale for planning, the delivery of public health services (Greer, 2006), and further and higher education provision. Active labour market policy is often organized at a regional level, corresponding to territorial labour markets. The main

measures of income support, including pensions and unemployment benefits, have usually remained national in scope. However, a range of supplementary benefits, including support to families, have been partly territorialized, and states have often delegated the conditions for rationing access to services such as health.

While there may be good reasons to assign such tasks to the regional level, functionalist arguments can often mask and depoliticize what are intensely political choices. Competitive regionalism, focused on economic development, has become a dominant theme and has influenced institutional design. Centralized regional development agencies like the French DATAR (*Délégation à l'aménagement du territoire et à l'action régionale*) in the 1960s and 1970s were guided by a productivist ethos, seeking to impose a new territorial division of labour and often insensitive to local social or other concerns. Urban Development Corporations in England and Wales in the 1980s were initially guided exclusively by business concerns. Such an exclusively economic focus has invariably provoked opposition because of their socially regressive effects, disruption of local production systems, environmental implications, and commodification of space as exchange value rather than a broader use value. The same applies to some of the rescaling to the European level, including the construction of the monetary union and the resulting obligation to fiscal austerity.

Actors opposing such developments have politicized spatial development policy and the implications of competitive regionalism, introducing distributive considerations (who gets what) and environmental concerns. They have linked with new social movements and territorial political parties to demand political autonomy. The outcome of this combination, of top-down considerations of how to manage territory with bottom-up demands for control, has been new forms of elected territorial government in the form of politicized, representative, multifunctional bodies at the new territorial scales. Such bodies have included the European Union itself, regions, and metropolitan areas. There is no standard model of regional government but a variety of experiences at the emerging 'meso' level between the central government and the municipal, local level. They include the long-established federal arrangements in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland and the devolved governments set up between the 1970s and the 1990s in France, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom.

This spatial rescaling and the construction of regions has not settled debate. Rather, the matter of appropriate scale remains politically contested by the social groups that lose out from the change in political venue, and from those who complain that functionally-designed units do not correspond to cultural or political communities. There is also continuous political competition within regions, with rescaling introducing distinct agendas and new sets of actors. New policy agendas, such as active labour market policy, represent both a move away from old approaches *and* a change of territorial scope, drawing in new actors and interests.

Regions as policy making systems

Regional policy-making is partly a function of the formal competences with which meso-level governments have been endowed. Yet it also depends on the construction of the political community and the balance of power and influence within them.

Regional party politics

The dominant view in political science has been that party systems operate along national lines, with few territorial variations (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Caramani, 2004). Any territorial differences could be attributed to the differential incidence of factors such as class and religion. Regional elections were seen as a class of 'second order' elections where voters acted on national lines, rewarding or punishing the central government. In fact, there may have been a territorial effect for a long time, as parties had to adapt their offer to local political conditions. The Italian Christian Democrats were able to present a different profile in the north and the south. The Scottish Conservatives rested on a different ideological and social base than their counterparts in England, something that became apparent when they collapsed in Scotland during the 1980s and 1990s while thriving in the south.

The election of regional governments, together with the faltering of state-wide parties, has provided an opening for distinct regional alignments and party politics (Detterbeck 2012). Parties have emerged to compete only in one territory, committed to defending the territorial interest and, usually, also to political autonomy or secession. State-wide parties may exert a centrifugal force for uniform policies, but also have to adapt to local issues and competition from territorial parties. The balance between left and right can differ between levels of government, and parties in opposition nationally may use the local and regional level to differentiate themselves. Different party coalitions can be formed at different levels, with local leaders given more or less of a free hand to form them.

The outcome is a series of contrasting models. In Belgium, the state-wide party system has broken down completely and only regional parties are present. Yet this very fact forces them to cooperate in the formation of government coalitions at state level. In the UK, state-wide parties compete with nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales, while in Northern Ireland only local parties are present. In Spain, the 'historic nationalities' of Catalonia, the Basque Country, and Galicia include state-wide parties competing with local nationalists, with regional parties remaining as minor actors elsewhere. In Italy, the peripheral regions have their own parties competing with state-wide ones; elsewhere, coalitions among the national forces are brokered, with local leaders often subject to orders from Rome. Detterbeck (2012) finds increasing variation in voting patterns across regions, but

concentrated in the historically federal Germany and Austria, and in Belgium, Spain, and the devolved nations of the United Kingdom. As the party systems of France and Italy have begun to fragment, there is more opportunity for regional coalitions to reflect local strategies and conditions. On the other hand, there are places where a long domination by one political tendency has left a strong policy legacy, for example in the Basque Country (Christian Democracy), Flanders (centre-right), Scotland, Wales, Wallonia, and Tuscany (centre-left).

These variations have an impact on inequalities debates. Redistributive politics may take the form of combatting social inequalities, but these will be defined differently, as will the proposed beneficiaries, whether by income, age, gender, location, or other factors. Distributive politics may also take the form of patronage and clientelism that is the selective allocation of benefits in exchange for political support. This can take an individual form, in which individuals or households receive selective benefits provided by a patron or intermediary to whom they are indebted. It can also take a collective form, as the allocation of benefits to specific groups or to localities (known in the USA as pork barrel politics). It becomes difficult, at this point, to distinguish between collective patronage and allocation to groups in need, since the definition of need is often contested, and it is likely that beneficiaries would show their gratitude by voting for their benefactor. In clientelistic and patronage systems, however, the effect of benefits is to increase the dependency of the recipient on the patron, rather than liberating them.

Party politics has also been boosted by competitive regionalism, with local leaders postulating a common territorial interest, incarnated by themselves. This is intended to expand upon their electoral base through local 'boosterism' and attracting inward investment. That, however, exposes them to the criticism of putting the needs of business and footloose capital above those of local citizens and provoking opposition social movements. Local government was historically regarded in most countries as somehow 'non-political', a matter of good administration of services. Meso-level government, in turn, was associated with a new form of modernization, which could overcome local systems of clientelism. It became associated with the ubiquitous term 'governance', suggesting cooperation in the pursuit of common interests. It could never, however, escape the issue of distribution, provoking political competition around distributive politics at this level.

Rescaling policy communities

Writing a decade after regional governments had been established in Italy, [Pastori \(1980\)](#) coined the term 'regions without regionalism'. Some years later [Trigilia \(1991\)](#) wrote of the 'paradox of the regions', a theme reprised by [Le Galès and Lequesne \(1997\)](#) for Europe as a whole. The common theme was that,

while regional governments had been formally established in several European countries, interest intermediation and policymaking were taking place elsewhere, usually at the state level. Regions were, at best, relays in centralized policy systems or were marginalized by the resilience of local networks. Regions did not live up to the general expectation that interest groups would shift their focus to match a shift in responsibilities (Mazey and Richardson, 2015).

To test whether this was still the case, Keating and colleagues conducted research on the territorialization of interest representation in the United Kingdom, France, Spain, Belgium, Italy, and Germany (Keating, 2013; Keating, Cairney, and Hepburn, 2009; Keating and Wilson, 2014). They traced the adaptation of trade unions, professional associations, large and small employers' associations, farmers, and environmentalists. The hypothesis was that, in response to functional rescaling and the emergence of regional government, interest groups would regionalize in three ways, to (1) establish regional levels of their organization, (2) orient their representational activities towards the regional government, and (3) frame their demands in a regional context. At one limit, groups would have experienced no change and would continue to operate on a national level. At the other, they would have reoriented to the regional level. More likely, there would be a selective rescaling, as some groups were drawn into regional networks while others remained national; some would have the resources to operate at all levels and to 'venue shop' for the most favourable treatment (Baumgartner and Jones, 2009). Rescaling might fragment existing functional policy communities operating at national level while new constellations of interests and policy communities could emerge at the regional level. Interest groups could be incorporated by regional governments into their policy systems. At the limit, distinct social compromises might be reached at the regional level, and the balance between productivist and redistributive policies would differ accordingly.

The results show a varied picture. Stronger regional governments with more extensive competences, not surprisingly, attracted more attention from interest groups. Different groups were drawn in according to the policy competences of the regions.

Large business is aware of the importance of territorial factors for development but often has the ability to shop around for investment locations, on a national, European, and global scale. This enables it to set the terms for investment and to avoid entering local networks where it may be confronted by territorial interests with other social or environmental priorities. Its preference is for a narrowly economic conception of regionalism and for non-politicized development agencies. Large businesses are also able to operate at multiple territorial scales, from the European to the local, and to venue shop. Small businesses, on the other hand, are more dependent on locally and regionally produced public goods, including enterprise-support agencies, local networks, and training and advice. They are also more likely to be managed by their owners, who are closer to popular sentiments

and identities, including autonomist political movements. Some places have kept their own indigenous business elites, with a local orientation and commitment, as in the Basque Country. Others, like Wales, are highly dependent on international capital. Some regions, like Tuscany, are characterized by networks of small producers.

Trade unions are cross-pressured. They are generally committed to state-wide welfare provision and equal social citizenship. There is a historic suspicion of decentralization as a ploy to divide the working class and promote races to the bottom. On the other hand, unions have been often drawn into localized struggles over plant closures and economic development policies. Some have historic commitments to decentralization. The French CFDT (*Confédération française démocratique du travail*), with its more pluralist ideas, has supported regionalism, in contrast to the more traditionally centralist CGT (*Confédération Générale du Travail*). In the Basque Country, the major trade unions are separate from the Spanish ones and committed to Basque nationalism. In Scotland, the main trades unions are British, but also affiliated with the Scottish Trades Union Congress. In Belgium, the trade unions are among the few bodies that have resisted the trend to regionalization. More generally, trade unions, having lost influence at national level, have sought to use new regional institutions to re-enter the policy game and engage with local actors.

Farmers (apart from the large agribusinesses) are local in orientation and have been drawn into identity politics and neo-traditionalism where this is important. At the same time, they need to operate at the national and, especially, European level, given their dependence on state and European support. Environmentalists are involved in multiple local struggles around the defence of space, while at the same time they are highly engaged at European level, as they have access there and can get regulations that are applicable all the way down.

These different orientations have produced new political alignments and alliances at different spatial levels. We often find productivist alliances of business and trade unions dedicated to competitive development against environmentalists (of both right and left). At other times, employers and unions differ in their respective concern for social as opposed to economic criteria in policy making. Territorial policy communities have emerged but these are never wholly enclosed or insulated. Rather, they operate as one level in a multi-level policymaking environment characterized by both vertical and horizontal (territorial) linkages.

Some meso-level governments have incorporated economic and social interests formally into the policy process. In Tuscany, policies are thrashed out through concertation tables (*tavoli di concertazione*), a form of social partnership or neo-corporatism (Keating, 2013). Lombardy, by contrast, lacks this form of concertation but the region has strong connections to business groups. In the Basque Country, social concertation was abandoned after the historically moderate trade union turned to militancy. Policymaking in Scotland is characterized by extensive

consultation but this tends to operate within sectors so that the key trade-offs among economic, environmental, and social considerations are not addressed through the social partners (Keating, 2010). Fully-fledged corporatism was never possible at the regional level, since regions are weakly bounded spaces and actors are not bound into, but have ample opportunities for, partial exit or venue shopping. Corporatism has, in any case, faded in most European states. Interestingly, it has survived in Belgium but at the state level, explaining the resilience of Belgium as a space for policymaking, in spite of the strong centrifugal pressures from the regions.

Policy capacity

As Chapter 3 describes, listing the formal competences of regional governments gives an incomplete idea of what they actually do, or what they govern (Négrier and Jouve, 1998). Competences may be defined narrowly, seen as the local projection of national programmes, or broadly, giving regions discretion on how to interpret and apply them. However competences are defined, territorial governments may be more or less inclined to interpret them as giving discretion or introducing distributive criteria in their application. Their willingness to do this in turn may depend on their party composition and ideological inclinations as the regional level is politicized.

Financial resources are critical. It is evident that wealthy regions may be in a better position to address problems of poverty than the poorer regions where the problem is most acute. However, if there is fiscal equalization, with central government providing more to poorer regions, that problem is lessened. Central grants, in turn, may be hypothecated, that is available only for certain services under particular conditions, or take the form of a block allocation, with the region able to decide on priorities. If grants are not hypothecated, then regional governments may decide on redistributive policies, but it does not mean that they will choose to do so.

Everything we have said so far might be subsumed in the concept of policy capacity, defined by Pasquier (2004) as a complex process of the definition of interests, of organization, and of coordination of collective action that permits the institutions and groups of public and/or private actors to resolve collective problems in the fragmented and fluid regional space. This does not mean that social conflict is absent or downplayed. The restructuring of regional government alters the balance of political and social forces but there are powerful historical legacies and institutions built over time, which condition how the region is constructed as a policy space.

The capacity of regions for redistribution depends also on the distribution of competences and the design of welfare states. Some welfare states rely heavily on insurance-based systems, often managed by the social partners, including trade

unions, religious societies, and the voluntary sector. These tend to operate at national level but are divided sectorally into occupational or other schemes. So welfare and health have not been significantly territorialized in the federal states of Germany and Belgium. States with publicly-run national health services, such as Spain, Italy, and the United Kingdom, have more easily included health in their programmes of devolution.

Programmes covering the major risks tend to remain with central governments, which can mobilize more resources and deal with asymmetrical economic downturns (affecting some territories more than others). This includes unemployment insurance. Even the Basque Nationalist Party, in its pursuit of maximum devolution, has not asked for this, mindful of the high unemployment rates endured in the Basque Country during the industrial restructuring of the 1980s and early 1990s. Other risks are more predictable as they stem from long-term factors rather than economic downturns. So Wallonia has consistently resisted efforts by Flanders to devolve social security, in the knowledge that it consistently transfers resources away from Flanders (although before the 1960s Flanders was the net beneficiary). Regions have not generally been keen to take on the risk of pensions, given the demographic challenges. Again, the Basque Country provides an example, aware as it is of its ageing population.

Yet there is significant rescaling of welfare in the broader sense to European and regional levels (Ferrera, 2005; Kazepov and Barberis, 2008, Vampa, 2016). Regional governments have been able to supplement cash transfers at the margins, and marginal upwards spending can have substantive political rewards as part of a narrative of distinctive regional policies. Public services not primarily based on cash transfers, including health, education, housing, and care of children and the elderly, have been decentralized. There has been some decentralization of taxation, often subject to state-level regulation and, increasingly, to the economic constraint posed by factor mobility.

Narratives of regionalism and inequalities

Regional or meso-level governments now exist as institutions created by state laws and sometimes constitutionally entrenched. Their competences vary greatly, as does their scope for autonomous action. In France and Italy, they started life as expressions of 'functional regionalism' (Hayward, 1969) intended to address specific needs linked to spatial planning, investment allocation, and economic promotion. Over time, their competences were extended, they were directly elected, and they took on the character of governments in their own right. There is a protracted history of regionalism in England, with repeated experiments in regional development machinery, which never reached the stage of elected government and were all reversed. In Spain, Belgium, the Italian periphery, and the devolved

nations of the United Kingdom, the prime motive was the management of national diversity and the containment of centrifugal forces.

Political actors use these developments to inform competing narratives on the current dynamics and future possibilities for regions beyond their formal constitutional status. Regions have been constructed, with more or less success, as political communities, foci of identities and policymaking systems. An important role is played here by territorial political entrepreneurs and their use of symbolism, imagery, and networking to create new systems of action and unify territorial actors around a shared project. For some, *the territory is not a region but a nation*. While the distinction is not based on objective criteria, the claim is nonetheless important. Nations are credited with the right to self-determination, which implies that they have the right to negotiate their own constitutional future. Nations are also presented as complete societies, encompassing the entirety of social systems, while regions can be seen as functionally specific. The claim to be a nation is uncontested in Scotland and Wales, more contentious in Catalonia and the Basque Country, a minority claim in Flanders, and non-existent in most cases. The effort in northern Italy in the 1990s to construct a nation of Padania was an almost complete failure.

Regardless of national status, images of regionalism have shifted from backward-looking and traditionalist in the nineteenth century to relentlessly modernist from the 1970s. The region or nation is presented as forward looking and economically dynamic, while keeping elements of tradition. Leaders appropriate the language of competitive regionalism, while keeping an eye on a suitably interpreted past. Flemish leaders point to the glories of their trading cities of the early modern period. Catalan politicians evoke their history as a commercial Mediterranean people. Modern theories stressing the role of social capital in economic development are pressed into service by stressing how culture and shared identity underpin common understandings and networks. Competitive regionalism also allows leaders to widen their local support base, by postulating a common territorial interest.

Competitive regionalism, however, is typically balanced by a conception of territorial solidarity and social cohesion. This is particularly important for leaders engaged in nation-building at the substate level and aspiring to provide an alternative focus for political and social identities (Béland and Lecours, 2008). How this is framed and translated into policy varies from one case to another. Some regions stress a market-oriented competitive regionalism as the best way to benefit all citizens via growth and employment. Others may be run by social democratic forces explicitly committed to equality as a primary aim via redistribution and universal public services. A third variety draws on Christian Democracy or traditional conservative ideas to balance the market economy with a social dimension. The region is invoked as a site of social solidarity and inclusion, but interpreted in different ways.

Keating et al. (2003) have studied these discursive constructions to show how political, social, and economic actors can be drawn into development coalitions, and how cultural themes can be interpreted to foster more or less attention to inequalities within or across regions. In some places, there is a narrative of dynamism, growth, and social cohesion, projected into the past and the future. In others, there is a story of failure and marginalization. The same stereotypical features are employed to explain both. So, in lagging regions, leaders will lament excessive individualism as a failure of social cooperation. In a successful region, individualism will be credited as an entrepreneurial virtue. Collectivism will be lauded in one place as evidence of social capital and blamed in another for the lack of dynamism.

These general themes encompass, but can obscure, difficult policy choices and distributive issues. Formulas such as sustainable growth or inclusive growth are deployed for policy, whether at European or the substate level. The EU's own spatial development policies and funds are caught in a fundamental ambiguity as to whether they are about competitive development or social compensation. Although the Commission insists that they are about development, they remain one of the few instruments available to the EU to correct market-generated inequalities.

These narratives may also be used to reinterpret Marshall's (1992) narrative of social citizenship vested, along with civil and political rights, in the nation state. Regions, as they evolved from spaces of administration to spaces of government, raise the possibility that they may become the focus of political allegiance and identity, for social compromise and, possibly, differentiated social citizenship. The available evidence shows great variation here. In some places, regions are not perceived as political spaces or arenas for policymaking and policy divergence; in others, they are. It is not surprising that territorial identities and the perception of the meso-level as one for policymaking is stronger in places with strong historic identities like Scotland, Catalonia, the Basque Country, Brittany, and Trentino-Adige (with its two distinct provinces). This contrasts with most French and Italian regions and Spanish autonomous communities which were not in the first wave of regionalization and not based on historic territories. A sense of regional citizenship and territorial solidarity can still emerge, but not necessarily replacing state-wide social citizenship and solidarity. Wealthier regions show a greater reluctance to share wealth with others, but there is little outright refusal. In what has been described as the 'devolution paradox', citizens frequently demand more autonomy for their own territory while at the same time supporting uniform services across the national territory (Henderson et al., 2014). This suggests not the disappearance of state-wide communities of solidarity, but rather a rescaling of solidarity and its expression at multiple levels, both territorial and social.

These narratives warn against the assumption that decentralization produces a race to the bottom. The institutionalization of regions has served to draw new

boundaries in the field of welfare but not to enclose territory in the way that national boundaries of old did. There are myriad opportunities for partial exit (Bartolini, 2005) and for actors to venue shop jurisdictions for favourable treatment. This creates pressures for a race to the bottom but we must be wary of economic determinism. Much depends on institutional design, on political competition, and on the construction of local territorial policy communities. Region and nation-building at the meso-level also provokes races to the top as territories vie to impress their own citizens and demonstrate a concern for social cohesion and unity (Gallego and Subirats, 2011). The balance between the two forces may even generate a race to the middle, and a convergence rather than divergence as a result of devolution (Dupuy, 2012).

Conclusion

We have described three broad trends in spatial rescaling across the EU. First, there is no longer an assumption that nation states should take sole responsibility for population welfare and solving inequalities. Regional levels of government have greater powers to address inequalities within multi-level policymaking systems. Second, however, the role of regions in addressing inequalities is unclear and contested. Their primary role can be to encourage economic growth via competition, or social solidarity via distributive and other policies. These are political choices about who benefits, influenced by new sources of political mobilization at regional levels. Third, many kinds of regional policymaking are possible, and there is continuous contestation to elect regional parties, form territorial policy communities, use multiple policy instruments, and harness this policy capacity into different narratives of regionalism. Therefore, the role of regions in addressing inequalities remains an open political question, and cannot be decided by technical means to identify an optimal spread and use of policy instruments.

These findings present a major practical problem for analysts seeking to engage in policy learning and encourage policy transfer. They suggest that there is no such thing as a typical division of policymaking responsibilities across a small and manageable number of levels of government. While the European Union's role may be relatively consistent across member states, the national and subnational dynamic varies markedly by territory. In some cases, it may be possible to identify shared models of policymaking across multiple countries, but many such countries also exhibit internal variations, with some regions enjoying different responsibilities. Further, this contestation to establish new regional policymaking responsibilities accompanies debates on how to define and address inequalities. There are many ways to define and make policy. No 'one best way' has emerged, and it would be naïve to expect its emergence in the future.

5

Inequalities Policies in Practice

Subnational Strategies and Choices

Introduction

Chapter 4 shows that national governments no longer have sole responsibility for welfare policies to address inequalities. There is scope for multi-level approaches to policy redesign, and differing priorities, within national systems of social welfare. However, while regional levels of government now have greater powers to address inequalities, their role is contested. There is no such thing as a typical division of responsibilities or one best way to address inequalities. Rather, many kinds of policymaking are possible, and there is continuous contestation to use policy capacity to create different narratives of regionalism. These policymaking narratives intersect with policy reform agendas. Multi-level structures may contain multiple veto points, such as to obstruct welfare state development or retrenchment, or multiple pressures that may encourage a race to the top or bottom.

In that context, Chapter 5 examines key experiences of decentralized policies on inequality and social inclusion in the United Kingdom, Spain, Italy, and Belgium. These states are particularly relevant since they have simultaneously experienced political devolution to the intermediate, ‘meso’ level, and significant transformation to the welfare and social provisions with an impact on socio-economic inequalities. We highlight three main elements for initial comparison.

First, *each country has its own history of meso-level government*. Since 1999, there has been devolution within the United Kingdom to Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, including legislative powers in all areas not reserved to the centre. Italian regions were provided for in the constitution but were not elected and empowered until the 1960s and 1970s. A constitutional reform in 2001 transferred significant competences to them and was intended as a move toward federalism, although Italian federalism has never been a clear idea. In Spain, autonomous communities were set up from the 1970s as part of the transition to democracy. They have steadily gained powers since then, although some regions complain that the process has been delayed while others, since the global financial crisis, have complained that their responsibilities are too great and even asked for powers to be taken back. Belgian decentralization is also a long process, starting in the 1960s and culminating in the constitutional reform of 1993, formally making Belgium a

federal state with three territorial regions (Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels) and three language communities (French, Flemish, and German).

Second, *these constitutional histories intersect with developments in the welfare state*. The main lines of the welfare state in the United Kingdom were laid down in the 1940s, with further developments under Labour governments in the 1960s and 1970s. This was essentially a national welfare state with uniform provision. Although Northern Ireland had its own devolved government, it generally followed provisions made for Great Britain and the central government provided the resources. While there was some administrative decentralization to Scotland and Wales, political devolution did not arrive until 1999. Belgium followed a similar course, with the basic lines of welfare being settled before the federalization of the state in the 1990s. Then, responsibilities were divided between territorial regions and language-based communities, which overlapped imperfectly. In Italy and Spain, welfare state development coincided with the establishment of devolved government in the 1970s and 1980s and built on previous patterns of provision heavily dependent on family networks and religious foundations (Ferrera, 2005).

Third, while there may have been some attention to technical aspects of policy design (e.g. which government should control which instruments?), *these developments largely followed political debates on autonomy and the welfare state*, each with an incremental impact on policymaking responsibilities. Tensions have arisen between new forms of multi-level policy making and new models of welfare. In Italy and Spain, the tension between modern ideas of unified social citizenship, written into their post-authoritarian constitutions and territorial autonomy, has been a constant theme. It is managed by framework laws and provisions for minimum levels of service for key items (*livelli essenziali delle prestazioni* and *servicios públicos fundamentales*). Framework laws are a source of conflict and often end up in the courts, as regions complain that they are too detailed, leaving little room for local discretion. Minimum service provisions are linked to financial allocations, although defining what the minima are, and realizing them, is contentious. Naldini and Saraceno (2008) criticize the way Italy's adoption of a framework law on social services in 2000 was immediately 'undermined' by the constitutional reform devolving the matter to the regions, leaving only the 'essential services' provisions, which themselves had to be agreed with the regions. There are no such provisions in the United Kingdom, although some on the English centre-left had argued for them in the early days of devolution. The Commission on Scottish Devolution (2008) based much of its argument on the need for state-wide social citizenship. Later, former Prime Minister Gordon Brown (2014) argued for a category of essential 'covenanted' services to be centrally financed. The Bingham Centre (2015) also argued that social solidarity requires minimal standards. In the event, there is no evidence that devolution has led to a race to the bottom in the devolved nations and these proposals have made little progress (Chapter 4). The constitution of Belgium lists social rights, including to health, housing, family

allowances, and employment, but there are no provisions for enforcing these on the federated entities.

This chapter does not offer a comprehensive analysis of all relevant policies in these political systems. Comparable data are not always available and the combination of policies across sub-state territories defies simple analysis or taxonomies (Chapter 3). Instead, we offer general reflections on critical areas where we have comparative knowledge: taxation; social services and assistance; service charges; active labour market policies; and minimum income guarantees. As Chapter 4 suggests, we find differences corresponding to a range of factors including: historical path dependence within territories; party political control; the weight of labour, business interests, churches, and the voluntary sector in territorial policy communities (Dupuy and Keating, 2021); policy capacity; and the available funding or resources.

Taxation and spending to reduce inequalities

While devolved governments initially had few tax powers, these have gradually been improved over the years, and there is some scope for increasing the progressivity of taxes. Yet regions have made little use of them for several reasons (Poole 2017). First, there are competitive pressures that inhibit regions from raising taxes, while lowering them will reduce revenues and require service cuts. Second, regional governments, seeking internal consensus, shy away from overt or transparent intra-regional distribution, unless for measures like cutting inheritance taxes, which, counter-intuitively, seems to be popular even among people who do not pay them. Third, regional governments, especially autonomist parties, prefer to blame central governments for austerity and avoid falling for the trap that they could reverse it by using their own revenues. Fourth, it is difficult to demonstrate to the public that a tax change has a direct impact on spending, or balance the blame for taxes with the praise for social benefits, particularly when different aspects are controlled across different levels.

In Belgium, the main taxes (income tax, business taxes, and Value Added Tax—VAT) are set at the federal level but a share of VAT is assigned to the regions. Since 2012, the federal income tax share has been reduced to give the regions additional fiscal space in 35% of the tax; they can alter the bands and degree of progressivity within a 10% range. In addition, some minor taxes are devolved to the regions. In practice, the regions have not made use of these tax powers. Further, social security is a state-wide competence, in spite of repeated Flemish demands to devolve it based on the complaint that Flanders has to subsidize inefficiency in Wallonia (the constitutional and political requirement for broad consent has meant that this complaint has not progressed). There is also an equalization formula. Devolution of income tax does not seem to have benefitted Flanders, because it is levied at the

place of residence and there is a net influx of commuting workers to the region. Overall, however, the tax regime has proven advantageous to Flanders ([Bisciari and Van Meensel, 2012](#)).

Spanish regions operate according to two systems. In the ordinary regime, autonomous communities have gradually gained tax powers so that they control half the income tax revenues. Half of VAT and excise revenues are assigned to them, without the ability to change the rate. In 2018, the lowest income tax rates varied only between 18.5 and 21.4% and the highest between 44 and 48%. The only significant increases came in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, notably in Catalonia. The Basque Country and Navarre have a special 'foral' fiscal status, which allows them to raise most of their own taxes and pay a contribution to the state for Spain-wide services such as defence. Social security is paid through a Spanish-wide fund. The foral regions have made more use of their fiscal autonomy. Income tax rates in Navarre in 2018 varied from 13 to 52%. In the Basque Country, the taxes are set by the three historic territories (provinces) individually. The Basque Government has argued that it provides better services than other regions because its citizens pay more, although this has been challenged ([Fortuño 2020](#)). Income tax rates are slightly higher than the Spanish average at the both the top and the bottom, but so are allowances, including those for large families and entrepreneurs. Taxes on business are slightly lower than in the rest of Spain but there is an agreement that they should not be so far out of line as to distort competition. The result is a system which is competitive but also includes some social benefits. The Basque Country also has a slightly higher rate on income from savings. Autonomous communities have responsibility for inheritance taxes, which vary between 0.2% and 3%, although the overall effect is less dramatic, given the relative weight of those taxes. In Madrid it has been abolished. Regions may also levy a wealth tax, which has come and gone at national level. Again, the Madrid region has introduced a 100% exemption as, under centre-right governments, it has pursued a strategy of attracting the wealthy. By 2021, it had eliminated all specifically regional taxes.

Italian 'ordinary status' regions can impose a supplementary income tax (*addizionale regionale*) within a range of 1.23 to 3.33%. In 2021, the lowest rates varied between 0.7% and 2.03%, with most being at just over one per cent ([Dipartimento delle Finanze, 2021](#)). The highest varied from 1.73 to 3.33%. Some regions apply a flat rate to all incomes and some have reductions for children from lower income families or disabled people.

The devolved governments in the United Kingdom started off with almost no tax powers except for a power in Scotland to vary the standard rate of income tax by three pence in the pound in either direction. That power was never used, as the cost of collection and the political cost were considered too great in relation to the revenue gained. In 2012 the Scottish Parliament was given control of half the earned income tax, but this was superseded by 2016 legislation which gives it control of

both the rate and the bands of the whole of income tax on earned incomes (but not on dividends or interest). It cannot define the tax base or change the pattern of deductions and exemptions. The system requires the Parliament to set the rate every year, so there is no default option allowing it to take no action. In the first year of the new powers, the Scottish Government (controlled by the Scottish National Party) was, politically, almost obliged to change the rates to prove that the power, for which it had argued, could be used. The changes, however, were marginal. At the lower end, a new rate was reduced at 19%, a one per cent cut on the old bottom rate. The remaining rates were then increased by 1%. There was strong political pressure to reverse a previous decision by the UK Government to reduce the top rate from 50 to 45%, but the Scottish Government's response was that could only be done at a UK level. The reason was that otherwise there would be tax competition and a danger of people moving their tax domicile to England. By this time, the Scottish National Party had abandoned its promise that an independent Scotland would engage in tax competition by cutting business taxes below UK levels. Northern Ireland, however, was given the right to lower business taxes, to compete for investment with the Republic of Ireland. Because of political difficulties, this power has not yet been used.

The evidence is thus that there has been some variation in taxation of incomes and rather less of businesses at the regional level. Some progressivity has been introduced in some regions, but it is difficult to make an overall judgement because of the complexity of different systems. In particular, the tax deductions for social purposes, mainly aimed at families, are difficult to compare. Greater variation, including more progressivity, is constrained by state laws, considerations of competitiveness, and the political difficulties of appearing to be a high-tax jurisdiction compared with other regions of the state.

Social assistance

The provision and planning of social services has been devolved in regions in Italy, Spain, and Belgium, and in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. While cash payments have mostly been kept at the state level, a variegated pattern of supplementary payments has emerged (although the growth mostly stalled with the global financial crisis and austerity measures after 2008).

With the constitutional reform of 2001, Italian regions gained responsibility for social assistance measures, notably for families and older people, which varied notably in their criteria for support (Napolitano, 2015). Historic patterns of provision have survived both the rise of the national welfare state and subsequent regionalization. In the northern special status (and wealthy) regions of Val d'Aosta and Trentino Alto-Adige, there is generous provision (the region of Trentino-Alto Adige has been decentralized to its component provinces of Bolzano and Trento,

and some of the measures we discuss are the responsibility of the provinces). In the northern region of Lombardy there are quite high levels of spending, combined with a reliance on private provision. Tuscany, in the centre, cleaves to the social democratic model of public provision and universalism. In the south, the family remains a main source of social support, with lower spending levels (Caltabiano, 2004). In the northern and central regions, social policies developed independently and sometimes in advance of state provision, while southern regions lagged behind (Maretti, 2008). Vampa (2016) shows that, while southern regions are highly dependent on central spending, regional spending in the north is much higher, with the net effect being higher overall levels in the north. Trentino-Alto Adige, with its special fiscal provisions, is massively ahead of the rest.

Spain has followed a similar trajectory, with considerable differences between better-developed services in the north, and less provision and more dependence on family support in the south. The Basque Country and Navarre, with their own fiscal systems, are outliers, with greatly superior resources available for social services and support. Poorer regions gain more per capita from the national social security system, especially during times of recession. The outcome is that, between 2002 and 2013, the region with the highest spending on social protection was Asturias, because of its dependence on social security. The next highest was the Basque Country, a wealthy region with a commitment to national social solidarity, which spent more of its own resources (Pérez García et al., 2015). Madrid, another wealthy region, run by the Spanish centre-right and with a low-tax philosophy, spent markedly less. As in Italy, the important differences are in the design of programmes and their targeting to specific groups including families, older people, or the unemployed. While the national social security system served to protect incomes following the global financial crisis, regional spending proved more vulnerable.

The devolved governments in the UK started off with control over social services but not cash benefits, except for the Scottish Welfare Fund and the Welsh Discretionary Fund, both emergency services administered by local governments. Northern Ireland has wider welfare powers in theory (based on the old Stormont regime), but it had tended to follow British policies, with the UK Government meeting the bill. The Northern Ireland Assembly was thrown into crisis in 2015 when it was unable to find a majority to mirror UK welfare retrenchment but could not find the money from its own resources. Eventually, it had to agree to allow Westminster to legislate for welfare reforms. Scotland and Northern Ireland were able to introduce reforms to mitigate the effects of the so-called 'bedroom tax', a measure to reduce housing support payments for recipients deemed to have more rooms than they needed.

From 2016, the Scottish Government took over responsibility for a range of benefits that included ill health and disability benefits, carers' allowance, and some housing payments. There are also some powers relating to the administration of Universal Credit, the main (consolidated) UK social security benefit. Scotland

also has the power to supplement UK Government benefits and to create new ones. One *rhetorical* change was the reintroduction of the term ‘social security’ to replace ‘welfare’, complementing a less punitive attitude to benefits than pursued by recent UK Conservative governments. A charter emphasized the principles of dignity, fairness, and respect, in contrast to the UK Charter which uses the language of ‘customers’. Substantive changes, however, were at the margin, given the restricted resources of the Scottish Government and the inability to redesign UK instruments. Upward adjustments were made in some benefits and conditions of access broadened. A new benefit was created in 2021: the £10 per week Scottish Child Payment.

Decentralization of welfare has proven difficult in Belgium, given the need for consent between Flanders, where support for it is strong, and Wallonia, which fears it would lose out. The corporatist mechanisms by which policy is negotiated between the social partners also work against this. Family allowances, however, were decentralized to the language communities (Béland and Lecours, 2017). The outcome is a varied pattern of entitlement and criteria for receipt. Social services are decentralized to the language communities but mostly run by municipalities.

Service charges

Each national government engages with a longstanding debate on the relative merits of universal or selected services and over user charges. On the one hand, universal services free at the point of use can be a marker of shared social citizenship and help to sustain support for public provision among the better off. On the other hand, income-related user charges may be a more effective means of targeting those in need of redistribution. The same dilemmas confront devolved governments, especially in times of austerity, but the scope for differentiation is limited.

Generally, the use of fees for public services has differed according to the ideological composition of territorial governments. Under centre-right governments in Flanders, Lombardy, and Catalonia, they were steadily extended (Van Lancker et al., 2018; Cichhetti and Gasbarini, 2016; Salvador-Carulla, Garrido, McDaid, and Haro, 2006), while centre-left governments have been more reticent. Variations also relate to economic circumstances, with poorer territories lacking the resources to provide more free services.

Health service charges

From 1982, Italian regions could charge for certain health services, including prescriptions, accident and emergency services, and specialist services through a *ticket*. Some charges represented variations on a national payment. Although there

were nationally-imposed limits, regions managed to exceed them in many cases. Regions can also add to the national list of exemptions. The ticket was politically controversial, although the payments tended to be quite modest. Varied patterns of charging are often justified according to general principles such as social citizenship (for universalism and low charges), or innovation. In Spain, on the other hand, health service charges are uniform.

Prescription charges for drugs have been a controversial matter in the UK since the 1940s, as the National Health Service (NHS) is otherwise free at the point of use. Between 2007 and 2010, charges were abolished in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland by governments of different parties. As the current charge in England is £9.35 per item this appears to be a large divergence, but in practice most medicines in England are free. This includes all drugs used in hospitals and exemptions for children, pregnant women, low income people, those suffering certain long term conditions, and other categories. In fact, prescription charges raise below 1% of the NHS budget (Keating et al., 2012).

Social care charges

Charges for care for older people have been another matter of variation. The case of Scotland became highly salient in 2002 when the Labour-led executive decided to implement the recommendations of a UK Commission to provide free personal care, after the UK Labour Government had declined to implement it for England. Labour politicians and think tanks in England claimed that this divergence violated the principles of equal social citizenship that should have been preserved after devolution, even though it represented an enhancement of provision in Scotland and it was England that had decided not to proceed. They were clearly fearful of the pressure this would create within England to follow suit.

In Spain, this care is organized by the Autonomous Communities but coordinated within a national framework, with agreed criteria of eligibility and service provision. Funding is shared equally and based on assessed needs. The regions can supplement this if they wish. In practice, agreed levels of funding and service are worth more, or less, according to the region (Fernanda Gutiérrez et al., 2010). There are also variations in the degree to which long-term care is still the responsibility of the family.

Social care in Belgium is decentralized and funding allocated according to needs. On the other hand, regions can increase spending using their own resources. This followed from Flemish efforts to increase its own powers in social policy, stimulating a race to the top, in which the federal government had to keep pace (Cantillon, 2021).

Higher education tuition fees

Another politically salient matter concerns tuition fees in universities. Again, the argument about equity can be played both ways. On the one hand, free university tuition benefits students who already have a higher earnings potential and who tend to come from better-off households, at the expense of students who do not have those advantages. On the other hand, it can be seen as a measure of inter-generational equity, when so many other factors, including pensions and rising house values, have benefitted the older generation. It might also be seen as a universal benefit, although in practice only a section of the population benefits.

Fees for public universities in Spain are decided by the Autonomous Communities and have historically been low, averaging about €1000 a year in 2011. At that point, in line with their general policies of austerity and marketization, the governments of Madrid and Catalonia increased fees, so that a course could cost over €1500 a year, almost twice as much as in the cheapest regions. Ten years later, the Spanish Socialist Government brokered an agreement to harmonize fees at around €1000 a year.

Fees are also a decentralized matter in Belgium, where they are determined by the language communities. There are some differences in detail, such as a cap on the maximum that French-speaking universities can charge international students, in contrast to Flemish ones. For the mass undergraduate courses, the difference is minor, at €940 a year on average in Flanders, while in the French Community there was a maximum of €835 in 2021–2022.

University fees in Italy are set centrally but regions may provide various types of support. For example, Tuscany supports scholarships and bursaries to students, a policy criticized by both right and far left.

It is in the United Kingdom where the issue of undergraduate student fees has become most salient and policy differences most pronounced (Keating et al., 2012). They were introduced by the UK Labour Government after 1997, applying across the UK. The initial fee was modest, at £1000 a year, with exemptions for students from low-income families. When the Scottish Parliament was established in 1999, Labour was forced by its Liberal Democrat coalition partners into a compromise under which the fee was deferred until graduation and then used for bursaries for low-income students. This remained the case when the UK Labour Government tripled the fee to £3000, but when the Scottish National Party came to power in Scotland in 2007 they abolished the fee altogether. The subsequent UK Coalition government—Conservative/Liberal Democrat—then raised fees in England to £9000, while in Scotland tuition remained free for Scottish and EU students (the fee exemption for EU students was a consequence of European law, until the UK's departure from the EU). Wales has taken a different approach, based on selective support. The £9000 fee was effectively halved by a grant, available to all Welsh-domiciled students wherever they studied in the UK. This was abolished in 2018,

but there are income-related maintenance grants to cover living costs. The Welsh fee itself is very slightly lower than in England. Northern Ireland set the fee for its own students at half the English rate. English, Scottish, Welsh, and Northern Irish students have to pay the full English fee (or slightly lower Welsh one) when studying in England or another of the nations. This represents a form of residence-based social citizenship that is common in the federations of North America but not in Europe. Even in Germany, differences in fees among the Länder were eliminated some years ago.

Active labour market policies

Welfare state restructuring and territorial rescaling coincided in relation to active labour market policies (López-Santana, 2015). Since the 1970s they have followed an interest in moving away from passive measures of income support and towards employment as the most effective means of raising people out of poverty. Instruments include vocational training, counselling, job placement, conditionality for receiving welfare benefits, and social partnership. Activation policy has been decentralized in Italy, Spain, Belgium, and, to a lesser extent, the UK, but its connection to largely centralized forms of passive income support is complex and not always consistent. The ideal of a virtuous circle, in which creating more work will reduce dependency, generate more taxes, and relieve the burden of welfare is difficult within a bounded nation state. At the level of an open region, when the benefits may spill over, it is even more problematic. Trained workers, for example, might be more inclined to move away, while contributing to activation schemes may place a burden on business. So active labour market policy is not always the zero-sum game that it promises, but has become an arena for distributive contention.

This is a highly complex field, in which the implementation of policy is deeply influenced by local and regional labour markets, government structures, and delivery mechanisms (Rubio Barceló, 2006). Policy is also strongly influenced by the policies of the European Union, which has promoted the idea, together with social partnership, and provided critical finance in Spain and Italy through its Social Fund (Sabatinelli, 2010). In Italy and Spain (as in France) there are local and regional partnerships of business and trade unions, with the latter often drawing a significant share of their resources from their participation in training programmes. Where business interests are predominant, active labour market policies may be seen as essentially an economic instrument, aimed at producing a supply of qualified workers. This may lead to a focus on those workers who are already nearer the labour market and are more easily prepared (Pérez Eransus and Martínez Virto, 2020b). Where trade unions have a larger role, there is a greater tendency to focus on the social dimension, bringing untrained people into the work force, although this is more costly and complicated (Keating, 2013).

In Spain and Italy, spending is less than in northern Europe, and there are sizeable variations across region. Only some regions, such as the Basque Country and Navarre, are cited as living up to the EU recommendations (Pérez Eransus and Martínez Virto, 2020a; OECD, 2019). In Belgium, employment services are the responsibility of the regions but labour relations are negotiated in the national corporatist structures. While training is devolved in the United Kingdom, job placement and other active labour market measures are not.

Minimum income guarantees

The idea of minimum income guarantees is a rare example of a bottom-up initiative. It bears some affinity to the Universal Basic Income (UBI) idea but is less comprehensive. While most UBI proposals envisage it as replacing most welfare benefits and being payable to everyone, local minimum income guarantees have aimed to fill in gaps in welfare coverage so that, taking benefits into account, nobody receives less than the minimum total income. They are often accompanied by conditionality rules requiring people to go into active labour market programmes, hence the name of ‘minimum revenue of insertion’ (into the labour market).

An early example was in 1989 in the Basque Country, aimed at households, and filling the lacunae in Spain’s patchy welfare coverage. By 2018, the monthly guarantee (the total amount including all income and benefits) varied from €625 to €959 depending on family circumstances, accounting for 4.5% of public expenditure in the Basque Country, or 0.69% of GDP (Della Rica and Gorjón, 2018). Over the following years, other regions followed the Basque lead. In 2020, as part of the coalition agreement between the Socialist Party and the leftist Podemos Unidos, a minimum income guarantee was established for Spain as a whole, linked to, but without undermining, the separate regional schemes (Gobierno de España, 2020). The regional schemes have a variety of names, and conditions for receiving aid vary, but there is a common emphasis on conditionality and being prepared to work or enter into training programmes. Some are time-limited and intended for emergency help while others, like the Basque one, are of longer duration. The amounts available are more or less generous, with the Basque Country and Navarre still paying the highest amounts, and there are residency rules to discourage welfare migration. Amounts are sometimes linked to the national minimum wage or the social security indicator IPREM (Indicador Público de Renta de Efectos Múltiples). In 2021, the amounts for Navarre were €636–€1273 and for the Basque Country €810–€1093, while in Galicia it was €423 with up to €200 extra depending on family circumstances (Vargas López, 2021).

In Italy, a national minimum income was introduced in 1998: the *Reddito Minimo di Inserimento*. The regions then introduced supplementary provisions.

Among the first were the autonomous provinces of Trento and Bolzano (Trentino-Alto Adige) and Val d'Aosta, wealthy northern regions with a favourable fiscal situation. In 2015, an 'autonomous income' (*Reddito d'Autonomia*) was introduced in Lombardy. In 2017, Tuscany introduced an 'inclusion income' (*Reddito di Inclusione*), replaced in 2019 with a 'citizens' income' (*Reddito di Cittadinanza*) (Regione Toscana, 2019). Other regions have introduced schemes under different names, which tend to be less comprehensive and generous in the south.

The idea of a citizens' income had been around in Scotland for a number of years until, in 2021, the [Scottish Government, \(2021\)](#) launched an initiative to explore the options for a Scottish Minimum Income Guarantee. In the same year, the Welsh Government announced that it would be exploring a test for Universal Basic Income (UBI), a much more ambitious concept and beyond the competences of the Welsh Parliament.

Overall, sub-state minimum income schemes fall short of the UBI ideal since they must work with state-level systems of social security, to which the local taxpayers already contribute. Even in the Basque Country and Navarre, pensions and unemployment compensation are payable from Spanish social security funds. Minimum income guarantees are ways of filling lacunae in national social welfare programmes. Still, there is evidence of policy diffusion and a race to the top as regions seek to present an image of social cohesion and inclusive development. Initiatives represent attempts to foster territorial social citizenship, connected strongly to themes of regional economic competitiveness and getting people into work. This link is not always effective in practice, due to fragmented efforts and diffused responsibilities. After years of lobbying, the Basque Country gained control of labour market activation which allowed it, along with Navarre, to mount for effective and coordinated actions, but even in those cases there are criticisms about lack of integration.

Conclusion: regional welfare regimes?

It would be an exaggeration to speak of distinct regional welfare regimes. Instead, we find many different variations on state systems: some are path-dependent, drawing on older, pre-decentralization traditions; others represent policy choices reflecting political priorities and the balance of forces in each case.

There is scarce evidence of a race to the bottom. Rather, there are clear instances of a race to the top (as with basic income schemes), while Spain and Italy have stipulated minimum standards for essential services. Wealthier regions are able to offer more generous benefits, but any national response to ensure shared social citizenship ([Segall, 2007](#)) would point to imposing maximum rather than minimum standards. In the absence of such limits, policy diffusion has taken the form of other regions adopting similar measures, or of state-wide programmes based on

regional approaches. There are limits to such local and regional anti-inequalities policies, which—during economic crises—are often less stable than state-level income support schemes that could draw on massive borrowing. Others realized that populist tax-cutting measures (such as the widespread cutting in inheritance taxes in Spain) were too costly.

In all four countries, there remains a distinction between *passive welfare support*, aimed at older people, the unemployed, and families (Bergmark and Renate Minas, 2010) and *active policies* to promote social inclusion and employment (Kazepov, 2010). Some regional systems are more comprehensive and integrated, as in Navarre (Sanchez Salmerón et al., 2020), the Basque Country, and the two provinces of Trentino-Alto Adige. Others are more fragmented and residual, reflecting the institutional efficacy of the regions and their policy capacity (Pasquier, 2004). Some regions, notably in southern Italy and southern Spain, have weak and underdeveloped institutions, which hamper policy formulation and service delivery and encourage clientelism and dependency.

There are also notable differences in how regional welfare systems are organized (Brugnoli Vittadini, 2008; Kazepov, 2010; Keating, 2013; Pavolini, 2011; Vampa, 2016; van Lancker et al., 2018). Some regions have long traditions of providing social services, health, and education through voluntary organizations, often tied to religious communities. In others, welfare state development was undertaken by direct government provision. Since devolution, some regions have retained the direct provision while others have experimented with contracting out or privatization. Catalonia and Lombardy have traditions of indirect provision, including by religious bodies. In other cases, such as Valencia in Spain, contracting out has been adopted more recently as conscious policy, with an emphasis on for-profit agencies and the voluntary sector. Lombardy has, since the 1990s, extended the contracting out of services, with the use of foundation hospitals and private and non-profit bodies for social services. It has provided vouchers to meet, at least partially, the cost of private education (Brugnoli and Vittadini, 2008; Violini and Capone, 2012; Colombo and O’Sullivan, 2012). Tuscany has preferred public provision, with a stronger integration of social services and health, and a planning role for government (Pavolini, 2011). Scotland and Wales have consciously not adopted the contracting and competitive model of health, education, and social provision practised in England under both Conservative and Labour governments. Similar differences are visible between Flanders, which has widely adopted New Public Management themes, and Wallonia.

Such differences are attributable to multiple factors that vary by region. The first is political control, with social democratic parties tending towards public control, integration, and equality, while right-of-centre parties are keener on marketization and competition. The second is the service professions, but with different effects. For example, the medical profession in Scotland is in favour of the Scottish model of public provision, while in Catalonia it has tended to look more benignly on new

modes of provision. Teaching unions in France and the United Kingdom tend to be opposed to efforts to divide the system or any degree of privatization, but in those regions of Spain, where there is a substantial private sector, they need to represent both and so remain neutral. Third, traditions are still important. In some places, there are traditions of social partnership, which drive both policy choices and delivery models, as in Tuscany and Veneto. Social partnership broke down in the Basque Country when the dominant nationalist trade unions radicalized and became more militant.

This tendency towards variation rules out a straightforward taxonomy of regional welfare regimes analogous to the ‘worlds of welfare’ literature (Esping Anderson, 1990). Instead, we can discern certain tendencies or ideal types. There are social democratic territories, committed to universalism, public provision, and social inclusion, and with a persisting presence of trade unions. Scotland, Wales, Tuscany, and Wallonia share these characteristics. Then there are regions where the commitment to social spending can draw on social Christian or Christian Democratic traditions of solidarity and cohesion, such as the Basque Country, South Tirol (Bolzano), or Flanders. Here we find a strong emphasis on voluntary or religious provision and subsidiarity and a focus on the family. Finally, there is a liberal type, with a commitment to low spending and taxation, competitive regionalism, and contracting out of services to market providers. The autonomous community of Madrid would come close to this type. Lombardy shares some of these characteristics although the local Christian Democratic tradition has ensured quite high levels of social spending. At one time, Catalonia also appeared to be heading in that direction, but the need of the governing party to assemble a broader coalition once it turned to secession curtailed the tendency somewhat.

This latter example illustrates a broader point, regarding the ways in which welfare has clearly been used as an instrument of nation-building or region-building in places with autonomist or secessionist movements (Elias et al., 2020; Elias and Franco-Guillén, 2021). These strategies require a broad coalition of support and focus on territory as the basis of common interest, although this strategy in itself does not necessarily lead to solidaristic social policies. Even where policies themselves are not very distinct, there is a striving for *ownership* of benign social policies, as seen in the various names given to benefits and minimum income schemes. In some places, policies have been drawn together to frame a singular message such as the ‘Lombardy model’ (Colombo and O’Sullivan, 2012). It represents a clear instance of the promotion of regional social citizenship and the use of social policy to present an image of social cohesion. The linkage of welfare policies to economic development both reflects new theories about tackling poverty via work and the labour market, and the rhetorical commitment to both the economic and social dimensions of the new regionalism (Keating, 2017).

We cannot give a summary answer to the question of whether decentralization undermines or enhances policies against inequality. The concept itself is contested, as is the old choice between universal and selective benefits. The choice of beneficiaries, whether the old, the young, or the unemployed, is essentially a political matter. The interaction between state-wide social welfare provisions and regional initiatives is often badly organized. In particular, the articulation between passive welfare support, active labour market policy, and regional welfare initiatives does not allow for an optimum combination of support, incentives and opportunities, even in the best-designed and executed schemes. Similarly, we lack the statistical bases to measure policy outcomes, although some territorial governments have developed their own indices. The meso-level, however, remains a critical one for welfare state rescaling and distributive politics.

6

Strategies to Reduce Health Inequalities

Introduction

This chapter examines how governments define and pursue health equity. It focuses largely on the health promotion/improvement strategy *Health in All Policies* (HiAP), fostered by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and adopted in principle by most countries (and many regions) and the EU. While health protection strategies seek to inoculate whole populations against epidemics of communicable diseases, health improvement strategies such as HiAP relate inequalities to epidemics of ‘non-communicable diseases’ (NCDs) such as heart disease, strokes, cancers, and diabetes.

Public health policy exhibits the hallmarks of equity policies that we describe in Chapter 1. Although there is a broad consensus that reducing unfair health inequalities would be a good thing, it does not solve the long-term endurance of major inequalities in chronic ill health and mortality (including unequal vulnerability to COVID-19—[Bambra et al., 2021](#)). Many describe health inequalities as a ‘wicked’ problem ([Lynch, 2017: 657](#)). There is high consensus on how to define and address the problem among a relatively small public health profession, but this understanding is not shared among policymakers or the wider media and public. Further, there remains contestation on the nature and cause of inequalities and the extent to which they can—and should—be solved by individuals, healthcare, or additional state action.

HiAP focuses on the ‘social determinants’ of health inequalities, related to factors such as income and wealth, education, housing, and social and physical environments. They are defined by the [WHO \(2019\)](#) as ‘the unfair and avoidable differences in health status ... shaped by the distribution of money, power and resources’ and ‘the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age’. HiAP challenges a tendency to relate inequalities to individual responsibility or ‘lifestyles’, or equal access to health services. While governments express some commitment to this agenda, they focus more attention and resources on healthcare and ‘drift’ back towards encouraging changes to individual lifestyles ([De Leeuw and Clavier, 2011: 237–240](#); [Breton, 2016: 383–384](#)).

As such, there is a double-sided and rather contradictory approach to health inequalities in political systems. The EU, national, and subnational governments provide a high level of rhetorical commitment to HiAP as the main vehicle for equity, but emphasize healthcare spending and the idea of equal regional access

to healthcare services to avoid the public perception of a ‘postcode lottery’ of treatment. They also prioritize ‘neoliberal’ economic and governance policies that undermine a social determinants focus. While the EU embraced HiAP rhetorically during Finland’s presidency in 2006, it has not made substantive policy changes to that effect, and its tendency to prioritize economic over social agendas undermines the HiAP agenda. This dynamic is also present in member states, albeit with a range of experiences in which Nordic country policies are more conducive to HiAP than most others.

These competing frames of health equity have implications for multi-level policy making in the service of spatial justice. First, HiAP highlights the need for meaningful collaboration across policy sectors, levels of government, and with non-governmental actors. However, there is an uneasy balance between HiAP as a top-down approach to seek uniformly beneficial outcomes *and* a vehicle for decentralized collaboration to tailor HiAP strategies to local communities and multiple policy sectors. Second, HiAP challenges the EU idea that ‘territorial cohesion’ can be achieved with equal access to public services. Rather, the disproportionate amount of resources devoted to reactive healthcare services come at the expense of public health policies devoted to reducing health inequalities. Third, there is scope for many regional and devolved governments to go their own way on public health, but also similar patterns in which rhetorical commitment to health equity competes poorly with higher salience agendas on public service delivery and encouraging lifestyle changes.

To explore these issues, we focus on three key aspects. First, *how do policymakers define health equity in theory and practice?* We outline the key tenets of HiAP, explore why HiAP advocates reject a focus on health services in favour of more ‘upstream’ population health measures, and examine the limited extent to which HiAP thinking is reflected in actual policymaking in the EU.

Second, *what can governments learn from allegedly leading countries with comparable systems?* Our qualitative systematic review of HiAP policymaking research (Cairney et al., 2021) highlights two main sources of best case scenarios and cautionary tales. South Australia provides lessons on centralized HiAP strategies which struggled to make an impact on other sectors. Nordic experiences help to explain why decentralized models exhibit limited progress, even in the context of social democratic welfare states that are relatively conducive to HiAP aims. In both cases, and in narratives of other European countries, HiAP researchers relate limited progress to low ‘political will’ and a tendency for a ‘neoliberal’ policy agenda to undermine a focus on social determinants. We examine these explanations critically, challenging a too-vague focus on policymakers rather than their wider policymaking environments, and identifying the policy dilemmas that accompany HiAP’s often-contradictory aims.

Third, *we examine the multi-level nature of health equity policy.* We discuss three main types of spatial politics in relation to public health policymaking.

The first relates to the idea of ‘healthy cities’, in which there is some scope for local policymakers to identify innovative approaches to HiAP. The second relates to the idea of a ‘postcode lottery’ in which the distribution of population health and/or quality or availability of health services may vary spatially, often prompting governments to limit decentralization to seek some degree of uniformity. The third relates to the trend in Europe towards healthcare decentralization, and scope for regional or devolved government autonomy in health policy more generally, with some enjoying the potential to go their own way but facing similar policymaking dilemmas.

Finally, we reflect on *the relevance of health equity policy to the idea of territorial cohesion*. Public health provides a case study of rhetorical commitment to social determinants and collaborative approaches in theory but a tendency to support individualism and service provision in practice. It therefore provides insights relevant to the EU descriptions of ‘territorial cohesion’ that focus on equal access to services and effective multi-level governance.

How do policymakers define health equity? The key tenets of Health in All Policies

The UN and WHO have fostered successive health promotion initiatives for over five decades, with predecessor agendas and concepts including Health For All (HFA) and Healthy Public Policy (HPP) (De Leeuw and Polman, 1995). In that context, our analysis of policy documents and published research suggests that this long term development helped to produce a coherent and well-supported HiAP narrative with the following elements (Cairney et al., 2021: 6–8):

1. *Health is a human right.*

It should be enjoyed by everyone and supported by governments and international organizations (WHO, 2014).

2. *Identify evidence of the ‘social determinants’ of health inequalities.*

Health is unequally distributed, and the primary cause is social rather than biological (Whitehead and Dahlgren, 2006: 4; Solar and Urwin, 2010: 6). HiAP focuses on:

significant and persistent disparities in health outcomes caused by structural inequities in social and economic factors, including employment opportunities, the law and the justice systems, education, housing, neighborhood environments, and transportation. These elements are otherwise known as the social determinants of health. The opportunity or lack of opportunity to be healthy is too often associated with a person’s socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual identity, or disability

(Bliss et al., 2016: S88; see also Zeeman et al., 2019).

COVID-19 has also highlighted the relevance of social determinants to infectious disease and health protection. There are inequalities in people's (1) underlying health conditions associated with NCDs (which increase the risk of death or major illness), *and* (2) ability to live and work safely (Marmot et al., 2020; Bambra et al., 2021).

3. *Identify evidence-based 'upstream' solutions*

An 'upstream' approach generally focuses on: (1) preventive health, akin to whole population inoculation (primary prevention) or supporting at-risk groups (secondary prevention); (2) a shift from interventions focused on individual behaviour (the 'causes of health') towards their social, economic, and physical environments ('the causes of the causes of health'), and; (3) the political systems that constrain or facilitate social determinants approaches (the 'causes of the causes of the causes') (Cairney and St. Denny, 2020; Oni et al., 2019; De Leeuw and Peters, 2014: 987–988):

Upstream interventions are aimed at fundamental social and economic reform and involve mechanisms for the redistribution of wealth, power, opportunities, decision-making capacities, and other resources. Midstream interventions aim to reduce risky behaviors or exposures to hazards and may include strategies to affect lifestyle or psychosocial factors, and/or to improve material working and living conditions. Finally, downstream interventions aim to mitigate the inequitable impacts of upstream and midstream determinants of health and disease through efforts to increase equitable access to health care services

(Shankardass et al., 2011: 29).

Examples of ways to describe 'upstream' measures include to: intervene early (in relation to a child's age, or a problem's severity); improve access to high quality education, employment, housing, public transport, air, water, and food; identify groups vulnerable to discrimination and violence, and; use regulations, planning, and economic incentives to improve access to healthy food and safe places to exercise (Marmot review of health inequalities in England, 2010; Bambra et al., 2010; Storm et al., 2011; Gottlieb et al., 2012; Corburn et al., 2014: 627; Hall et al., 2015; Alderwick and Gottlieb, 2019: 411; Kranzler et al., 2013: 3). We provide some illustrative tables in Chapter 3, but most HiAP studies describe the general principle and approach rather than a list of specific instruments.

4. *Promote intersectoral action and collaborative governance*

A focus on social determinants suggests that most health equity policy measures are not in the gift of the health sector. Responsibility for key instruments—to redistribute income, improve public services in education, housing, and transport, reduce discrimination and violence, and improve social, economic, and physical environments—is spread across government and shared by governmental and non-governmental organizations.

Therefore, HiAP requires collaboration inside and outside of government. The means to foster intersectoral action include:

First, policy sectors other than health can be encouraged or explicitly asked to adopt policies that advance the health objectives. Second, policy integration can consist of launching specific policy measures that help to mutually attain the objectives of health policy and other policy sectors. Third, actors from the health sector can make their health expertise available to other policy sectors. This approach would mean that the health sector strives to promote health objectives through systematic cooperation with other policy sectors. Fourth, policy integration can be realized by assessing and possibly addressing the health effects of policy proposals from other policy sectors

(Tosun and Lang, 2017: 555).

5. *Seek high and enduring political commitment*

Long-term success requires high and enduring political support. It may help produce a high-level strategy or legislation, cut through ‘administrative silos’, address ‘turf wars’ (Carey and Crammond, 2015), generate support for HiAP-friendly measures (such as the application of Health Impact Assessments—HIAs—to non-health policies) and reduce problems with implementation.

The HiAP playbook

HiAP research also describes a range of strategies to facilitate policy change, which Cairney et al. (2021) describe as the HiAP ‘playbook’:

1. use the WHO (2014) ‘starter kit’ to get from strategic commitment to delivery;
2. raise awareness of HiAP to policy actors in other sectors, showing them how it connects to their values;
3. foster trust and cooperation via win-win solutions, in which delivering HiAP also helps deliver the objectives of other actors;
4. avoid the perception of ‘health imperialism’ or interference by health actors in the routine business of other organizations;
5. encourage policy champions and the ‘policy entrepreneurs’ able to exploit opportunities for policy change;
6. ensure the routine use of HIAs;
7. seek support for new ways to establish the value of policy changes, beyond cost-benefit analyses that do not incorporate fully the benefits of improved population health.

The hidden ambiguity of HiAP

Cairney et al. (2021) describe remarkably high agreement among HiAP advocates and researchers, largely because it is more ambiguous than it seems. For example, the meaning of ‘social determinants’ and the ‘upstream’ metaphor is neither clear nor applied consistently (McMahon, 2021a; 2021b), there is minimal attention to how exactly to join-up government (Carey and Friel, 2015), and very few accounts get beyond the ‘hollow political rhetoric’ of low ‘political will’ (Post et al., 2010: 654; Baum et al., 2020: 2). Further, empirical work describes a tendency to make sense of HiAP in different ways (Storm et al., 2014: 184; Shankardass et al., 2018: 2), and the need to engage with trade-offs when advocates try to combine high central government support for a specific strategy with the freedom of local governments and stakeholders to change policy as they deliver.

The role of the EU: rhetorical HiAP commitment with no substantive effect?

This ambiguity helps to explain why the EU can make such a strong commitment to HiAP without producing a substantive change to the routine business of EU policymakers. Finland was an early adopter, and key to raising HiAP on the EU agenda during its presidency in 2006 (Puska and Ståhl, 2010: 322–325; Ollila, 2011: 12–13; Lazzari et al., 2015: 279; Melkas, 2013: 8). At the time, a strategy of advocates was to argue that it was already consistent with ‘EU core values such as solidarity, equity and universality’ (Bert et al., 2015: 45), to help avoid the sense that HiAP required a radical shift in values (Godziewski, 2021: 5). Initially, HiAP commitment was ‘more rhetoric than action’ (Koivusalo, 2010: 501). HiAP then became ‘regularly referred to’ by the European Commission, not least because its focus on non-health sectors gives the EU a policy role despite its limited health sector powers (Godziewski, 2020: 1307). Yet this rhetorical commitment has not been operationalized or ‘implemented as an overarching political vision’ (2020a: 1307), while HIA remains a ‘box ticking’ exercise in the Commission (Franklin, 2016: 30; Rosenkötter et al., 2013: 11).

There are several reasons for the gap between rhetoric and reality. First, the EU has more important priorities, some of which undermine HiAP’s aims and approach. In particular, EU governance tends towards a ‘neoliberal rationality’, prioritizing economic over social policy (2020a: 1308–1313), while the Directorate General for Health and Food Safety (DG SANCO) has low power and capacity in relation to economic and single market directorates (Franklin, 2016: 30; Rosenkötter et al., 2013: 7). Second, the routine business of the Commission is not conducive to radically new ways of thinking; rather, new agendas are reinterpreted to fit with existing approaches (Godziewski, 2020: 1313–1318).

HiAP's ambiguity helps to facilitate this integration. Third, the HiAP playbook is surprisingly non-confrontational (given its description of the need for radical policy change), and its deferential approach to policymakers in other sectors make 'this policy agenda particularly prone to being reinterpreted, and ultimately watered down' (Godziewski, 2021: 2). On paper, HiAP represents a radical policy agenda on its own terms. In practice, it only becomes acceptable when reinterpreted or 'strategically packaged to better fit in the EU policymaking space' (2020b: 2–3).

Godziewski (2020b) shows how these factors made HiAP vulnerable to reinterpretations that changed its original intent. HiAP's ambiguity and playbook allow it to be interpreted as little more than a means to work collaboratively across sectors, aided by the need to avoid health imperialism, to the extent that non-health actors retain control of their own sectors and ways of thinking (see also Lynch, 2017: 657). The Commission treated its HiAP commitment primarily as a tool for stakeholder collaboration, providing a way to involve non-health actors in health policy. Crucially, collaborative exercises included private sector actors—the food and drink industry—that public health actors treat with suspicion and often refuse to work with; they recommend that industry actors be excluded from formal consultations, largely because they blame health inequalities on the 'commercial determinants of health' (Godziewski, 2021: 6). This approach helps to explain the EU's ability to commit to HiAP and produce 'lifestyle drift'. Godziewski's (2021: 8) case study of diet policy shows that: (1) EU policymakers recognized the need to address social determinants, but (2) the primary focus of its activity was to work with industry actors to treat health as the responsibility of individuals by recommending information exchanges, better information, education, marketing, and the promotion of healthy lifestyles.

In such cases, HiAP is only able to become a part of 'orthodox policymaking spaces' if its 'political, normative essence is toned down so as to not fundamentally challenge the status quo' (2021: 2–3). Further, given the EU's tendency to favour economic growth over social policy, the status quo is in clear contrast to HiAP's aims (as is the EU's approach to immigration, according to Puchner et al., 2018: 3). Indeed, EU membership contributed to the undermining of Finland's HiAP progress, via market deregulation, pro-growth policies, and limits to alcohol control policies (Kokkinen, 2019a: 258; 263–264; Ollila, 2011). While Finland put HiAP on the EU's agenda, EU membership undermined its own progress.

What can governments learn from each other?

This comparison between HiAP aims and policymaking reality helps to inform the study of policy learning and transfer. As Chapter 2 describes, there is a contrast between policy learning insights associated with the *pursuit* of HiAP versus the

explanation of its limited progress. The former would use our three-question framework to identify success stories, the evidence for their success, and their applicability to an importing government's context. The latter would examine how governments learn about HiAP in relation to dominant ('neoliberal') ways of working and connect the importation of ideas to their established practices.

In that context, we use Chapter 2's framework to explore 'best case' examples of international HiAP experiences whose lessons generally provide cautionary tales.

1. *What story do policymakers tell about the problem they seek to solve?*

The juxtaposition of a HiAP narrative and a wider neoliberal approach suggests that policy actors are often telling different stories about their overall aims. HiAP advocates' questions could include:

- how did this government design an effective strategy to address the social determinants of health inequalities?
- how did it foster intersectoral collaboration to advance HiAP aims?

In contrast, experiences from the EU suggest that policymakers may ask:

- how have governments brought together public health and industry stakeholders to produce technically and politically feasible solutions?

Or, since social determinants and neoliberal approaches exist in the same policy space, questions would examine if governments were able to incorporate new HiAP aims into routine government business.

2. *What is the evidence for one government's success?*

We are unlikely to find straightforward evidence of success or failure. Rather, governments have a general incentive to provide selective evidence of their successful reforms, while HiAP advocates may challenge their claims and identify the adverse consequences of neoliberal approaches (compare with the same section in Chapter 7).

3. *Do they have comparable political and policymaking systems?*

Our use of Australian and Nordic country experiences demonstrates considerable problems regarding the comparability of experience. To some extent, describing experiences of two different HiAP models—South Australia's centralized model, and Nordic decentralized models—helps to extract and compare lessons in a systematic way, albeit subject to limited information about their policymaking contexts. However, most other countries have limited comparability with Australian states or Nordic country and municipal governments. Any discussion of country experiences provides ideas to discuss in reference to different situations rather than blueprints for emulation.

In that context, Australian and Nordic experiences represent best case examples and cautionary tales, because there is a stark contrast between high level rhetorical

commitment and actual practices and outcomes. Positive tales of political will meet negative tales of implementation gaps. In both cases, HiAP researchers often show a limited ability to learn from these experiences, since they relate disappointing progress largely to the same general story of low ‘political will’ and a ‘neoliberal’ policy agenda. Theory-informed learning would explore the wider policymaking environment that limits even the most wilful policymakers, and identify the policy dilemmas that accompany HiAP’s often-contradictory aims.

Lessons from South Australia

South Australia has provided a source of international lessons out of proportion to its population (1.7m) and comparability to other governments. This status results partly from research: it is one of the most researched experiences of a ‘centralized’ approach to HiAP which, in this context, describes the role of a state (not federal) government’s central authority (see [Cairney et al., 2021](#): 13–15). Its ‘best case’ status relates to the pursuit of a centralized HiAP model supported strongly (1) at the top level, and (2) by a wider policy context ‘of social policy innovation,’ ‘attention to social determinants and health public policy from 1980s,’ and senior staff with experience of intersectoral action ([Baum et al., 2019a](#): 6). In that context, it is a rich source of positive and negative lessons on the HiAP strategy and playbook.

- *Positive lessons.* Factors facilitating HiAP progress include: high-level senior policymaker support, a well-resourced HiAP unit with a political mandate, policy champions, trust-based cooperation, and aligning HiAP with a government’s core business and priorities.
- *Negative lessons.* Factors undermining progress include: patchy political support, silo working, a failure to honour commitments, and mismatches between HiAP projects and other sectoral priorities ([Delany et al., 2016](#): 893–895)

However, often the most informative lessons relate to the wider policymaking context that helps to qualify support for HiAP. In South Australia’s case, financial support for the HiAP unit was small (0.01% of the health sector budget), intersectoral action did not boost commitment to health equity in other sectors, and it took place in the context of a state government (1) supporting a wider neoliberal agenda, and (2) without the willingness or powers to produce a radical shift in priorities and policy instruments ([Baum et al., 2019a](#)). Best case research highlights the lack of impact of HiAP on policy outcomes.

Lessons from Nordic countries

Nordic experiences provide different reasons to expect HiAP progress, since their social democratic welfare states are relatively conducive to a social determinants

approach and countries such as Finland were early adopters. They also provide lessons from national decentralized models in which central governments provide strategic direction (backed by legislation, funding, and research support) and municipal governments are responsible for developing and delivering their own HiAP strategy. In each case, HiAP researchers describe a gap between their expectations for such countries and the dispiriting results.

Finland was one of the first countries to commit to HiAP, building on a historic tendency to adopt public health initiatives in the past, while maintaining a Nordic welfare state and resisting neoliberal reforms. Successive national governments challenged a focus on lifestyles and healthcare in favour of an 'ecological approach' to population health, fostered ambitious projects to shift population behaviour (e.g. the North Karelia project on healthy eating), and, encouraged decentralized public health based on a 'culture of collaboration and societal values' (Kokkinen et al., 2019a: 259; Puska and Ståhl, 2010: 315–320; Ståhl, 2018: 39; Ollila, 2011: 12–13). However, from the 1990s, successive national governments became more likely to propose market reforms, reduce public spending, and give less protection to existing equity measures and labour protections, particularly after joining the EU (Kokkinen et al., 2019a: 261). They developed a contradictory commitment to neoliberal ideas and HiAP's focus on social determinants (Shankardass et al., 2018: 6). Municipal governments had high freedom but reduced budgets. While HiAP was well-established as a public health approach at the national level, it did not translate into local intersectoral plans with a substantive impact on health equity (Melkas, 2013: 6; Ståhl, 2018: 43).

Similarly, Norway is a social democratic state (outside of the EU) with a historic commitment to address the social determinants of health inequalities and foster collaboration across levels and sectors of government (Fosse and Helgeson, 2017: 1–2; Fosse, 2011: 266–267). Historic policies have combined redistributive tax and welfare state measures, legislation to institutionalize a HiAP approach in central and local government, and a decentralized model in which municipal governments develop their own public health capacity and intersectoral health equity plans (Hagen et al., 2018: 808). However, HiAP researchers identify a tendency for municipal governments to struggle to produce detailed local plans built on cooperation across sectors, and for at least half to default to more established foci on at-risk groups or healthy lifestyles rather than 'living conditions' (Hagen et al., 2018: 808; 2017: 985; Hofstad, 2016: 571–574; Fosse and Helgeson, 2017: 3; 8).

Studies of Sweden and Denmark identify a similar Nordic pattern: the redistributive and welfare state policies of these countries are relatively conducive to HiAP, and there is high national government commitment to decentralized public health models, but also limited local progress. For example, Scheele et al. (2018: 59–64) and Holt et al. (2018a: 49; 2017: 881–882) identify common elements of Scandinavian experiences: there is high but vague rhetorical commitment to HiAP, based primarily on describing the problem rather than feasible solutions;

health units have responsibility and other sectors have low incentive to collaborate; there are continuous tensions between national direction and local autonomy, and; it is difficult to generate a ‘common language’ to describe aims and monitor progress. While there is some evidence of cross-sectoral action, it tends to default to healthy living initiatives.

Similar findings from other European experiences

While there are fewer (and patchier) studies of other European experiences, the typical report is of (1) high rhetorical commitment to the idea of health equity, and more joined-up policymaking to achieve it, but low HiAP progress, (2) the low status of public health in other sectors, and/or (3) insufficient analysis of how non-health policies improve health. For example, [Storm et al. \(2014; 2016\)](#) and [Peters et al. \(2016: 291–294\)](#) describe high commitment but low HiAP ‘maturity’ in municipal governments in the Netherlands. [Bucci et al. \(2020\)](#) describe minimal public awareness of, and policymaker support for, public health policies in European states. [Kearns and Pursell \(2011\)](#) identify the limited use of HIAs in Ireland, and [Kenny et al. \(2018: 84\)](#) describe a ‘distinct absence of public health representation’ in food policy (compared to the centrality of food producers). [Thomson et al., \(2006\)](#) and [Thomson and Thomas, \(2015\)](#) describe a lack of evidence for the health impacts of housing improvement and ‘area based initiatives’ such as urban regeneration schemes in the UK (see also [Lundberg, 2020](#)).

[Lynch’s \(2017\)](#) interviews with politicians and policymakers in France, Belgium, Finland, and the UK highlight the negative consequences of high but misleading commitment to social determinants approaches. The HiAP-friendly framing of policy—*focusing on intersectoral action*—allowed policymakers in each country to raise the issues of health inequalities ‘without directly referencing income inequality or redistribution’ (2017: 655). They could fit HiAP into current commitments rather than question neoliberalism and the wider tax and spending system. In that context, government documents would ‘pay lip service to the social determinants of health’ but social determinants approaches ‘have been vanishingly rare’ (2017: 656). Governments have found a way to *signal* commitment to HiAP while actually remaining committed to the medicalized descriptions of inequalities and individual-focused policies that undermine its implementation (2017: 656).

What can policymakers (and HiAP advocates) learn from these experiences?

HiAP researchers relate limited progress to low ‘political will’ and a tendency for a ‘neoliberal’ policy agenda to undermine a focus on social determinants. Such factors are clearly important, but this narrative contributes to a cycle of superficial

learning that does not reflect on HiAP assumptions and strategy. What other lessons are relevant to advocates and researchers of health equity policy?

1. *Clarifying the role of political will: when is it important, and in what context?*

Few studies define ‘political will’ before they relate it to dispiriting implementation gaps. The description remains ‘hollow political rhetoric’ (Post et al., 2010: 654) unless operationalized. For example, it may describe policymaker power and agency: key policymakers, with the same understanding of a policy problem, committed sincerely to supporting the same policy solution (2010: 671). In that context, there are two main lessons.

First, a regular focus of theory-informed lesson drawing is to identify (1) the policymaking contexts that influence the motivation and ability of policymakers to implement HiAP strategies, and (2) how advocates can generate enough support for HiAP to reduce the level of political will necessary for policy change. For example, if political will relates to the impact of policy change on a government’s electoral popularity, we must examine the extent to which they need to overcome:

- ‘path dependency’ (to disrupt existing rules and practices);
- interest group opposition, and;
- any mismatch between HiAP and (1) a governing party’s ‘political philosophy’, and (2) dominant ways to frame policy problems (Baum et al., 2020: 2–11).

In other words, more political will is required if a government seeks radical changes to policy and policymaking that go against its usual neoliberal instincts and are opposed by powerful groups. If so, HiAP supporters can help to reduce barriers to radical policy change by generating higher levels of public, civil society, or interest group support (2020: 11). Strategies include to: challenge or exploit dominant ways to frame problems, build coalitions, shop for supportive authoritative venues, and exploit windows of opportunity for policy change (Townsend et al., 2020: 974; Harris et al., 2018: 1090; Baker et al., 2018).

Second, the role of political will begins much sooner than policy implementation. While most studies describe the formal adoption of a strategy as a major step towards health equity, we suggest that it could be adopted with the opposite intention. A high rhetorical commitment to HiAP can act as an *alternative to a substantive health equity strategy* because policymakers ‘can use the language of radical change in *policy processes* as an alternative to radical changes in *policy instruments*’ (Cairney et al., 2021: 15).

2. *HiAP ambiguity: is it intentionally or unintentionally vague?*

There is an under-explored contradiction at the heart of HiAP ambiguity. On the one hand, the ambiguity of HiAP is intentional, to allow its advocates to generate high but superficial commitment followed by more

substantive agreement during collaborative exercises (Holt et al., 2018b: 10). If so, we argue that this commitment is insufficient to translate into substantive action, and agreement is often illusory. Multiple studies explore what happens when the responsibility for HiAP shifts from its initial advocates towards actors in other sectors. For example, Synnevåg et al. (2018: 68–70; 2019: 2) argue that public health terminology is either defined so broadly as to mean everything and therefore nothing, or it hinders local implementation because it triggers reactions against public health interference in other sectors or professions (although De Leeuw et al., 2015: i20 relate this problem to people thinking ‘healthcare’ when they hear ‘health’). Further, Holt et al. (2018a: 49) describe a tendency for HiAP enthusiasts to reform its governance structures—rather than support people to develop long-term relationships—whenever there are implementation challenges.

On the other hand, it is common for public health specialists to argue that their ambitions are *not* ambiguous: they know precisely what key terms mean, and/or they seek the correct language to harness wider support. We describe this approach as a feature of workshops on preventive health rather than of published research (Cairney et al., 2022), although the issue does arise in online discussions (e.g. Turner, 2018). Further, some studies propose a new language to aid wider understanding of HiAP (Huang et al., 2018: 25), a ‘new model of intersectoral public health’ to address HiAP’s limited impact (Bteich et al., 2019: 242), or concept mapping among experts to help measure ‘integrated public health policy’ progress (Tubbing et al., 2015).

As such, it is not clear what people learn from HiAP experiences. One lesson is that it needs to remain ambiguous to foster wider collaboration and avoid ‘health imperialism’, aided by a playbook that emphasizes win-win strategies and fitting into the agendas of other sectors. Another is that it needs to be reformulated to reduce ambiguity, re-establish the impact of public health strategies, and *disrupt* the agendas of other sectors. Combined, we find a confusing narrative in which HiAP advocates should seek radical policy change and disruptions to the old damaging rules, but do so in a non-disruptive way. It appears to be based on an implicit assumption that policy actors in other sectors will eventually ‘get’ the problems with their own approaches if they spend enough time in conversation with public health actors (much like ‘knowledge deficit’ accounts that assume more exposure to evidence will solve policymaking problems).

3. *Does it make sense to describe a HiAP implementation gap?*

We identify tensions between interpretations of implementation gaps based on the presence of two mutually exclusive—top-down *and* bottom-up—approaches within HiAP (Cairney et al., 2021: 12). A top-down approach defines implementation as ‘The carrying out of a governmental decision as specified by official legislation or formal strategy (i.e., mandate)’ (Freiler

et al., 2013). A bottom-up approach encourages local policymakers and stakeholders to modify policy as they make sense of it in new contexts. For example, coproduction methods help to identify new ways to define the policy problem, establish priorities, and identify the role of non-health actors (Corburn et al., 2014: 625–630).

These approaches do not seem contradictory during the production of a vague HiAP strategy, but they create problems in practice when they encourage different dynamics:

- ‘the rationality of *national to local implementation*, emphasizing hierarchy and obligation, may undermine the rationality of *continuous local collaboration*, emphasizing co-production, creativity, and tailoring policy to local circumstances’;
- ‘much HiAP advocacy relates to getting public health language into formal strategy documents, often at the expense of dialogue with partners to foster ownership of that agenda’ (Cairney et al., 2021: 12, discussing Synnevåg et al., 2018).

In that context, while researchers seek to learn how to close ‘implementation gaps’ they are really finding the dilemmas associated with trade-offs between different aims (Holt et al., 2018c: 44). Many trade-offs relate to centralizing and decentralizing aims: to make HiAP specific enough to describe, but ambiguous enough to negotiate, and structured enough to guide reforms to existing practices but flexible enough to adapt to new contexts (Van Vliet-Brown et al., 2018: 719–720). These dilemmas play out in different ways, and seem starkest in countries like Norway where municipalities play very different roles simultaneously: as ‘agents for the welfare state through their responsibility for implementing national policy goals’ and ‘independent local democratic areas that are able to decide how to use national funding in accordance with local priorities’ (Fosse et al., 2018: 48). In such contexts, the phrase ‘implementation gap’ symbolizes a narrow lens through which to interpret HiAP lessons.

4. *Lessons for the HiAP ‘programme logic’ and playbook*

Researchers may be learning that the HiAP strategy does not produce the stated or desired results: intersectoral action is a requirement rather than a well-evidenced practice, the playbook may not produce new behaviour, and new behaviour does not improve health equity. In that context, we can extract different lessons from different approaches. Studies of public administration identify the factors or behaviours that seem to facilitate more joined-up government, including a ‘supportive architecture’, powerful narrative, and effective leadership (Carey and Crammond, 2015: 1022–1028; Greer and Lillvis, 2014: 14–15). Studies of public policy identify the factors that seem to undermine it, such as when silo-working makes sense to its participants:

Classic studies of ‘policy communities’ highlight a logic of delegating policy responsibility to junior civil servants, engaged in routine consultation with a limited number of actors who trade information and advice for access ... Most policy is processed in silos that seem to defy central coordination. Silos develop rules appropriate to their own contexts, and their logics do not change simply because the overall effect looks like uncoordinated and incoherent policymaking

(Cairney et al., 2021: 24, citing Richardson and Jordan, 1979, Jordan and Maloney, 1997; Jordan and Cairney, 2013; Jordan and Halpin, 2006; Cairney et al., 2021; Cairney and St Denny, 2020).

HiAP research focuses on how to learn to overcome these policymaking obstacles, such as to (1) produce a new ‘program theory’ (or theory of change) to identify ‘mechanisms leading to the desired changes,’ or (2) engage in ‘systems thinking’ to understand and exploit policymaking complexity (Lawless et al., 2018: 512; Boswell et al., 2021). However, policy theory-informed studies suggest that complex policymaking systems defy control, prompting policymakers to learn how to adapt to their limited powers to direct policy change (Cairney, 2021a: 130–135). They prompt HiAP advocates to learn that there is an inevitable major gap between intention and outcomes, and to revisit the assumptions behind current theories of change.

Overall, these discussions of policy learning highlight a gap in perspectives akin to the difference between policy analysis and policy process research (Chapter 2; Cairney and Weible, 2017; Cairney, 2021b). Researchers focus on how to understand policymaking, either to (1) change policy processes, or (2) explain why they seem so resistant to policy change. Both approaches seem reasonable in relation to their logical starting point: how to foster health equity across the globe, or how to understand policymaking dynamics in different political systems. However, they represent very different ways to learn lessons from experience. In particular, the former seems designed to analyse the application of the same basic approach—HiAP—to political systems with remarkably different policymaking processes.

How would governments learn?

As Chapter 3 shows, multi-level and multi-sectoral policy learning is easier said than done. To demonstrate with an illustrative example, we ask an ostensibly simple question: how would policymakers in the Netherlands learn from comparable experiences in Norway?

Table 6.1 Health policy competences in Norway

	Direct	Indirect
National	<p>System control for healthcare. Specialized health services (hospitals). Pandemic response coordination. Public health coordination and legislation; coordination of specialist healthcare services. Public health campaigns. Governance of the regional health authorities and the national health network. Digitization of the healthcare sector—aka <i>eHealth</i>. Coordination with municipalities over healthcare provision. healthcare budget. Healthcare communications.</p>	<p>Higher education/universities, labour market. System responsibility for refugee, asylum, and immigration policy. Education system. Specialized social services. The National Insurance Scheme. National transport infrastructure. Agricultural issues. Environmental issues. Criminal justice system control. Emergency and rescue services.</p>
National agency	<p>Food safety and regulation. Issuance of permits for pollution Regulation and coordination of healthcare services. Health surveillance, research, and prevention. Recompense for healthcare mistreatment. Biotechnology research and advice. Medical product regulation. Drug and alcohol use monitoring and research. Scientific Impact Assessment on food products. Specialist hospitals (including psychiatry). Ambulance services. Hospital pharmacies. Emergency telephone number. Management of state owned laboratories.</p>	<p>Management of state owned forestry and natural property. Agricultural regulation and inspection. Benefits administration. Media regulation. Monitoring of sale of products. Nutrition research. Marketing of Norwegian products. Nuclear exposure monitoring. Housing funding. Occupational health and safety regulation. Research laboratory regulation and inspection.</p>
Provincial	<p>Dental care.</p>	<p>Upper secondary school. Environmental protection. Regional development. Regional roads and public transport. Regional planning. Business development. Culture (museums, libraries, sports). Regional environmental issues.</p>

Continued

Table 6.1 *Continued*

	Direct	Indirect
Municipal	Primary healthcare (management of general practitioners, health centres and emergency rooms). Outpatient health care. Prevention and care for the elderly and people with disabilities.	Local planning. Agricultural issues. Environmental issues. Local roads. Harbours. Water supply, sanitation, and sewers. Planning and housing. Comprehensive municipal emergency planning responsibility. Fire protection. Disaster prevention and response.

Sources: Norwegian Government Of Local Government And Modernization, 2014; Norwegian Healthcare Department, 2021; SNG Wofi, 2019

They might begin by identifying key contextual factors, in which Norway enjoys a welfare state already conducive to HiAP's 'upstream' focus, high national commitment to HiAP, enshrined in legislation, and a decentralized system that empowers municipal governments to take HiAP forward in local areas (under national direction). As such, good health outcomes ([Nordic Burden of Disease Collaborators, 2019](#)) may follow a broad effort to attenuate inequalities through welfare provision across social welfare, public services, and economic and social policy. Further, as Table 6.1 shows, municipal governments enjoy a wide range of relevant powers, with the ability to 'join up' health and non-health strategies.

Then, they might explore further the Nordic cautionary tales, such as by noting that (a) identifying who is responsible for each instrument, does not tell us (b) the use or (often limited) impact of those instruments. Or, the simple process of tabulating relevant responsibilities may help to explain why policy coherence is so difficult to achieve.

Countries like the Netherlands exhibit less HiAP 'maturity' and may therefore seek lessons from Norway on how to make progress. If so, how comparable are their systems, and who would learn what? The Norwegian and Netherlands healthcare systems enjoy certain similarities, but HiAP focuses more on the health impacts of non-health sectors. Therefore, note in Table 6.2 the crucial role played in the Netherlands by regional and municipal government (and the EU) in 'upstream' areas such as environmental and pollution regulation (shared between national, municipal, and regional governments) and urban planning (the responsibility of municipalities). As such, the sheer breadth of policy instruments, distributed both horizontally and vertically, provides enormous potential for (1) efforts in one area to be unconnected to (or undermined by) another,

Table 6.2 Health policy competences in the Netherlands

	Direct competence	Indirect competence
EU	<p>Common safety concerns in public health matters. Regulation of medicinal products. Cross border health. Labour market regulation. Consumer and food standards policy. Benchmarking and monitoring of healthcare best practice. Medical products regulation.</p>	<p>International trade and investment policy. Common agricultural policy. Food standards. Health and safety standards. Shared agricultural policy.</p>
National	<p>Public health regulation, funding, supervision, and international collaboration. System control for healthcare. Health inspection. Healthcare resources allocation. Statutory Health Insurance Package contents. Emergency management. Public health data collection and dissemination. Management of health service. Agricultural policy. Natural conservation. Pharmaceutical policy. Vaccinations.</p>	<p>Welfare system policy and administration. Environmental protection. Funding of academic collaboration on epidemiology, infectious diseases, public mental health, youth health care, environmental health, and demographic changes. Broad fiscal and taxation framework. Housing policy. Funding of child-care provided by municipalities. Setting performance targets for and monitoring of social housing.</p>
National Agency	<p>Implementation of Health Insurance Act. Healthcare market regulation and provider inspection. Prevention and control of infectious diseases. Promotion of public health and consumer safety, and environmental protection. Food and product safety Health inspection. Health and safety. Scientific advice to central government. Healthy living promotion. Public safety.</p>	<p>Transport and public safety. Scientific research. Co-ordinating the environmental impact assessments and permits for spatial planning, including maritime waters. Environmental monitoring. General public information provision. Land registry and mapping. Consumer protection. Environmental data. Public infrastructure and water management. Tax and customs administration. Labour, work, and income inspection. Regulating the legal framework for spatial planning. Setting the framework for national spatial planning. Regulation of fisheries. Implementation of national migration policy. Processing of asylum and refugees.</p>

Continued

Table 6.2 *Continued*

	Direct competence	Indirect competence
Regional	<p>Emergency health services (ambulances). Supervising the availability, distribution, and planning of medical facilities (e.g. hospitals). Providing advice on priorities for public health planning. Preparing regional public health plans alongside municipalities and providers. Monitoring and implementing elements of national health policy. Licensing of ambulance service. Implementing public health education.</p>	<p>Environmental and water regulation. Allocating quotas for social housing. Allocating grants to the municipalities. Building and maintaining provincial roads, cycle paths, and bridges. Air safety and noise at airports. Inland water transport and infrastructure. Addressing regional pollution concerns. Partial control over water supply. Environmental police supervision. Granting environmental permits. Executing the Rural Development Programme (European Fund).</p>
Local	<p>Production of four-yearly public health plans. Youth health care. Organising care for the elderly. Providing support to people with physical, mental, or psychological disabilities, including people with learning disabilities and the elderly. Providing the youth support, assistance, or care services or are supported in this process by a healthcare provider (Youth Act). Providing healthcare services for the elderly and chronically ill. Municipal healthcare fund. Licensing of ambulance service. Locating GSM/UMTS base stations. Elements of environmental health. Socio-medical advice. Sanitary inspections. Health facilities for asylum-seekers. Screening. Epidemiological research. Health education. Community mental health.</p>	<p>Providing social and preventive health care on the local level (municipal medical services). Spatial planning. Social security provision. Waterway and local pollution management. Implementation of elements of social security legislation. Management of welfare payments. Domestic violence services. Homeless services. Financial support for the chronically ill. Childcare supervision. Allocation of social housing. Constructing and maintaining local roads and bicycle lanes. Determining urban areas and urban planning. Youth Care. Local water supply quality and infrastructure maintenance. Allocating agricultural areas with spatial planning. Local livestock and agricultural regulation policy and enforcement.</p>

Sources: Cairney and Kippin, 2021; Maarse et al., 2018; European Committee of the Regions, 2021d

and (2) muddled policy learning, when neither the importing nor exporting government know exactly who or what impacts on health.

Multi-level and decentralized policymaking: healthy cities and postcode lotteries

The experiences that we have described so far suggest that governments treat HiAP primarily as a vehicle for policymaking collaboration, not as a way to radically change policy to increase economic redistribution or state intervention. HiAP adoptees focus on the value of collaborating across government departments or sectors, subnational and local governments and non-governmental actors, to combine a rhetorical commitment to health equity policy with local initiatives to join up services at the point of delivery. In that context, relatively centralized or decentralized variants of HiAP relate primarily to mapping a collaborative strategy onto different systems with varying levels of local government autonomy and responsibility.

Healthy cities

The example of ‘healthy cities’ shows that many more decentralized models are possible when HiAP remains a relatively safe or non-controversial vehicle for collaboration rather than a challenge to power dynamics within government. The WHO has fostered the idea of ‘healthy cities’ for over three decades. The [WHO Region for Europe \(2021a\)](#) describes ‘a global movement working to put health high on the social, economic, and political agenda of city governments’, including ‘100 flagship cities’ and ‘30 national networks’ covering ‘1400 municipalities’ across Europe:

Within a complex world of multiple tiers of government, numerous sectors working towards similar goals, and many stakeholders involved in the pursuit of health and well-being, cities are uniquely placed to provide leadership.

The [WHO Region for Europe \(2021b\)](#) describes a healthy city as ‘a process, not an outcome’, driven by an enthusiastic local area (which does not need formal city status to qualify). Success requires ‘a commitment to health’ and a way to promote it by improving ‘physical and social environments’ and ‘the community resources that enable people to mutually support each other in performing all the functions of life and developing to their maximum potential’ (2021a). A healthy city would harness commitment, leadership, and collaboration to ‘put health high on the political and social agenda of cities and to build a strong movement for public

health at the local level. It strongly emphasizes equity, participatory governance and solidarity, intersectoral collaboration and action to address the determinants of health' (2021b).

Initial HiAP research identified slow progress to establish a social determinants approach, particularly when it challenged the established policies of national governments across Europe. For example, [Goumans and Springett's \(1997: 314–315\)](#) study of UK and Dutch cities finds a wider context in which national governments were slow and reluctant to move beyond more individualist and healthcare-focused health strategies, combined with different arrangements in which only Dutch municipal governments had a significant role in health. Nevertheless, variations of city experiences were more marked *within* each country, with many interviewees reporting non-trivial progress in relation to levels of leadership, commitment, policy coordination, and planning across sectors (1997: 321).

More recent and larger reviews identify greater progress in the set-up of projects under the 'healthy cities' name ([De Leeuw and Simos, 2017](#)). In each case, reviews seek to understand the factors that facilitate successful and enduring projects. [De Leeuw et al \(2015: i26\)](#) identify a collection of 'healthy urban design' projects and HiAP/ health city projects, including projects 'linking community action with neighbourhoods regeneration projects' in Barcelona (Spain), the 'The Warsaw Mental Health Programme for 2011–15' (Poland), 'tackling health inequality by connecting social and medical services' in Waterford (Ireland), and 'Needs assessment of single-parent families in the City of Zagreb' (Croatia). Further, [Simos et al. \(2015\)](#) describe an evaluation of the promotion of HIA in WHO European Healthy Cities Network Phase IV (2003–2008). The idea was to boost the use of HIA to inform specific 'areas such as healthy urban planning (HUP) and healthy ageing' and mainstream its role 'for integrating health and well-being concerns into all urban policies and projects' ([Simos et al., 2015: 72](#)). They generally found that policy actors in cities did not feel they had the resources for HIA, but the project still raised awareness of social determinants and encouraged some intersectoral working (2015: 72). They identify multiple factors to boost HIA use, including: it enjoys policymaker, planner, and stakeholder support, it has a clear economic benefit, its language is clear and it can be used flexibly by local stakeholders, it boosts the evidence base, and it brings something new to the discussion (2015: 80–81; see also [Ramirez-Rubio et al., 2019](#) on using HIAs for 'urban health' and to implement UN Sustainable Development Goals).

Decentralization, recentralization, and postcode lotteries

This low-salience focus on HiAP collaboration seems far removed from high-salience debates on spatial justice summed up by phrases such as 'postcode lottery':

The random countrywide variations in the provision and quality of public services have been referred to as ‘the postcode lottery of care’, i.e. where you live dictates where you are treated, which in turns dictates how you are treated, and this in turn affects whether you survive

(Bungay, 2005: 36; see also Grayley et al., 2011: 1 on England; De Matthias et al., 2019 on Italian regions).

When analysts focus on the social determinants of *health*, postcode lotteries refer to major health inequalities that relate to levels of deprivation or marginalization in each area. When focusing on government policy, they refer more frequently to geographical differences in access to public services such as *healthcare*. Of course, both elements may be present: people in poorer areas are more likely to be vulnerable to NCDs *and* receive fewer services (Bungay, 2005: 38). However, the latter receives higher policymaker attention, focused on variations in healthcare quality and efficiency and measured according to factors such as waiting times and performance in reducing mortality.

While the delivery of HiAP-style policies is a possible response to postcode lottery issues, so too is the decision by central governments to limit non-central autonomy to ensure some degree of nationally uniform outputs. For example, from 1997 in the UK, the Labour government made a commitment to reform cancer care in England to address ‘the postcode lottery for cancer treatment’, including screening, services, drugs, and palliative care (2005: 35). It related the problem to:

1. inferior treatment and services in deprived areas;
2. the negative consequences of internal competition measures in the National Health Service (NHS), created by its predecessor government, prompting the need for a centralizing unit and a plan to distribute specialist care;
3. the need to use NHS funding to address unequally high waiting times for treatment, and end *ad hoc* service provision by charities;
4. the need for an organization—NICE (The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence)—to end ‘the lottery of postcode prescribing, by comparing drugs and other treatments and issuing guidance on what works best and is most cost-effective’ (Bungay, 2005: 38–41).

The ability of regional or devolved governments to manage health policy

As Costa-Font and Greer (2012a: 3–5) describe, this type of recentralization relates to major changes to the use of policy instruments within a region (in this case England) rather than the reallocation of political autonomy held by elected regional governments (in this case, devolved governments in Scotland, Wales,

and—at times—Northern Ireland). The latter involves the delegation of power to produce policy tools or instruments (legal, financial, resource, informational) in specific sectors while retaining powers in others. As we describe in Chapters 1 and 4–5, this type of devolution relates to a political or constitutional question regarding the demand for territorial autonomy, rather than any functional requirements associated with policy problems. Central governments do not design the devolution of powers in relation to a notional optimal technical balance between centralized and decentralized policy instruments, even though some may refer to technical benefits such as to tailor services efficiently to local areas, and encourage experimentation and learning (2012b: 23–24).

Therefore, we should not expect major constitutional change to recentralize policymaking to be a feasible response to the enduring problem of spatial inequalities. Rather, each country contains a mix of responsibilities for population health, spread across multiple levels and types of governmental and non-governmental actors. Further, in healthcare in Europe, [Costa-Font and Greer's \(2012a\)](#) edited volume identifies a trend towards decentralization. They describe a variety of models of health governance relating to:

- decentralization to municipal governments (e.g. Nordic countries, Poland) or larger and often more powerful subnational governments (Spain, Italy, UK);
- tax funded systems which tend to maintain a central tax system but devolve political authority (Italy, Spain, UK, Norway), or social insurance systems (Poland, Austria, Germany, France, Belgium, Switzerland);
- different reasons to decentralize, such as: part of an ill-fated efficiency drive (e.g. France): an attempt in vain to shuffle off costs and risks to subnational governments (Germany); a response to Europeanization in relation to the need for 'fiscal stability' within the Eurozone (Italy) or to introduce competition (Poland); a response to political demands for more territorial government authority (Belgium, Spain, UK, Italy), or; part of a tradition of strong municipal government (Nordic Countries);
- periods of centralization to assert control in general (e.g. Poland, Norway) or in relation to specific concern over costs and quality (Germany, France) ([Costa-Font and Greer, 2012c: 272–275](#)).

In that context, research focuses on (1) empirical questions regarding the extent to which regional autonomy improves or exacerbates spatial health inequalities, and (2) normative questions regarding how to balance spatial inequalities against the right for central governments to devolve policymaking or for subnational governments to go their own way.

[Costa-Font and Turati's \(2018\)](#) quantitative analysis explores these dynamics in Italy and Spain. In such 'unitary states', equity measures could be pursued

‘formally (such as equalization grants) or informally (by promoting regional policy transfer and diffusion of institutional innovations)’ to satisfy the ‘the mission of a national health service (“equal service for equal need”)’ (2018: 974–975). However, countries like Italy and Spain are also near the top of OECD ‘fiscal autonomy’ rankings in Europe (their regions receive a share of national funding for ‘tax funded healthcare’), and we would expect elected subnational governments to use their powers in different ways even when subject to statutes that limit their autonomy (2018: 975).

They find that decentralization did not exacerbate inequalities of ‘health outcomes and outputs’, partly because fiscal and statutory measures limit major regional differences and because there is a notional race to the top (Chapter 4) driven by:

... the potential effect that decentralization exerts on incentives for policy innovation and diffusion. These incentives apply to both Italy and Spain, because some regional governments play the role of frontrunners in devising new programmes that are subsequently adopted in other regions. Thus, organizational advantages of some regions exert positive external effects on other regions
(Costa-Font and Turati, 2018: 983).

Therefore, decentralization does not pose problems for ‘regional cohesion’ in ‘European unitary states’ when its ‘design promotes competition and policy innovation, and equalization mechanisms and framework regulation do not exert unintended effects’ (2018: 983). In Europe more generally, a race to the top has been more likely than to the bottom, in which:

1. ‘decentralizing provision to democratic governments made inequalities visible and gave politicians incentive to highlight and fix them’ (often while going into debt, in countries such as Spain, Italy, Poland), and/or;
2. devolution to subnational governments with relatively large electorates prompted ‘some degree of health policy innovation’ to help ‘justify their existence’ (e.g. in Scotland, Catalonia, Flanders) (Costa-Font and Greer, 2012b: 26; 2012c: 275).

Cairney and St Denny’s (2020) qualitative analysis finds similar levels of innovation and non-radical variation in practices and outcomes when comparing the public health policies of the UK and devolved governments. In the context of HiAP, two key examples are particularly relevant.

First, the early experience of the Welsh Government demonstrated political limits to a major shift from healthcare to public health policy after devolution in 1999. The Welsh Government fostered a decentralized and collaborative approach to public health, and redrew health and local government boundaries to make them

(small and) coterminous. However, the UK Government related health equity to equal access to healthcare services, prompting unkind comparisons between England and Wales in relation to high-salience waiting times and waiting lists for treatment. Unusually high levels of media and public attention prompted the Welsh government to replace its Health minister to address a perception that the policy shift towards long-term public health measures had come at the expense of short-term healthcare management (Cairney, 2009: 15–16).

The Scottish Government is less subject to this comparison-based pressure, and its tax and spending responsibilities have grown since devolution. However, it has not used either factor to develop a radically different health agenda than its UK government counterpart. Rather, successive devolved governments have sought to protect higher per capita levels of spending on healthcare (Cairney and St Denny, 2020: 120).

Second, the longer term Scottish Government experience highlights the difference between HiAP policymaking and policy change. On the one hand, like the Welsh Government, the Scottish Government has cultivated a reputation for a more HiAP-friendly policy style by: (1) fostering widespread and routine cooperation with ‘interest groups, public bodies, local government organizations, voluntary sector and professional bodies, and unions’, (2) placing high levels of trust in public sector partners, (3) reforming government structures to remove silos between departments, (4) developing an overarching strategic plan that connects strongly to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and, (5) incorporating the language of coproduction and assets-based approaches into the ‘Scottish Approach to Policymaking’ (Cairney and St. Denny, 2020: 70–75).

On the other hand, it shares with the UK Government a tendency to use this language of decentralized and collaborative policymaking to *repackage* policies (in other words, describing non-radical changes to health policies as preventive), often while reducing attention and commitments to social determinants approaches to health equity (2020: 140–142, citing Harrington et al., 2009; Baggott, 2011). Cairney and St. Denny (2020) identify, among the UK and Scottish governments, the same causes of limited progress in relation to preventive health policymaking. Preventive health policy is:

1. vulnerable to ‘continuous uncertainty about how to operationalize broad aims’, with policy ambiguity and ‘programme rebranding’ providing a veneer to hide limited progress;
2. supported rhetorically or fleetingly, with support falling when policymakers try to make sense of vague aims;
3. difficult to fit into routine government business (driven by short term performance measures and cost-benefit analysis), and;
4. not able to compete with higher salience agendas on healthcare performance and access (Cairney and St. Denny, 2020: 144–148).

Both governments have enjoyed more success in taking forward *specific* public health aims, including tobacco control policy, in which many separate changes to policy instruments (over decades) have contributed to paradigmatic policy change. In that context, [Cairney and St. Denny \(2020: 151\)](#) highlight the policy-making problems associated with very *general* HiAP-style projects: governments generate support for a vague solution to an ill-defined problem, they struggle to translate this support into tangible changes to policy and policymaking, and their attention wanes when they see no way to overcome limited progress (2020: 151).

At the same time, both governments face similar dilemmas on how to manage contradictory aims, such as to centralize to seek uniform policy practices and outcomes, and decentralize to recognize the value of (a) local policymaker and stakeholder collaboration when applied to different spatial contexts, and (b) policy innovation and learning (as summarized in Table 2.3). Further, as in [Lynch's \(2017\)](#) case studies of European countries, both governments have used their preventive health policy agendas to accentuate the general value of intersectoral action and multi-level governance, while downplaying the ability for social determinants approaches to present a fundamental challenge to neoliberal policy and policymaking.

Conclusion: lessons from health equity for territorial cohesion

The EU, along with its member states and regions, has many vague ambitions to foster greater health equity. They pursue them at the same time as the policies that are likely to have the opposite effect. In rhetoric, it is possible for governments to pursue HiAP policies informed by social determinants ideas *and* neoliberal policies that favour limited state intervention in favour of market measures and a focus on individual lifestyles, while supporting national healthcare systems. In practice, these aims are contradictory, describing different causes of the policy problem, and prompting the devotion of resources to one activity at the expense of the other. One represents a major challenge to the status quo; another protects it.

These contradictions are not solved by greater intersectoral action and decentralized governance bringing together all relevant stakeholders. Nor will deliberation alone resolve major disagreements on how to act, or challenge inequalities in power among policymakers. Indeed, the collaboration agenda could have the opposite effect to the one desired by HiAP advocates: providing a rhetorical veneer to hide a tendency towards business as usual. This potential is increased by a tendency for the radical HiAP agenda to come with a non-radical playbook, allowing policymakers to incorporate the rhetoric into a policymaking process that will not deliver HiAP aims.

These dynamics are reflected in policy at all levels of EU policymaking. The EU has embraced HiAP as a concept and vague strategy, but the Commission has

translated it into a vehicle for stakeholder consultation. This approach serves not only to protect the routine neoliberal business of the EU, but also to bring in industry actors that public health actors would otherwise refuse to engage with. It also undermines the HiAP ambitions of leading countries such as Finland. Studies of member state countries highlight a similar gulf between high levels of rhetorical commitment and actual progress, even in the ‘best case’ Nordic countries backed by public health legislation and a large welfare state. These experiences suggest that HiAP does not represent an effective vehicle for a social determinants approach (built on the insight that countries need to reduce income and wealth inequalities to foster health equity).

These experiences also inform approaches to territorial cohesion that relate equity to equal access to public services (Chapter 1). They offer more than one cautionary tale. First, HiAP advocates reject the idea that equal access to health-care services is a vehicle for equity (although access to public services in other sectors, such as education and housing, is important). Rather, health equity relates more strongly to (1) the need to reduce inequalities in income and wealth, as well as foster safe and healthy social, economic, and physical environments, driven by (2) more ‘upstream’ population health measures. If so, high level support for well-funded acute health services may come at the expense of more effective but more vulnerable public health measures. Attention to the postcode lottery of health services overshadows attention to a postcode lottery of health.

Second, a key theme in previous IMAJINE work on ‘territorial cohesion’ (Chapter 1) is that interview respondents put their faith in a combination of equal access to services *and* the sense that collaborative multi-level governance can facilitate positive impacts on spatial justice. Yet, studies of HiAP suggest that the language of multi-level collaborative governance often represents a rhetorical veneer and substitute for more substantive action (collaboration, not redistribution).

As in Chapter 7, there is great potential to learn from such experiences, to inform not only the study of health equity policy but also a wider collection of policies designed ostensibly to foster equity. However, it is difficult for policymakers to learn from others if there is a profound difference between what they say they are doing versus what they actually do. The veneer of equity and collaboration rhetoric takes attention from the contestation to define the policy problem, as well as the tendency for EU and national policymakers to blunt the power of radical initiatives by incorporating them into routine government business. If HiAP is a vehicle for collaboration rather than redistribution, and it is incorporated into an existing system rather than becoming a fundamental challenge to that system, what can policymakers and HiAP advocates really learn?

Strategies to Reduce Inequalities in Education

Introduction

This chapter examines how governments define and pursue education equity, focusing largely on early years, primary, and secondary education. Education exhibits the hallmarks of equity policies that we describe in Chapter 1. There is a broad consensus that reducing unfair education inequalities would be a good thing, but also the long-term endurance of major inequalities. Further, there is high contestation on the cause of inequalities and the balance between individual, school, and state responsibility. There are competing notions of ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ equity (giving everyone the same opportunity to access resources, or redistributing resources), debates on equal access to schools versus equal education outcomes, and a tendency to relate equal outcomes to a threshold of attainment or ‘attainment gap’ at school leaving age.

As in HiAP studies (Chapter 6), ‘social justice’ approaches focus on the ‘wicked’ nature of the problem and the need for action beyond the education sector. They suggest that ‘out of school’ factors—such as parental education and income, and poverty—have more impact on unequal outcomes than schools, and call for the greater use of joined-up policy to address the underlying causes of unfair inequalities (although few use the term ‘social determinants’). In contrast, ‘neoliberal’ approaches suggest that governments can reduce attainment gaps by improving the quality of schools while reforming education systems to make them more competitive in global knowledge economies. The latter framing of the problem dominates global and domestic policy. The economic frame is promoted successfully by large philanthropies and international organizations such as the World Bank, while the school reform agenda is associated strongly with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (Grek, 2009: 24; 2020; Rizvi and Lingard, 2010: 128–136).

As such, there is a twin-track approach to education equity, in which national governments make vague reference to social justice in education but also retain strong commitments to accountability and performance measures. Further, the latter appears to undermine equity policy: the pressure for schools to compete comes at the expense of equal access to ‘high quality’ schools, and prompts some

systems or schools to segregate marginalized populations by describing them as in greater need of ‘special needs’ education.

These competing frames of education policy feed into multiple levels of policy-making. On the one hand, EU research and advice contributes somewhat to the economic agenda of the World Bank and the performance management agenda of the OECD. On the other, its rules on human rights and social inclusion have—if implemented by member states—positive implications for marginalized populations (Alexiadou, 2019). At member state level, the performance management agenda creates central-local tensions. National governments tend to delegate *and* retain key responsibilities: decentralizing the responsibility for school delivery to local governments and schools, but centralizing accountability via national student testing and league tables of local government and school performance.

There is also some scope for regional or devolved government autonomy, such as to oversee education system design and/or modify education spending. This is particularly the case in Germany and the UK, as well as most Belgian regions (the language communities have 100% competence for education), Spanish regions, and Trentino/Province of Trento, South Tyrol/Province of Bolzano, and Valle d’Aosta in Italy (Garritzmann et al., 2021: 20). This autonomy produces some potential for distinctive central-local relations. For example, the devolved Scottish Government acts as a national central government that delegates school delivery to local governments while overseeing its own curriculum and measures of student performance, and it projects the sense that its central-local government relationship is more cooperative than its UK government counterpart.

To explore these issues, we focus on three key aspects. First, *how do policymakers define education equity in theory and practice?* We identify the social justice and neoliberal ideas promoted by the OECD, EU, and member states. We compare how they are defined in theory with how they interact in practice, to explore a general commitment to the former but tendency for the latter to dominate. Most education research identifies a tendency to focus on equal access to education services, giving relative inattention to inequalities of outcomes, and contributing to an enduring gap between equity rhetoric and actual practices.

Second, *what can governments learn from allegedly leading countries with comparable systems?* Chapter 2 describes policy learning and policy transfer as desirable but contested political processes. Policy actors learn through the lens of their beliefs and according to the dominant ways in which policymakers define problems, and they transfer policies based not only on learning but also on perceived pressure to follow international norms. In that context, while we have designed a three-question framework to facilitate learning and potential transfer, it actually helps to identify contestation and explain a gap between expectations and practices. For example, Nordic experiences (again) provide best case examples but also cautionary tales, because neoliberal agendas appear to contrast strongly with the ideas associated with Nordic welfare states. For some, these experiences

reinforce the value of resisting neoliberal reforms; for others, they show why a major rethink of policy was essential.

Third, *we examine the multi-level nature of education equity policy*. There are two main types of spatial politics in relation to multi-level education policymaking. The first relates to the balance between the decentralization of policymaking responsibilities to local governments and schools and the impetus to centralize key aspects, such as accountability and performance management indicators. The second relates to the scope for regional autonomy in education policy, with some regions across Europe enjoying similar powers as national governments, enjoying the potential to go their own way on education equity policy. In each case, there is some evidence that local and school policymaking matters, but in the context of a strong driver towards meeting targets and staying competitive overall. Local governments also lack the powers to address the ‘out of school’ factors that are more responsible for inequalities. To explore these issues, we draw on UK and devolved government experiences, highlighting distinctive education systems and policy styles, but within a wider context of performance management (and attention to high stakes exams) that seems to limit policy divergence.

Finally, we reflect on the overall impact of problem definition and multi-level policymaking on education equity and examine *how it compares with the idea of territorial cohesion*. Education provides a case study of continuous contestation over problem definition. There is a tendency for neoliberal approaches to dominate but be challenged at different levels, as well as some commitment to social justice in theory but a tendency to downplay it in practice. Education therefore provides insights relevant to the EU descriptions of ‘territorial cohesion’ that focus on equal access to services.

How do policymakers define education equity? Social justice versus neoliberal approaches

Chapter 6 describes a commonly told story in HiAP research: a coherent and well-supported strategy is undermined by the wider external ‘neoliberal’ policy agenda, defined as a way of thinking that favours individualism and market over state solutions, and prioritizes economic growth. In comparison, education research describes the framing of equity policy as relatively contested (Cairney and Kippin, 2021). HiAP research externalizes neoliberalism, while education research centres it. As such, this chapter describes neoliberal and social justice approaches as in continuous interaction or competition with each other, and both are integral to policy.

To some extent, Thorius and Maxcy’s (2015: 118) description of ‘six transformational goals’ for ‘equity-minded policy’ highlight some shared concerns about the distribution of resources, governance, efficiency, relationships with communities,

improvement, and ‘explicit emphases on equity’. However, social justice and neoliberal lenses provide different ways to understand and deliver such aims, and contrasting answers to contextual questions such as:

1. *What is the main purpose of education?* As part of an economic narrative in which education is preparation for work, or a social narrative in which education fosters student emancipation, wellbeing, and life opportunities (Faul, 2014; Vongalis-Macrow, 2010).
2. *Who should deliver education?* State regulated quasi-market models are replacing traditional state-funded and delivered models. New models combine state and private school provision with market-incentive initiatives such as school vouchers (to extend state funding to non-state schools) and parental choice regarding where to send their child (‘school choice’).
3. *What is the role of the state? Horizontal and vertical approaches to equity.* ‘Horizontal equity is concerned with providing equal treatment and provisions to all schools and students whereas vertical equity is concerned with ensuring that students with greatest needs or in disadvantaged conditions will receive more resources’ (Chu, 2019: 5). The former relates inequalities to individual motivation and ‘merit’ and requires only equal access to schools or opportunities to learn. The latter relates inequalities to social determinants, requiring greater state support to foster more equitable outcomes. The state can intervene modestly to ensure a threshold of attainment, or maximally to redistribute (a) income and wealth or (b) education resources, to reduce geographical inequalities or pursue a greater equality of outcomes in relation to attainment (Gilead, 2019: 439; Bulkeley, 2013).

These different answers inform the two main international agendas that have an impact on EU, national, and subnational policy (Cairney and Kippin, 2021; Faul, 2014; Klees and Qargha, 2014). One describes a social justice and social inclusion narrative. Social justice is akin to the social determinants approach in Chapter 6, focusing on the ‘out of school’ factors—such as parental education and income, socio-economic conditions, or the marginalization of minority groups—that influence the ability to learn, and encouraging redistribution or more resources for marginalized students. Social inclusion describes a series of initiatives promoted by organizations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2021a; 2021b; 2021c) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) to:

- treat education as a human right;
- challenge marginalization in relation to ‘sex, ethnic/social origin, language, religion, nationality, economic condition, ability’;
- boost gender equity in relation to access to schools;

- foster early years education;
- take forward the UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 to ‘Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’.

A second approach describes an economic narrative, identifying the role of education to boost human capital and economic competitiveness in a global knowledge economy. International organizations (most notably the World Bank), major philanthropies, and donor countries such as the US are most associated with this approach. It uses access to schools as a measure of equity, and student testing data to measure education outcomes, as part of a general promotion of new public management (NPM) measures of performance (of teachers, schools, and education systems), the role of the private sector in education provision, and quasi-market mechanisms and incentives to encourage competition between schools.

While vocational, further education (FE) and higher education (HE) are a less visible part of either agenda; there are equivalent narratives on more equal access to post-secondary learning via major expansions in capacity, often connected to regional equality agendas (Pinheiro et al., 2016; Pinheiro and Antonowicz, 2015).

The role of the OECD: transcending neoliberal and social justice approaches?

The OECD has an unusually wide remit that transcends this social justice/neoliberal dichotomy. Its coherent description of both approaches to equity suggests that, *in theory*, they are not necessarily mutually exclusive (OECD, 2008; 2012; Field et al., 2007; Levin, 2003; compare with Haugen, 2011). For example, it describes the ‘lack of fairness’ caused by the enduring and highly unequal impact of ‘socioeconomic background’ on school completion and attainment (OECD, 2012: 9), and identifies cross-sectoral working and supportive social security as essential: ‘education policies need to be aligned with other government policies, such as housing or welfare, to ensure student success’ (2012: 10). Further, multiple reports describe equity in relation to opportunity *and* inclusion arguing that everyone should have the chance to receive good education, social background should not obstruct education potential, and the costs of inequalities are both individual (relating to income and citizenship) and social (including economic, public service, and democratic costs) (OECD, 2008: 2; 2012: 3; Field et al., 2007: 33). In that context, the OECD supports reforms to encourage:

- an *equitable distribution of budgets* in relation to regional disparities and each stage of education, emphasizing high quality early education and free

- or reduced-fee compulsory education, rather than funding higher education (OECD, 2012: 3–11; 117–8; 2008: 5; 2015; Field et al., 2007: 23; 122–126);
- *multiculturalism and antiracism* via curriculum reform, language training for immigrant students, and rejecting measures such as ‘tracking’ (segregating students by alleged ability) at an early age (OECD, 2008: 2; Field et al., 2007: 150–151; 20);
- *school governance to ‘help disadvantaged schools and students improve’*, including financial incentives and training to redistribute teacher provision, discourage lower teacher expectations for marginalized students, and form more meaningful relationships with their parents or guardians (OECD, 2012: 11–12; 2008: 5; Field et al., 2007: 19).

Nevertheless, among education academics, OECD influence tends to be associated with the neoliberal approach (Cairney and Kippin, 2021). This perception results partly from OECD attempts to combine elements from two narratives, such as when:

- relating inequitable outcomes to a combination of ‘deprived backgrounds’ and ‘weak schooling’ (Field et al., 2007: 26);
- arguing that school governance and performance, coupled with an equitable distribution of school resources, can address the social determinants of education inequalities (OECD, 2012: 9; 3; 2008: 2; 6–7; 2015: 1–2; Field et al., 2007: 22; 39);
- emphasizing individual motivation when describing the need to exploit equal opportunities to learn (Levin, 2003: 5)
- presenting a working definition of equitable outcomes—everyone should reach a *minimum standard* of education or training at school leaving age—as ‘workable’ in relation to the context of neoliberal approaches (Levin, 2003: 5; Field et al., 2007: 31; 46–51).

The OECD’s role in performance management and evaluation, via PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), is largely the reason that it has become so associated with neoliberalism. The OECD uses PISA to gauge the knowledge and skills—e.g. in reading or mathematics—of 15 year old students in participating countries (the 2018 exercise focused on reading in 79 countries). Participating students complete a test to gauge how they use their knowledge in everyday life and a questionnaire to establish their social and economic background (OECD, 2021). PISA’s focus on lifelong learning is also part of a wider narrative of individual motivation and responsibility (Grek, 2009: 27).

The OECD proposes that governments use PISA results to reflect on their schools’ and education system’s performance, such as to identify unequal

early-dropout rates and attainment at school leaving age, and ‘give strong support to those schools with weak results’ (OECD, 2008: 7; Field et al., 2007: 23–24). However, there is a wider tendency for governments and commentators to use the results crudely, focusing on international league tables to identify good and bad country performance, often prompting lagging countries to pursue NPM reforms to catch up, and crude league tables of good versus bad schools that emphasize competition and do not take into account the socioeconomic composition of each school (Field et al., 2007: 131).

As such, PISA contributes to politically salient debates on the relationship between economic growth/competitiveness and school performance, underpinned by the idea that we can quantify and compare the relative performance of each country’s education system (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010: 133–136; Grek, 2009: 27). This process is part of a wider ‘governing by numbers’ effect, associated with the ‘effect that numbers have in bringing together national and organizational storylines on the status of education’ (Grek, 2020: 140–141; 146; see also Lawn, 2011; Lingard, 2011; Ozga et al., 2011; Ozga, 2017; Spillane, 2012).

The EU approach to education equity: performance versus inclusion?

The EU does not have the power to design or deliver education systems directly. However, it contributes to the global economic agenda that extends well beyond the nation state, while its focus on the human rights implications of education (to challenge discrimination and ensure the equal distribution of high value public goods) gives it an influential role (Alexiadou, 2017: 112–115).

EU-driven research and policy reflects the global picture in which economic and social justice ideas interact, with the potential for the former to undermine the latter. The European Commission (2006: 2) describes equity as the extent to which (1) ‘individuals can take advantage of education and training, in terms of opportunities, access, treatment and outcomes’, and (2) ‘the outcomes of education and training are independent of socio-economic background’. Further, it describes equity policy as a cross-sectoral initiative ‘to link education and training policies with those related to employment, the economy, social inclusion, youth, health, justice, housing and social services’, and fosters policy ‘to correct regional imbalances in education and training’ (2006: 4). This definition relates primarily to an economics lens, describing the role of equity in human capital investment, to aid (a) ‘competitiveness’, economic growth, and taxable income, and (b) ‘social cohesion’, political participation, population health, and reduced crime (European Commission, 2006: 2; Woessmann and Schuetz, 2006: 2–9). In that context, education should be ‘both efficient and equitable’ (2006: 2).

1. *Efficiency* is the best time to invest in human capital:

- using the famous ‘Heckman curve’ to support the earliest possible investment in *high quality* education (by well-trained teachers using evidence-informed methods), particularly for ‘children from low socio-economic background’;
- noting the inequity of higher education investment, since participation is limited and the tax system does not offset their higher earnings, and;
- noting the public and private underinvestment in vocational education and training (VET) despite its value as a second chance at equity (2006: 4–5; Woessmann and Schuetz, 2006: 10–14).

2. *Equity* relates to two elements:

- *Human capital*. Low investment in education reforms now means lower productivity later, since existing systems exacerbate inequalities in relation to the socio-economic challenges—including globalization, digital economies, demographic change (ageing, migration), and labour market changes—that affect low-skilled people with a basic education (European Commission, 2006: 3).
- *The governance of schools and education systems*. Member states have decentralized key aspects of school governance, which requires a parallel commitment to centralized accountability and distributional measures—such as standardized formal examinations to monitor attainment outcomes, evaluations of school progress, and motivating the most experience and skilled teachers ‘into the most challenging schools’—to ‘avoid the potentially inequitable local consequences of decentralized decisions’ (2006: 6–7). Woessmann and Schuetz (2006: 16; 20; 31) also describe the potential value of competition between state and private schools (accompanied by school choice and voucher schemes), public-private partnerships, and performance-related pay.

In that context, critical commentary describes the relative inattention to social justice. Demeuse et al.’s (2007: iii) report for the European Parliament criticizes Commission work for:

- *Its narrow definition of equity*. It conflates (a) equality of opportunity to access education (the *potential* for equal outcomes) and (b) ‘actual equality of access, treatment and results’. It does not identify a minimum threshold of achievement to which everyone is entitled. It uses the term equity, but does not ‘define unfair inequalities in education’ or ‘make a statement on the model of fairness’. It focuses narrowly on socio-economic inequality, which does not acknowledge the role of gender, race, ethnicity, or disability.

- *Its problematic discussion of efficiency.* It presupposes ‘agreement on an ideal relationship between the investments and the results’ in a field where preferred outcomes are contested (2007: iii).
- *Its call for a market of competing schools.* ‘A market of more and more diversified schools is a vector for social segregation’, exacerbated by implicit and explicit mechanisms of self—and external selection, and by the inequality of school choices when there is high local autonomy (2007: iv–v; see also EGREES, 2005 on measuring education inequalities across the EU).

Hippe et al.’s (2016: 5) updates to Commission work recognize these criticisms to some extent, such as by paying more attention to gender, immigration, and regional disparities (Braga et al., 2013: 73). However, they largely maintain the original definition of equity in relation to schools and focus on school quality and performance as the main vehicle for equity, recommending that:

- school systems foster ‘autonomy coupled with accountability’ and ‘competition sponsored by public funding’ (without encouraging ‘tracking’ to segregate students according to predicted attainment);
- teachers receive ‘rewards for their performance’ (while recognizing that the evidence is mixed on teacher quality);
- initiatives such as school choice can boost performance via competition (but exacerbate inequality via segregation) (Hippe et al., 2016: 9; 14–20; drawing on Braga et al., 2013: 51–54).

One rationale for this neoliberal focus is the political context: redistributive policies *could* address head-on the relationship between income and education attainment, but remain ‘controversial’ and less amenable to public policy; and, policies to foster equal ‘opportunities’ to access high quality education would be more popular (2016: 7). Therefore, like the OECD, the Commission highlights the profound impact of socio-economic background on education outcomes in each country’s education systems, but primarily:

1. relates equity to a *minimum threshold* of (a) good education and (b) attainment when leaving school. For example, Eurydice (2020: 42) measures each system’s achievement gaps between highest and lowest performing students, compared with the proportion categorized as ‘low achievers’ (the ‘least inclusive education systems’ have large attainment gaps *and* high percentages of ‘low achievers’);
2. focuses policy recommendations on *increased spending* (particularly on early years and primary provision), *school governance*, and *distributional measures*, to provide targeted support for ‘disadvantaged schools’ that enrol

‘high proportions of students from low socio-economic backgrounds’ (Eurydice, 2020: 13–19).

Overall, the EU oversees policymaking in which social justice agendas are rhetorically important and often enshrined in regulations, but difficult to find in the strategies or practices of member states. This general picture is also a feature of European Commission analysis of member states.

From EU policy to EU analysis of member states

Eurydice’s (2020) analysis of education systems in EU member states (and some regions) reinforces the finding that governments combine vague rhetorical support for education equity with specific OECD-style initiatives. Some education systems do not have an ‘official top-level definition’ of education equity (‘Bulgaria, Germany, Cyprus, Switzerland, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Norway, and Turkey’) while most make some kind of reference to equity in policy documents without ‘having a formal or explicit definition of equity in education or related concepts’ (2020: 50–52). There is also wide variety in the use of terminology, including who defines what:

Five education systems (Denmark, Malta, the Netherlands, Slovenia and Sweden) refer to equity, but not to disadvantage, while for others (Belgium—Flemish Community, Ireland, Italy, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, the United Kingdom—England, Wales and Northern Ireland) it is the other way around, that is, they refer to educational disadvantage, but not to educational equity. A few, namely Spain, Latvia, Lithuania, Austria, the United Kingdom (Scotland) ... have defined both concepts

(2020: 50).

Of the systems declaring an equity goal, Eurydice (2020: 50–51) identifies a variety of approaches, including: a general statement of *fairness* (in Malta, ‘the education of each student is of equal importance’); connecting equity to *merit and motivation* (in Estonia, ‘equal educational opportunities commensurate with their abilities’), or; emphasizing *socio-economic inequalities* (Denmark emphasizes reducing ‘the significance of social background with regard to academic results’) and *reducing attainment gaps* (in Scotland, ‘closing the poverty-related attainment gap ... by ensuring every child has the same opportunity to succeed’).

This variety extends to defining a ‘disadvantaged student’. Examples include students: with low cultural, linguistic, financial, and/or social capital (Belgium, Flemish Community); in a disadvantaged ‘social, economic, cultural, ethnic or geographic’ situation (Spain); who are ‘at risk of social exclusion such as

immigrants and children with special educational needs' (Lithuania); 'from rural, social-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, Roma children and students with special education needs' at highest risk of dropping out or repeating a school year (Romania), or; entitled to free school meals (a proxy for low income) (UK). In some cases, disadvantage connects strongly to 'special needs' and 'inclusive' education, widening its definition beyond a specific focus on mental or physical disabilities towards including socio-economic, cultural, or linguistic barriers to learning (e.g. in Greece and Italy) (2020: 52).

These rather general understandings of equity and unfair disadvantage feed into a range of initiatives to 'address low achievement or underperformance among students', often to focus specifically on a threshold of performance to 'reduce the numbers leaving education or training early or without a formal qualification' (2020: 52–53). They include strategies to: provide additional support for students from 'migrant backgrounds' or compensate for 'a lack of student support at home' (Germany); ensure that 'disadvantaged students will be more evenly distributed among schools' (Spain, Hungary); increase 'school choice' by expanding provision, and centralize the 'allocation of resources for student support' (Luxembourg); oblige school attendance from age 3, and introduce an 'early warning system' for students at risk of leaving school without achieving a 'baseline performance' (Hungary); defer the choice of school or vocational 'pathway' until age 14 (Netherlands), and; give greater financial and school support to 'students from a disadvantaged socio-economic background, including Roma children, children living in rural areas, and also children with special education needs' (Romania) (2020: 54).

The impact of neoliberalism on social justice approaches

Education research, on global *and* domestic agendas, describes the uneasy coexistence between competing approaches to education equity (Cairney and Kippin, 2021). Hajisoteriou and Angelides (2020) describe global policymaking as two-headed. One helps to produce 'global policies of social justice and equity' and 'may play a substantial role in the development of minority and immigrant rights, while also moving citizenship debates beyond the idea of the nation state' (2020: 278; 282). Another fosters benchmarking, privatization, and NPM to produce policies including 'school-based management, teachers' accountability, public-private partnerships and conditional fund-transfer schemes' (2020: 277). Further, 'Market oriented education seems to overrule policy reforms aiming to achieve equity in education ... [producing] educational policies preoccupied with efficiency, "excellence", "standards" and "accountability"' (2020: 282; 277).

Most articles in Cairney and Kippin's (2021) review suggest that the economic narrative dominates international and domestic policy agendas and

undermines social justice policies. There is high rhetorical support to address unfair inequalities, but not at the expense of economic development or competitiveness. Equity relates primarily to minimum standards: to promote equal access to sufficiently high quality schools and teachers, and equal opportunities to achieve a threshold of attainment when leaving school. Further, the competition to provide and receive ‘high quality’ teaching guarantees unequal access (often accompanied by advice for parents on how to compete for places—[Exley, 2009](#): 254).

Case study examples relate these dynamics to country-level experiences in which vague equity strategies do not change social inclusion practices, and are undermined by greater commitment to neoliberal reforms (e.g. [Grimaldi, 2012](#) on Italy; [Simmie, 2012](#) on Ireland; [Teasley, 2020](#) on early years education in Spain). For example, in Cyprus, a general focus on equal access to schools, combined with vagueness in government aims (to respect ‘diversity and cultural, linguistic and religious pluralism’) ensures that schools reproduce ‘cultural domination, non-recognition and disrespect’ and do not adapt their equity policies to the social background or cultural practices of marginalized: ‘it appears that policy-makers themselves do not value their own policy rhetoric for social justice, thus failing to get schools to take such policy priorities seriously’ ([Hajisoteriou and Angelides, 2014](#): 159; 168). This lack of progress is part of a more general commitment to ‘neoliberal policy imperatives’ at the expense of attention to ‘issues of difference and diversity’ ([Liasidou and Symeou, 2018](#): 151).

Studies also relate the neoliberal/social justice tension to the impacts on particular social groups, such as in relation to gender, minority ethnicity, and immigration.

Education equity and gender

[Vaughan’s \(2019](#): 494–496) discussion of financial support for gender-based education equity identifies the potential to focus on social inclusion (such as to challenge violence against women and girls) in the context of a neoliberal policymaking environment. There are new opportunities for women’s rights groups to influence policy (2019: 500–508), but not to shift dominant economic frames of equity supported by ‘multilaterals, bilateral agencies, national governments, and, more recently, private sector organizations’ (2019: 494). These organizations measure ‘gender disparities in access, attendance, completion, and achievement’, drawing ‘heavily on human capital perspectives concerned with the economic significance of getting girls into school, particularly in terms of poverty reduction’ (2019: 509; 496). They do not favour the development of alternative approaches, such as ‘capabilities’ approaches that foster learning environments (a) more tailored to students’ needs and (b) more able to empower them to learn when they are subject to differences in power, culture, and resources ([Wahlström, 2014](#); [Molla and Gale, 2015](#)).

Education equity and the Roma minority

Alexiadou (2019: 427–428) identifies the mixed impact of neoliberal and social justice approaches in relation to ‘the Roma minority in Europe’, in a context of (a) ‘high absenteeism and alienation’ and early school leaving among Roma students, even when (b) EU actors such as the Commission are committed to addressing the problem (Alexiadou, 2019: 423). On the one hand, EU member states are potentially subject to legal sanctions if they do not fulfil their legal and human rights obligation to promote ‘equality of outcomes’ in relation to Roma students (2019: 425–432). On the other, the strategically-worded ‘on paper’ strategies by states and regions may never leave the page. National or subnational governments can subvert these aims by using, for example, their ‘special needs’ categorization to segregate and discriminate against Roma students. Three common measures are:

1. using linguistic, psychological, and pedagogic tests—and socio-economic disadvantage—to describe proportionately more Roma children as in need of ‘preparation opportunities to enter mainstream education’ (the listing of language and cultural barriers as disabilities also features in studies of ‘the USA, the UK, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Germany, and Japan’—Chong, 2018: 502);
2. providing low quality education in those classes, which limit progression to mainstream education, and/or;
3. boosting school choice to attend allegedly higher quality schools outside of a local area, which requires resources to access and attend schools.

Education equity and immigration

There is rather mixed research on the impact of EU rules on the education of immigrant students. Schlicht-Schmälzle and Möller’s (2012: 1046) quantitative comparison of West European states finds a strong relationship between unequal educational attainment in mathematics in the PISA 2006 assessment and immigration. However, curiously, a government’s *greater commitment* to ‘EU standards of good practice’ (‘educational programmes for migrant children and anti-discrimination policies’ to enable ‘equal participation in the education system and to gain the same achievements as their native counterparts’) is associated with *higher inequality* (2012: 1049; 1056). Further, the only countries that exhibit minimal inequalities are the (majoritarian) UK and Ireland, which challenges the argument that consensus democracies are ‘kinder’ and more conducive to equal outcomes (2012: 1056). Rather, they ‘enable the representation of large minorities in the political process’ (2012: 1060–1061, countering Lijphart, 1999).

Intentional and unintentional barriers to equity policies

While these examples vary in focus, a common approach is to (1) juxtapose the relatively low commitment to social justice strategies and high commitment to the neoliberal policies, often to show that (2) the latter undermines the former. The rhetoric of equitable access to services *intentionally* or *unintentionally* undermines attention to social justice agendas and the social determinants of inequalities. A tendency towards ‘equity for all’ strategies without specific support for marginalized populations, combined with quasi-market competition to segregate marginalized students, exacerbates the ‘achievement gap’ related strongly to minoritization and the social determinants of education (e.g. [Gorard, 2018](#); [Felix and Fernandez Castro, 2018](#); [Reid, 2017](#)). Further, governments prioritize education system performance in relation to the economy or to high stakes exams, often at the expense of attention to equity.

As the following section suggests, Nordic experiences illustrate key aspects of this argument, since research describes a shift away from social justice—associated with social democracy, universalist welfare states, and comprehensive schooling—towards neoliberal approaches to education.

What can governments learn from each other?

Chapter 2 provides a contrast between the *pursuit* versus the *explanation* of policy learning and policy transfer processes. The former would use our three-question framework to identify success stories, the evidence for their success, and their applicability to an importing government’s context. The latter would examine how actors learn through the lens of dominant ways to define problems, and transfer policies to address pressure to follow international norms. For example, Rizvi and [Lingard \(2010: 80–91; 121–122\)](#) describe how governments import ideas (on human capital and the global knowledge economy), techniques (NPM), and programmes (the privatization of education and promotion of school choice), without evidence that they improve outcomes.

In that context, we use this framework to set up a brief comparison of Nordic experiences whose lessons are highly contested.

1. *What story do policymakers tell about the problem they seek to solve?*

The neoliberal/social justice comparison suggests that policymakers are often telling very different stories about their overall aims, and there are multiple aspects to each aim. As such, questions regarding neoliberal reforms could include: how did this government achieve a high or low PISA ranking, or adopt new central accountability measures to address concerns with decentralization? Social justice questions could include: how did this

government deliver social inclusion measures for marginalized students, or design an effective and inclusive early years education system? However, since both agendas exist simultaneously, more meaningful questions would examine how governments were able to balance competing aims or ensure that, say, national performance management measures did not undermine local government and school inclusion agendas. For example, how did Finland maintain an effective comprehensive education system while its neighbours felt more pressure to reform?

Pöder et al. (2013) show how such tensions between policy aims may be incorporated in pragmatic research. On the one hand, they use evidence from 28 European countries (and Nordic countries in particular) to describe the *absence of school choice and tracking measures* as most likely to produce equitable (and efficient) outcomes (2013: 24). On the other, they accept the likelihood that school choice measures serve a political and ideological purpose—‘indicating that the state’s role has shifted from redistribution to empowerment, responsibility and respect’—and are here to stay (2013: 25). In that context, ‘the question is not whether to tolerate choice or not, but rather how to minimize the harm caused by choice policies’, such as to highlight ‘good choice models—Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, Hungary, and Ireland’ (2013: 25).

2. *What is the evidence for one government’s success?*

We are unlikely to find straightforward evidence of success when approaches to equity are so contested. Rather, governments have a general incentive to provide selective evidence of their successful neoliberal reforms, while critical education research challenges their claims and identifies the adverse consequences of neoliberal reforms on education inequalities (Cairney and Kippin, 2021). In other words, governments are describing their race to the top, while their critics decry their race to the bottom, and both interpret new evidence through the lens of those beliefs (DeBray et al., 2014).

3. *Do they have comparable political and policymaking systems?*

Our use of Nordic country experiences demonstrates considerable problems regarding the comparability of experience. To some extent, describing experiences of countries with similar backgrounds helps to extract and compare lessons in a systematic way, but subject to limited information about their policymaking contexts (as opposed to their—far more knowable—political system rules). However, most other countries have limited comparability with Nordic countries. As such, any discussion of country experiences provides ideas to discuss in reference to different situations rather than blueprints for emulation.

In that context, Nordic experiences are often described as best case examples and cautionary tales because new neoliberal agendas contrast strongly with older ideas associated with Nordic welfare states built on

social democratic values, trust and social capital, their maintenance of comprehensive education systems, and their tendency to decentralize policy to municipal governments without highly centralized accountability measures (Chong, 2018: 502; Cairney and Kippin, 2021). This general narrative suggests that, while Nordic approaches to education are under threat, experiences vary, with Finland largely retaining its system but Scandinavian countries undergoing major change.

Finland's maintenance of a comprehensive system

Finland has an international reputation for pursuing equity via lifelong learning and a comprehensive schooling system (staffed by well-paid and respected teachers), supported by a Nordic welfare state (Niemi and Isopahkala-Bouret, 2015; Lingard, 2010: 139–140; Grek, 2009: 28; 33). Equity means ‘minimizing the influence of social class, gender, or ethnicity on educational outcomes’ while making sure that everyone achieves a threshold of basic education and skills via: ‘active social investment through universal early childhood education’; ‘a comprehensive education model’ in which every school has a near-identical standard, and; ‘the provision of support to lower-performing or at-risk students’ (Chong, 2018: 502–505).

Consequently, Finland has enjoyed praise from (1) the OECD for investing early, avoiding tracking, minimizing the number of people leaving school without adequate skills, and maintaining a high PISA ranking (Field et al., 2007: 26; Møller, 2017: 377), and (2) from education researchers welcoming its resistance to neoliberal, market-based reforms that foster individualism and competition (Chong, 2018: 502–505). However, this praise is not uniform. For example, Zilliacus et al. (2017: 232) contrast Finland's reputation with its historic favouring of national integration and ‘othering’ of immigrant populations, and only recently pivoting to ‘support cultural diversity and social justice as well as counter marginalization and discrimination in education and society’.

Finland's contrast with Sweden, Norway, and Denmark

Sweden's attempts to recentralize accountability, manage a quasi-market of state and private schools, and emphasize equal access to high quality schools, provides the biggest departure from the old Nordic ideal (Pettersson et al., 2017: 732; Camphuijsen et al., 2020: 12–14; Varjo et al., 2018; Wahlström, 2014). As such, Sweden has an education system that is simultaneously committed unusually strongly to equity as a value, and pursuing policies that undermine it (Andreasson et al., 2015: 267–268).

Varjo et al. (2018: 481; 483) compare how Finnish and Swedish local education authorities deal with the pressure to adopt neoliberal approaches that combine decentralization, market-based reforms, and quasi-market incentives such as school choice policies. In Finland, decentralization is in the context of the maintenance of comprehensive schooling and no tradition of ‘mandatory national testing ... school inspections and school league tables’ (2018: 486). School assessments remain unpublished to prevent media stories of the ‘weakest’ schools (2018: 489). In contrast, Swedish governments:

- encouraged a larger private sector: in 2015, 26% of students attended government-subsidized private schools, with a marked spread by geography (50% in large cities, 3% in rural areas) and class (55% in highest and 5% in lowest socio-economic decile);
- fostered school choice via vouchers for students, which contributed to competition between state and private schools (2018: 486–489). There is also evidence of rural student commutes to cities but not the other way, prompting some rural schools to sell themselves as more welcoming to local immigrant populations (2018: 490–491);
- contributed to tensions between the *trust in* versus *audit of* teachers in Sweden when checking how fairly they grade national student tests (Novak and Carlbaum, 2017: 673). The choice to introduce an inspectorate and regrading programme contributed to a government and media narrative on ‘teachers’ assessments as incorrect, unfair, and as jeopardizing the credibility of the grading system, thus justifying increased central control and authority over teacher assessments’ (2017: 673; Wahlström, 2014).

Camphuijsen et al. (2020: 4) identify comparable developments of ‘test-based accountability (TBA)’ in Norway, which previously seemed ‘immune’ to neoliberal agendas since it maintained a social democratic welfare state and comprehensive education system with strict limits on private schools and school choice (over 96% of students attend state schools—Nortvedt, 2018: 433). Indeed, while an OECD report in 1988 questioned its ability to hold a decentralized school system to account, reforms were largely resisted by ‘key political actors, parliamentarians and the main teacher’s union’ (2020: 5). Things changed following the ‘PISA shock’: poor performances in PISA 2000 and 2003 ruined Norway’s self-image as ‘the best school in the world’, highlighted inequitable outcomes, and showed that 17% of students left school without basic competencies (2020: 7). The reform-push coincided with rising NPM and outcome-based management (encouraged by the OECD) (2020: 12).

In Denmark, Engsig and Johnstone (2015: 472) identify the contradictions of educational ‘inclusion’ policies with two different aims: (1) social inclusion and

student experience (the UNESCO model, adapting to students), and (2) mainstreaming in public education coupled with an increased focus on excellence and quality, via high stakes student testing to meet targets (the US model, requiring students to adapt). In that context, they argue that the focus on student testing to aid performance management, coupled with a reduction in funding per student, was ‘directly inspired’ by US policy (2015: 472).

Contested lessons from Nordic (and wider European) experiences

To some extent, these experiences provide practical lessons for governments and education researchers. For example, Finland has been in a unique position of receiving praise by social justice advocates *and* the OECD. As such, a common question may be: how does Finland maintain its education system despite pressure to respond to a global neoliberal agenda? However, the lessons learned by other governments are highly contested. For some, Finland’s experience shows other countries that neoliberal reforms can be resisted without major adverse consequences for its international image, and that policy continuity helps avoid the unintended consequences of reforms on education equity. For others, poor international performances by Scandinavian education systems necessitated a major rethink of policy and a need to catch-up with many other countries (a ‘lesson’ also taken by many European countries or systems, including France and England—[Power and Frandji, 2010](#): 394).

Further, these experiences reinforce a tendency in empirical studies to highlight the role of external agendas in policy change. Almost all of these developments relate not to a voluntary lesson-drawing process (such as described by [Rose, 2005](#)), but rather the perceived pressure to respond to neoliberal agendas and poor performances in international benchmarking exercises. In that sense, Nordic experiences provide extreme examples of wider trends in Europe. For example, [Grimaldi \(2012: 1135\)](#) shows that, in Italy, neoliberal reforms were described by key supporters as, ‘the Anglo-Saxon ones’, describing countries that ‘have high quality performances, thanks to systems based on a strong culture of evaluation and responsibility’ and viewing equity through the lens of economic policy.

While such neoliberal global and national agendas are pervasive, their impact varies markedly ([Apple, 2001](#); [Rizvi and Lingard, 2010](#): 42). ‘Generic solutions’ are translated and transformed in local contexts ([Ball, 1998](#): 126–127). Borrowing from PISA leaders takes place if a lesson ‘fits their own domestic policy agenda’, and comes with the need to translate into local contexts ([Steiner-Khamsi, 2014](#): 154; 2012: 4; [Vandenbroeck, 2007](#)). For example, [Nortvedt \(2018: 427; 437–438\)](#) argues that, while there was some attention to the ‘PISA shock’ in Norway, policymakers used it largely to reinforce policy changes already in progress,

while maintaining a relatively decentralized education system. More generally, varying levels of national government indifference to international benchmarks suggests that ‘international studies like PISA are often used merely to validate existing policy directions’ (2018: 431). The time it takes to borrow also varies markedly, particularly if countries rely on international organization funding to make it happen, thus highlighting a major difference between policy transfer as a commitment and as an implemented reform (Steiner-Khamsi, 2006: 674; Rizvi, 2016: 5).

How would governments learn?

As Chapters 2 and 3 show, multi-level and multi-sectoral policy learning is easier said than done. To demonstrate, we follow Chapter 6 in using an illustrative example to ask an ostensibly simple question: how would policymakers in Finland and Ireland share lessons from comparable experiences?

Finland is often treated as the exporting country, as a world-leading education system in terms of attainment, equity, and lifelong learning, supported by a generous social welfare state, and showing that coherent policy is possible (Grek, 2009: 28; 33; Lingard, 2010: 139–140; Niemi and Isopahkala-Bouret, 2015). Table 7.1, shows the distribution of relevant policy instruments. Competences are distributed widely across tiers of government, and across different agencies at the national level. Different organizations carry out functions such as curriculum development and monitoring spending. Strong roles are evident for regional councils, which play a coordination role and support local and national education efforts, and local government, responsible for the running of schools, aspects of their funding, interpretation of curricula (Helsinki-Uusima Regional Council, 2020), and indirect competences such as over local care services and youth service provision.

Our preliminary research also highlighted the perception within policy communities in Ireland that its equity policies showed substantive progress (Cairney et al., 2018). As such, it may seek to export *and* import lessons. However, which organizations would lead processes of policy learning? The Ireland-Finland comparison is instructive since their multi-level responsibilities differ markedly (see Table 7.2). For example, the Irish system grants most powers to the national level, including formal competences over compulsory and higher education systems. National agencies also play a role in school inspection and quality assurance. A key role accrues at the regional level in the shape of regional Education and Training Boards (ETBs), which manage several types of schools and FE colleges. An approach to pursue a social justice equity strategy in Ireland, focused on equitable funding, inclusivity, and diversity, and resisting neoliberal reforms, would need to be directed from the national level. If so, mutual cross-country learning on policy would also require learning about their differences in policymaking.

Table 7.1 Education policy competences in Finland

	Direct	Indirect
EU	<p>University student and staff exchange programmes. Research funding and support. Fostering encouragement between member states and setting benchmark standards. Monitoring and sharing of best practice.</p>	<p>Encouragement of cooperation between member states on education and skills. Monitoring of EU member states citizens' education levels. Promotion of coordination between HE authorities. University student exchange programmes.</p>
National	<p>System wide responsibility for compulsory education. System wide responsibility for higher education. System wide responsibility for pre-school education. Preparation of national education legislation. Programmes of education reform. Structure of education system and allocation of sub-national competencies. National matriculation exam. Licensing of vocational placements. System wide responsibility for adult education. Education funding (shared with municipalities).</p>	<p>Childcare policy. Budget allocation and departmental allocations. System control for health, social security (including family allowance), and other public services. Environmental regulation and monitoring. Transport infrastructure. Border and immigration policy. Public sector pay. Employer/employee relations.</p>
National Agency	<p>National Forum for Skills Anticipation, National Sports Council and State Youth Council. Development of broad education objectives, guidance, and advice. Development of learner content. Development and approval of core curricula and requirements of qualifications for pre-primary and basic education, general and vocational upper secondary education. Monitoring of educational expenditure and provision by municipalities. Allocation of subsidies to schools and municipalities. Training provision. School evaluation. Teacher training requirements. Vocational education. Planning and procurement in vocational education and vocational adult education.</p>	<p>Allocation of European Union funding. Local transport services and roads maintenance. Child exploitation monitoring and enforcement. Promote cooperation in adult education. Support for children's and young people's physical development projects. Museum system coordination. Residence permits for education and training. University inspection, monitoring, and evaluation.</p>

Continued

Table 7.1 *Continued*

	Direct	Indirect
Regional	<p>Identifying of regional long-term and medium-term training needs as part of the development plan for education and research.</p> <p>The development and coordination of regional education and studies concerning the region.</p> <p>Development plans on education.</p> <p>Education project preparation.</p>	<p>Data gathering and information provision.</p> <p>Development plans on housing, logistics, infrastructure, environment, and public services.</p> <p>Regional sports councils.</p> <p>Coordination of regional public services.</p> <p>Ensuring accessibility in online government services.</p> <p>Swedish/Sami language services.</p> <p>Support, guidance, and funding for public libraries.</p> <p>Allocation of sport funding and regional sports councils.</p> <p>Youth services (training, funding, workshop provision, and evaluation).</p> <p>Occupational health and safety enforcement.</p> <p>Environmental and water permits.</p> <p>Wealth and asset regulatory enforcement.</p> <p>Coordinate Child and Youth Policy at a regional level.</p>
Local	<p>Basic education.</p> <p>General upper secondary education.</p> <p>Cofunding of education with the central Government.</p> <p>Education for children in hospitals.</p> <p>Education provision in both Swedish and Finnish.</p> <p>Voluntary additional basic education and activities.</p> <p>Music and art education.</p> <p>Devise curricula based on the core curricula and [local] requirements.</p> <p>Cofunding of vocational education and training with state authorities.</p> <p>Youth work and services (including educational guidance, recreation, support for youth associations, environmental education).</p>	<p>Activities supporting the access to employment and specific work for people with disabilities.</p> <p>Child and youth welfare.</p> <p>Child day care.</p> <p>Child guidance and family counselling.</p> <p>Informal care services.</p> <p>Institutional care.</p> <p>Family care.</p> <p>Service for people with intellectual and physical disabilities</p> <p>General social services.</p> <p>Organize training in their area.</p> <p>Match provision with local labour market needs.</p> <p>Promotion of local sports and provision of local sport services.</p> <p>Cultural, music, and arts programming; library services.</p> <p>Child health services.</p>

Sources: *European Committee of the Regions, (2021e), Finland Centre for Economic Development, Transport, and the Environment, (2021), Finland Regional State Administrative Agency, (2021); Eurydice, (2021).*

Table 7.2 Education policy competences in Ireland

	Direct Competencies	Indirect Competencies
EU	<p>University student and staff exchange programmes. Research funding and support. Fostering encouragement between member states and setting benchmark standards. Monitoring and sharing of best practice.</p>	<p>Encouragement of cooperation between member states on education and skills. Monitoring of EU member states citizens' education levels. Promotion of coordination between higher education authorities. University student exchange programmes.</p>
National level	<p>Pre-school education. Primary and Secondary Schooling. Higher education policy and research. Recognition and regulation of schools. School curricula and standards. Resourcing and staffing of schools. Teachers' salary scales. Higher education. Further education and training. Adult education. School inspections.</p>	<p>Central government budget. Science and skills. Public service reform. Skills and training. Participation in sport. Childcare provision. Child welfare. Family support. Adoption. Youth crime.</p>
National agencies	<p>Examinations and qualifications. School inspections and quality assurance. Higher education research and policy advice. Development and implementation for National Framework of Qualifications.</p>	<p>Child welfare. Protection of equality and human rights. Promotion of measures to improve child wellbeing outcomes. Data gathering and national statistics.</p>
Regional level	<p>Regional administration of national departmental affairs. Regional training boards. Management of further education colleges. Prison education. Vocational education and training. Post-primary education outdoor education. Adult education and guidance. Irish-language pre-schools (and Irish language initiatives). Managing and operating certain schools</p>	<p>Regional planning and spatial strategy. Allocation of EU funding. Youth work provision. Psychological services.</p>
Local level	<p>Higher education grants. Administration of some elements of education. Representation on regional training boards.</p>	<p>Planning. Libraries. Economic development. Heritage and conservation. Recreation and cultural services. Parks, playgrounds, sport and recreation. Arts and culture.</p>

Multi-level policymaking: centralization and decentralization

Chapter 2 describes a broad tension between two often-contradictory policymaking aims:

1. to *centralize*. To prioritize a common purpose, directed from a single authority and formalized in multiple levels of government, expecting fidelity to a general aim of reducing unfair inequalities.
2. to *decentralize*. To prioritize the legitimacy of multiple forms of governance, directed by local policy actors in collaboration with stakeholders and communities to make sense of policy aims, expecting that the results will be different from a central agenda.

In education, most ‘neoliberal’ attention to this dynamic relates to centralized accountability and performance management. For example, Eurydice’s (2020: 13–19) review of education equity policies across Europe identifies the same governance and performance indicators highlighted by the OECD (2012), including the extent to which education systems:

- avoid harmful academic segregation, such as via tracking and a too-early age at which students enter academic or vocational pathways (2020: 16; 125);
- find alternatives to students repeating an entire grade (2020: 22; 142–143);
- avoid school selection processes based too much on academic performance (rather than residence) (2020: 117; 130–132);
- manage school autonomy to foster the positive effects of decentralization while avoiding ‘a hierarchization of schools, which can have detrimental effect on equity’ (particularly when a system has a high proportion of private autonomous schools) (2020: 15; 152).

Social justice approaches may devote their primary focus to the policy instruments that remain a national government (or EU) responsibility, including taxing and spending to redistribute resources, or regulations to protect human rights and challenge discrimination (Chapter 3). However, there is some international research attention being paid to the classic focus on ‘top down’ versus ‘bottom up’ approaches to policy change (Cairney and Kippin, 2021). In particular, a recurring theme is the extent to which local policy actors can reinforce or subvert national priorities, or take responsibility for the equity issues that national governments do not prioritize (Molla and Gale, 2019). In other words, is central or local direction more conducive to social justice approaches to equity?

Studies of the United States context (a disproportionately large source of international lessons) suggest that both levels of government provide insufficient impetus for social justice reforms: school or school district leaders need (but do not receive) strong federal support to overcome local parental opposition to policy

change, or local leaders respond primarily to the high stakes federal neoliberal policies at the expense of low stakes efforts to target racism or minoritization (Cairney and Kippin, 2021; Michener, 2019). Although an extreme case, it is difficult to find studies of EU countries that contradict its general findings, or even describe how governments use national financial or regulatory powers in practice. Rather, a general finding in education research is that policy change is more apparent on paper than practice at national *and* local levels. Country governments express rhetorical support for a multi-faceted approach to improving education equity, but generally without saying which policy instruments they will use. At the same time, tracking and other inequitable local practices endure despite widespread criticism from organizations such as the OECD.

The ability of regional or devolved governments to manage education policy

Some regions across Europe enjoy similar powers as national governments, and therefore the potential to go their own way on education equity policy. Does this delegation of policymaking responsibility make a difference, such as by challenging the dispiriting lack of equity policy progress that we describe? Under specific circumstances, there are two reasons to think so.

First, Garritzmann et al. (2021: 3; 7–11) explore the idea that regional autonomy combined with a left-wing government in office can make a difference, based on the hypotheses that (1) ‘leftwing parties increase public education spending, because education can contribute to upward mobility, foster equality of opportunities, and decrease educational and socio-economic inequalities’, and (2) ‘the more authority over education is decentralized to the regional level, the more the ideological standing of the regional governments matter’. They find that left-wing governments are more likely to increase education spending, not only at a national level but also in regions with significant powers. As such, if a left-wing government is in office, the European countries most open to regional government impacts are Germany and the UK, followed by all Swiss, most Belgian, and a few Italian regions (2021: 20).

Second, regional or devolved governments may pursue policymaking styles that improve central-local relations. This idea of distinctive ‘territorial policy communities’ and devolved government policy styles is a regular feature of UK policy research, suggesting that devolved governments (in Scotland, Wales, and—to some extent—Northern Ireland) make policy in a more consensual manner and place more trust in organizations such as local authorities (which oversee school governance) (Keating et al., 2009; Cairney, 2008; 2013; 2019).

In that context, Chapman and Ainscow (2019: 899) describe a common ‘equity policy challenge’ to secure ‘sustainable improvement in schools serving learners

from disadvantaged communities’ and relate it to UK (governing education in England), Scottish, and Welsh government case studies. In each case, there is scope for each government to fund education and negotiate the central-local relationship in different ways. For example, the Scottish and Welsh governments oversee education systems that favour comprehensive schooling, largely opting out of UK government reforms for England that (a) differentiate strongly between school types (including grammar schools based on academic selection), and (b) encourage school autonomy from local authority control (while giving many schools the ability to cap their recruitment of ‘children with special educational needs and disabilities’—Rayner, 2017: 30; West, 2006). Further, the Scottish Government describes a distinctive focus on (a) reducing an attainment gap in relation to poverty, (b) some redistribution of funding in relation to ‘most disadvantaged backgrounds’ via a £1200 per child ‘Pupil Equity Fund’ sent directly to schools, (c) shifting levels of school resources, such as teacher numbers and class sizes, and (d) performance and leadership (2006: 907; in England the equivalent fund, albeit with limited impact, is the Pupil Premium—BenDavid-Hadar, 2018: 562). Still, Chapman and Ainscow (2019: 899; 909) highlight broad similarities in each government’s pursuit of ‘bottom-up leadership within a context of top-down political mandate’:

1. the routine use of centralized accountability measures regarding quality and performance to help improve school management (following an OECD-style agenda);
2. central government attempts to place high quality teachers in schools in ‘disadvantaged communities’, and;
3. national-local government tensions in relation to who should drive the policy agenda and how much variation in processes to tolerate (2019: 899; 909).

More generally, the Scottish Government has not found a magic formula to combine social justice and neoliberal approaches. It *emphasizes* commitment to the aim of a ‘more egalitarian education system in Scotland’ (Mowat, 2019: 67), often with reference to myths of Scottish education distinctiveness, connections to Nordic social democracy, and First Ministerial ambitions to ‘close the attainment gap completely’ (Arnott, 2017: 5). However, it also produces ‘competing policies and imperatives acting against each other’, with a tendency for Scottish Government policy to be ‘driven largely by OECD rhetoric’ (Mowat, 2019: 67), which suggests that ‘attainment gaps’ may relate primarily to minimum thresholds.

Further, Kippin and Cairney (2021) find that all four nations oversaw very similar policy ‘fiascos’ when they sought new exam policies during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. All four pursued a ‘four nations’ approach to education policy, and followed a similar process:

- cancelling school exams but seeking a replacement mechanism to allocate final grades (largely to allow students to secure university places);
- delegating the moderation of teacher-estimated grades to an exams authority, which used an algorithm to standardize the results with reference to historic schools data;
- announcing and defending the results, then;
- overseeing a ‘U turn’ by reverting to teacher-estimated grades after public, media, and parliamentary criticism regarding the unfairness of the outcomes (focusing on schools with high proportions of students from low income backgrounds).

To some extent, these experiences highlight the ability of each government to go its own way, and to engage voluntarily in policy coordination. However, the UK government’s decision to change policy quickly (which took place after a similar decision in Scotland) caused the governments in Wales and Northern Ireland to follow suit. Their experience reflects a general ‘tendency for UK government choices to spill over to—and limit the options of—the others’ (2021: 8). In this case, UK decisions for students and university places in England limited the ability of devolved governments to pursue a different policy for students and universities in the rest of the UK.

Conclusion: lessons from education equity for territorial cohesion

The EU, along with its member states and regions, has many vague ambitions to foster greater equity and it is generally difficult to tell if they are complementary or contradictory. In the case of education, policymakers are incorporating social justice and neoliberal approaches to the same sector. While these approaches may be described as complementary in theory, they are contradictory in practice. They describe different functions for education, models of education system governance, and ideas about the appropriate role of the state. One approach emphasizes the need for social inclusion and redistributive measures to foster greater equity of outcomes, while the other emphasizes individual merit and the equal opportunity to attend a high quality school. Organizations such as the OECD and European Commission seek ways to combine these general ideas, to relate equity to social background and school performance. While they describe the relationship between social and economic disadvantage and unequal attainment, their main focus is on fostering reforms to increase the proportion of students reaching a threshold of attainment, aided by international benchmarks to compare attempts to meet that aim.

Similarly, national governments pursue a vague rhetorical commitment to social justice ideas, but a tangible commitment to performance measures designed to foster decentralized delivery and centralized accountability. Country level examples, and case studies of gender, minority ethnic, and immigrant populations suggest that the end result is a tendency for neoliberal reforms to undermine social justice commitments. While Finland represents a model to resist such reforms, it has proven to be exceptional, even among Nordic states. Regional or devolved government autonomy offers the potential to bolster social justice approaches, and improve central-local dynamics. However, the UK experience suggests that the ability of devolved governments to go their own way is tempered strongly by the perceived need to keep up with international practices, particularly in relation to high-stakes measures of performance and the school exams that determine university entry.

These experiences inform approaches to territorial cohesion that relate equity to equal access to public services (Chapter 1). They offer a cautionary tale for territorial cohesion policy, since most education equity researchers criticize the negative impact of neoliberal approaches that emphasize equality of access or opportunities, place the onus on individuals to exploit those opportunities, and encourage competition between schools that, by definition, precludes equal access to the same quality of education (Cairney and Kippin, 2021). For some, these outcomes are unintended consequences of the relative attention to neoliberal approaches and NPM-style performance agendas. For others, they are the intentional result of approaches that use social justice and equity rhetoric as a way to hide the limited progress towards reducing inequalities of education outcomes.

As such, there is great potential to learn from such experiences, to inform not only the study of education equity policy, but also the wider collection of policies—including territorial cohesion—designed ostensibly to foster equity. However, it is difficult for policymakers to learn from others if they are not sure what they are trying to do. Indeed, the veneer of equity rhetoric takes attention from not only the contestation to define the problem and offer solutions, but also the tendency for EU and national policymakers to blunt the power of radical initiatives by incorporating them into routine government business.

Strategies to Reduce Gender Inequalities

Introduction

This chapter examines how governments define gender equity and seek to reduce unfair gender inequalities. As with health and education (Chapters 6 and 7), significant inequalities endure despite general support for reducing them. Further, this case shows a lack of agreement on the meaning of inequity (unfair inequality) *and* of gender. As a result, actions taken in the name of gender equity—more frequently described as gender *equality*—are highly diverse, and their effectiveness varies significantly. For example, minimalist anti-discrimination frameworks contrast with more expansive affirmative action policies designed to target particular groups to redress historically entrenched patterns of exclusion and unfairness. More recently, the very nature of policymaking has been criticized as ‘gendered’ and therefore unfit to produce inequality reduction policies.

The concept of ‘gender mainstreaming’ (GM) emerged in this context as a critique of traditional policymaking and a broad vision of how to transform it. In particular, by making gender inequality reduction the everyday business of all policy actors, GM echoes the enjoinder from health and education equity advocates to act beyond a specific sector—in this case ‘women’s policy’—to leverage transformative change. Nevertheless, while GM constitutes a discursively powerful concept, it remains deeply contested and prone to substantial implementation gaps when translated into practice.

Multi-level and multi-sectoral policymaking can help either address or amplify this problem. On the one hand, supra-national and inter-governmental organizations and their networks provide strong direction. These networks feature the more pronounced involvement of civil society actors and third sector organizations than in health and education, with many actors active in setting the agenda, diffusing norms and policy learning, and providing policy-relevant expertise. On the other hand, the diffusion of responsibilities and resource limitations pose challenges for gender equality actors within and outside of the state. While considerations of gender have spread across sectors, they tend to be co-opted in the pursuit of other goals (e.g. economic growth) or adopted in a superficial manner that does not fundamentally challenge the gender relations that sustain systemic inequalities.

As such, there is general agreement that gender equality policy exhibits a persistent gap between rhetorical commitment and concrete impact. The main

causes for this gap include conceptual vagueness, institutional resistance, policy incoherence, and the selection of weak policy instruments. This chapter argues that each of these factors is the result of inevitable trade-offs, many of which often remain invisible to policy actors, especially when they may not fully understand the structural nature of the gender relations that underpin inequalities. Engagement with these trade-offs highlights two contrasting stories of how to make gender equality policy. The first concerns working within the confines of existing systems to develop and refine tools to advance practical goals and accrue transformative results. The second concerns politicizing gender within policymaking—in all sectors, at all levels—to show that policies, policy actors, *and* policy processes undermine gender equality.

We focus on three aspects of this challenge. First, as with health and education (Chapters 6 and 7), we consider *how policymakers define equity or equality in relation to gender*. We identify different conceptions of both ‘gender’ and ‘equality’ that lead to more or less passive (statutory) or active (interventionist) forms of policy, and which address either gender relations in general or the rights and status of women in particular. In the case of the EU, for example, the Euro-polity was one of the most progressive political organizations in the 1990s before seeing the issue of gender equality (re)marginalized by new political and economic challenges.

Second, we examine the *multi-level and multi-sectoral* nature of GM policy and policymaking, as part of a wider discussion of *how policy and policymaking trade-offs can be identified and tackled but never fully resolved*. This process requires making multiple connected decisions on how to: (1) make gender policy when not everybody agrees on what gender equality is, should be, or looks like; (2) select policy instruments with more or less impact (such as routine bureaucratic procedures versus radical transformation of the policy process and its practices); and (3) achieve policy coherence in a multi-level setting, making trade-offs between central coordination to seek uniformity, or decentralized approaches to foster place-appropriateness.

Third, we consider *how governments learn from international gender equality ‘leaders’ and how policy innovations in this field diffuse*. We show that best practice ‘lessons’ tend to be drawn from a limited range of ‘leader’ countries. Yet these ‘best case scenario’ countries represent highly-specific and, at best, partially successful models from which to learn. As a result, diffusion remains very regional, and there is little evidence of sustained learning from non-neighbouring countries (especially outside of Europe). Moreover, normative and political pressures to conform have driven a top-down expansion of political commitment to gender equality across the globe, but often in the absence of an equivalent commitment to effective concrete action.

Finally, in the conclusion, we reflect briefly on *the relevance of gender equity policy to the idea of territorial cohesion*, including its focus on equal access to services and effective multi-level governance.

How do policymakers define and seek gender equality?

Over the course of the 20th century, gender inequalities were considerably reduced across a significant range of areas, most notably formal rights (Hallward-Driemeier et al., 2013). Preventing and reducing gender inequalities became a key policy goal of governments and international organizations (Inglehart et al., 2003), and has come to be associated with notions of ‘modern government’ (Squires, 2005: 374; Daly, 2005: 440). In this way, gender inequality constitutes a policy problem: it has been widely identified as a gap between what *is* and what *ought to be*; placed on the public agenda as an issue policymakers are endowed or mandated to address; and inscribed with information and beliefs about its significance, causes, and consequences (Hogwood and Gunn, 1984). However, at no point was gender equality comprehensively reached anywhere in the world; progress towards gender equality has therefore stalled and, in some places, regressed (Klasen, 2020).

One explanation for this problem is that gender equity is an ambiguous and contested term. Interpretations of how and why gender inequality constitutes a problem vary significantly. This drawback is characteristic of unstructured problems, where there is little certainty and agreement on the nature of the problem, and little consensus on how to tackle it (Hoppe, 2011: 16). *Why* and *how much* gender equality matters, and how best it should be addressed, are subject to frequent debate.

To some extent, we can identify some common ground. For example, broadly speaking, the *gender gap* describes ‘the systematic differences in the outcome of men and women’ across multiple areas (Richarddt, 2008: 277). All aspects of collective life are stratified according to a gender-based hierarchy in terms of access to power, status, and material resources (Ridgeway, 2011). Gender inequality refers to the fact that certain individuals, especially women, face discrimination, hardships, or missed opportunities on the basis of their gender. These inequalities pervade public and private life, affecting, among other things, rights, health outcomes, access to education, employment and pay, and political participation.

We can also identify commonly-described elements of gender inequality, such as in relation to a territorial dimension (McCall, 2001). For example, gendered differences relate strongly to the agenda on territorial cohesion that focuses on unequal access to public services (Chapter 1). Where such inequalities exist, women have been found to experience greater challenges than men in accessing healthcare (Pavolini and Vicarelli, 2012), justice (Biland et al., 2020), and employment (Bock, 2010). Further, the unequal provision of public services, such as childcare, predominantly affects women because of the enduringly gendered nature of reproductive care work (Bock, 2015; Prentice and White, 2018; Lazzarini and Neergaard, 2021).

Nevertheless, when policy actors seek to make sense of gender equality policy, they contribute to three different interpretations of the problem which leads to different diagnoses of the solution and, ultimately, different forms of public action.

1. *'Gender equality' policy*

Gender can be understood as a way of categorizing and constituting politically relevant groups according to how their identities, practices, and norms relate to dominant conceptions of masculinity and femininity, neither of which map directly onto biological sex. What constitutes masculinity and femininity corresponds 'only fleetingly and roughly to "male" and "female"' (Beckwith, 2005: 131), and men and women can exhibit masculine or feminine traits, behaviours, and preferences. Emphasizing the fluidity and socially constructed nature of gender gives a more nuanced sense of gender hierarchies, not as the simple privileging of 'men' over 'women', where both refer to fixed, bounded, and internally uniform groups. Instead, those who most embody masculine ideals have privilege over all others, including—of course—women, but also men who do not match these ideals. Gender equality in this sense refers to redressing these hierarchies to liberate all people from the strictures of unfair gendered expectations and challenges. This meaning leads to conceiving of gender equality policy as a broad field, encompassing 'all political interventions which directly or indirectly influence gender relations' (Abels, 2011: 325).

2. *Women's policy*

Gender equality policy can refer more narrowly to public action to address women's gender-specific needs and interests. The stratifying role of gender in ascribing status, rights, and benefits has historically sustained patriarchal practices and structures, engendering systems in which men hold primary power in all spheres of life, and in which women are dominated, oppressed, and exploited (Walby, 1990). It is therefore women who need interventions to redress historical legacies of exclusion and discrimination. There exists a wide variety of women's policies, including those addressing the issues of women's presence (e.g. gender quotas in politics and in the public and private sectors) and voice (e.g. setting up institutions dedicated to addressing gender equality and the needs of women), and those seeking to improve the policymaking process to better capture and respond to women's needs (Squires, 2007).

3. *Feminist policy*

'Feminist policies' concern public action that is avowedly based on feminist beliefs and explicitly aims to promote women's rights and equality (Mazur, 2002: 28). In other words, this definition partly warns against supportive-looking policies based on motivations other than advancing

gender equality (Borchorst, 1999: 164. For example, see below on legislative quotas).

In practice, these categories are not mutually exclusive: gender equality policies subsume women's policies, and many women's policies are also feminist policies. Nevertheless, retaining an analytical distinction between them allows us to give more shape to what otherwise appears as a vast and diverse range of policies. Moreover, the plurality of interventions undertaken in the name of gender equality points to the fact that 'gender' is not the only contested concept underpinning this area of action: what is meant by 'equity' or 'equality' is also open to interpretation and can be taken to mean different things in relation to gender (Lombardo et al., 2009; Verloo, 2007).

For example, three conceptions of equality can be identified—*treatment*, *opportunity*, or *impact*—and associated with different policy instruments. Equal *treatment* and *opportunity* are approached as questions of statutory rights (compare with 'horizontal' and 'vertical' equity in education, Chapter 7). Statutory equality involves the establishment of laws that enshrine equality and/or protect women against discrimination. They most often take the shape of rights promotion and anti-discrimination measures, which individualize the responsibility for seeking redress after an injustice has been committed (Krizsan et al., 2012). Equal treatment is based on a gender-neutral *sameness* principle that establishes women and men as *the same* and therefore deserving of the same treatment. Equal opportunity policy is based on a gender-specific *difference* principle that identifies women as deserving of special protection or affirmative action to redress socially and historically entrenched inequalities. Equal *impacts* policies focus on achieving substantive equality outcomes. Feminist scholars tend to consider only these policies, which pro-actively promote gender equality and tackle gender inequality, or frameworks that balance all three conceptions of equality, to be 'true'—or truly equitable—gender equality policies (Lovenduski, 1997; Booth and Bennett, 2002).

Further, gender inequality unfolds in a complex context of multiple inequalities. Other categories of difference, including class, ethnicity, race, sexuality, and disability, interact with each other to create systems of subordination with implications for the status, wellbeing, and material welfare of individuals. The concept of 'intersectionality' (Crenshaw, 1991) is useful for grasping how these identity dimensions interact and what this implies for inequality reduction efforts (compare with Lombardo and Verloo, 2009). In that context, 'unitary' policies tackle only gender inequality, while policies based on a 'multiple approach'—such as equality duties that prohibit discrimination—address more than one category, but in a way that considers them essentially distinct (Hancock, 2007). An 'intersectional approach' considers multiple categories equally, sees these as

mutually constitutive of each other, and emphasizes the interaction between them (Hancock, 2007). Few policies to date have successfully operationalized a meaningful intersectional approach, but a growing number do engage (at least superficially) with the concept (Lombardo and Rolandsen Agustín, 2011). An intersectional conception of gender equality also reveals the challenges involved: since gender inequality is interdependent and intersects with other inequalities, it is notionally impossible to achieve equality in this domain while other social inequalities persist (Lombardo and Verloo, 2009). In this way, intersectionality constitutes an implicit but fundamental critique of mainstream policymaking. Routine policymaking is characterized by sectoral, disjointed, and issue-by-issue approaches which are maladapted to achieving the holistic structural transformation required to eradicate pervasive social, political, and economic inequity.

Overall, the plural meanings of gender equality have led to the development of plural policies to achieve it (Squires, 2007). *At best*, gender equality has a vague but settled core ‘associated with the aims of achieving equal political, economic, personal and social rights for women, as well as improving relations between women and men’ (Fejerskov et al., 2019: 3), with plural expression in local contexts. *At worst*, it represents an ‘empty signifier that takes as many meanings as the variety of visions and debates on the issue allow them to take’ (Verloo and Lombardo, 2007: 22). These different conceptions of equality appeal to different groups on the political spectrum. For example, liberals may endorse policies that protect equal treatment, while the redistributive logic of equal opportunity policy is congruent with socialism. Policymakers of any persuasion can get behind ‘gender equality’ while having diverging interpretations of what it looks like in practice and what action is legitimate to achieve it.

Gender equality in a multi-level context

Gender equality policymaking and implementation cannot be singly attributed to central state actors at the national level. Rather, policy has long been made at multiple territorial levels. Early laws to enshrine equality between men and women and formalize women’s access to social, political, and economic rights were considered to be primarily nation state-led (compare with Chapter 4). However, even domestic laws determining the boundaries of women’s citizenship, such as those granting women the right to vote, were impelled by social and policy movements extending beyond and across national borders (Ramirez et al., 1997). The post-war period has seen further territorial diversification of governance, with the emergence and progressive ascendancy of new supra-national institutions and intergovernmental organizations, such as the EU but also the UN, Mercosur, Organization of American States (OAS), Nordic Council, and South African Development Community (SADC) (van der Vleuten et al., 2014; Engberg-Pedersen et al., 2019). This

rescaling of policymaking has been accompanied by a further diversification of the actors involved in informing, designing, and delivering gender equality policy (Kennett and Lendvai, 2014). Rescaling has enabled the:

1. mobilization of women's social movements above and beyond the state;
2. multiplication of venues and levels at which coalitions of social movement and policy actors have formed and operate, leading to the
3. diffusion of norms and opportunities for policy learning to reduce gender inequalities.

Each new territorial level and venue afforded new institutional and political opportunities to mobilize and make demands (Roggeband et al., 2019; Lang, 2009). Concerning the EU, for example, Jacquot (2015: 1) describes the 'persistent links between women and Europe and the ability of women in Europe to call on [European] institutions in defense of their rights.' Further, feminist political science points to the importance of 'velvet triangles,' or coordinated networks of actors spanning (1) women's movements, (2) dedicated women's policy agencies, and (3) feminist allies in government and parliament (Woodward, 2004: 84).

In that multi-level context, in which there are gender-focused and territorial policy communities, 'state feminism' refers to the degree to which demands for equality and women's rights are taken up by the state. In particular, it describes fostering effective relationships between these actors and creating specialized institutional machinery to make, deliver, and defend equality policy (Stetson McBride and Mazur, 1995; McBride et al., 2010). Indeed, between the 1960s and 1980s, this state-led establishment of dedicated women's policy agencies was the primary vehicle for achieving gender equality. This 'women's policy machinery' was intended to have an *agenda-setting* role, gendering policy and designating issues affecting women as a priority, and an *entrepreneurial* role, providing the leadership and taking responsibility for tackling these issues (McBride et al., 2010).

In reality, the extent to which women's policy agencies were able to reach their goals varied considerably depending on their autonomy, resourcing, authority, broader economic context, and support from wider government (McBride and Mazur, 2013). Moreover, the impetus for adopting new elements of gender equality policy often originates from outside of formal political structures and chiefly from women's social movements which serve to apply pressure on political actors and act as a source of expertise and context-specific policy knowledge (True and Mintrom, 2001; Weldon and Htun, 2013; van der Vleuten et al., 2014; Sanín, 2020). Women's policy agencies therefore often appear as a helpful, but rarely solely sufficient, facilitator for advancing the causes of gender equality and women's interests.

The successful gendering of policy problems by a range of state and non-state actors is therefore the key explanatory factor in the adoption of gender equality laws and policies at both a domestic and supra-national level. Yet, while the multi-level governance of gender equality has diversified the venues across which feminist policy entrepreneurs can mobilize, it has also complicated this process. Clavero and Galligan (2009, drawing on Ostner and Lewis, 1995), describe the process of political objectives being formalized in a multi-level Europe as having to pass through the ‘eyes of two needles’, or making it onto the policy agenda and through the decision-making process at the supra-national then the national levels. Successful agenda-setting and then translation into concrete action are therefore resource-intensive, and challenges are multiplied with every additional territorial level.

EU and multi-level policy design: from hard to soft equality instruments

Chapter 3 (Table 3.5), and Tables 8.1 and 8.2 below provide illustrative lists of the policy instruments that could be used to support gender equality. These measures are often described as ‘soft’ or ‘hard’, depending on whether they involve legally binding obligations and incur penalties for non-compliance (Abbott and Snidal, 2003).

‘Hard’ tools have traditionally been used to secure formal equality of treatment and outcomes. For instance, the principle of gender-equal pay has been enshrined in European law since its inclusion in the 1957 Treaty of Rome, while the principles of gender-equal treatment in matters of social security, and in access to and supply of goods and services, have been part of EU legislation since 1978 and 2004 respectively. Such laws originated as EU directives which then required transposition into the domestic legal frameworks of member states. The use of such ‘hard’ instruments by the EU has engendered concrete changes, leading for example to the introduction of parental leave in the UK, making sexual harassment punishable as a form of discrimination, and introducing protective legislation to secure the pension rights of women who stay at home to raise children (MacRae, 2010: 160).

In the EU context, the use of ‘soft’ tools, such as the issuance of recommendations and the use of benchmarking, has tended to (1) *precede* the introduction of ‘hard’ laws or, (2) from the 1990s onwards, *replace* them as the EU has sought a more flexible and cooperative approach to policy convergence via the Open Method of Coordination (Beveridge, 2012). This trend forms part of a general sense that ‘soft’ measures:

1. represent a weak(er) commitment to gender equality;
2. have become more prevalent over time as policymakers move away from a focus on granting new formal rights, and

3. have generally contributed to a dilution of policy efficacy over the last thirty years.

At the same time, ‘soft(er)’ measures do not require the generation of a strong consensus about questions of enforcement, and are therefore easier to introduce, adopt, and adapt over time. They may serve to establish an issue as a legitimate area of policy intervention, or prime policymakers to the idea of introducing harder laws (Beveridge, 2012). Softer measures also allow actors without formal competence to make policies, acting as policy entrepreneurs by setting the agenda and highlighting areas of priority or visions of ‘best practice’ (Beveridge, 2012: 32). Their use can facilitate the adoption, or enhance the effectiveness, of other policies. If so, they may constitute a useful complementary tool to ‘hard’ measures or standalone interventions. Moreover, the adaptability of soft instruments to localized contexts, needs, and resources has territorial implications, potentially offering opportunities for different regions or countries to take different paths towards the same objective of gender equality (Beveridge, 2012: 44). In this sense, they fit with the description of the ‘portable, technocratic policy tools that are designed to achieve “reform at a distance”’ associated with policymaking at different scales or across multiple territorial levels (Peck, 2002: 332).

Such policy design is strongly conditioned by institutional and contextual constraints. In particular, ‘windows of opportunity’ for adopting the most radical version of gender equality instruments—which would require a fundamental reform of existing political structures—are rare. This rarity is well illustrated by the comparative empirical scholarship on the adoption of legislative gender quotas, with legally binding parliamentary seat quotas representing the most radical type of gender quota with the potential to increase women’s participation in the shortest amount of time. Such measures have tended to be adopted by new states (Rosen, 2017) because the absence of institutional path dependency provides a rare opportunity to (re)design electoral systems and parliamentary rules. Conversely, older democracies with well-entrenched constitutional and institutional designs and political dynamics have tended to opt for less radical forms of quotas, such as candidate quotas in France (Dahlreup et al., 2011). Rapid and radical change is often associated with radical moments, whereas routine politics is associated with incrementalism. Further, even the most radical instruments to improve gender equality can emerge out of non-feminist intentions (Krook, 2007). The adoption of electoral gender quotas, for instance, can stem out of dominant parties’ strategic motivations to consolidate or retain power, rather than out of a normative commitment to enhancing women’s representation. Feminist policy analysts are therefore careful to disentangle motives from outputs and outcomes.

Three periods of EU policy: ‘gender mainstreaming’ replaces substantive action

We can usefully distinguish between three periods of EU policy (Clavero and Galligan, 2009; Jacquot, 2015; Daly, 2020; Guerrina, 2020). The *first period* (from the 1980s) saw the construction of gender equality policy, with an emphasis on ‘hard’ policy instruments aimed, for example, at enshrining new rights. It established the EU as a leader in gender equality policy, presenting a rare occasion where policies went beyond the establishment of minimum standards to optimize economic productivity (Pollack and Hafner-Burton, 2000). This action was not linear, and different types of instruments—including ‘soft’ ones—were selected at different times, to meet different objectives, and with varying levels of success (Jacquot, 2015).

The *second period* (from the 1990s) saw a shift away from equality as a goal in itself and towards its subordination to market principles (Jacquot, 2015). That is, equality policy was designed to support the functioning and expansion of the market rather than being an objective in its own right. The same period saw the global ascendancy of a new policy approach to gender equality: *gender mainstreaming*. The concept of GM emerged in the 1970s in the context of debates over how to include women in shaping and delivering development policy. It was adopted as a more general strategy for gender equality policy at the Fourth United Nations Women’s Conference in Beijing in 1995. The Beijing Platform for Action defined GM as a form of gender impact assessment characterized as the systematic integration of ‘a gender perspective in all policies and programmes, so that, before decisions are taken, an analysis is made of the effects for women and men, respectively’ (United Nations, 1995: 38; compare with Health Impact Assessment in Chapter 6). The EU adopted GM in 1996 as a strategy to ‘promote equality between men and women in all activities and policies at all levels’ in a way that does not rely only on distinct measures to help women (European Commission, 1996). GM was then incorporated into the 1997 Treaty of Amsterdam. The Council of Europe also set up the Group of Specialists on Mainstreaming, which submitted their report in 1998. The group developed a more detailed definition of GM as ‘the (re)organization, improvement, development, and evaluation of policy processes, so that a gender equality perspective is incorporated in all policies at all levels at all stages, by actors normally involved in policy making’ (Council of Europe, 1998: 15). The work of the group informed the development of EU and member state gender equality policy, especially in the context of EU enlargement (Booth and Bennett, 2002: 431).

GM quickly became associated with ‘modern government’; a successor to the ‘low bar’ of equal opportunity approaches to gender equality of the 1970s and 1980s (Jacquot, 2015: 8; Prüggl, 2011). GM was also presented in terms of efficiency and productive value: reducing discrimination and the difficulties women face

in reconciling work and family would reinvigorate the labour market and contribute to growth (von Wahl, 2021; Perrons, 2005). This rhetoric was facilitated by the generation of new types of knowledge concerning gender and inequality, and, in particular, data that quantified the ‘costs’ of gender inequality and ‘benefits’ of gender equality (Bruno et al., 2006). The period between 1995 and 2000 was characterized by sustained efforts by the EU to impel and support the implementation of GM across member states, through the funding of pilots and test projects to the Fourth Medium Term Community Action Programme for Equal Opportunities for Men and Women (1996–2000), although participation was limited and uneven (Bretherton, 2001: 71). The EU also attempted to mainstream gender across its own organizations, creating dedicated positions in each of the Commissions Directorates-General (Hafner-Burton and Pollack, 2002).

Few deny that the EU had an impact on the adoption of gender equality policy, and particularly gender mainstreaming, across the region (Lombardo and Bustelo, 2012). Early accounts highlighted progress in establishing and diffusing gender-sensitive knowledge and tools in formulating policy and in incorporating a gender perspective into important policy areas such as social affairs, employment, and development (Pollack and Hafner-Burton, 2000; Mazey, 2001). Nevertheless, there is broad consensus that a substantial implementation gap quickly emerged between rhetoric and policy practice and that EU policy had not lived up to its early ambitions. GM quickly took the form of a ‘highly variable and voluntaristic’ agenda that never progressed past the instrumental use of bureaucratic tools or beyond a limited range of policy areas (Hafner-Burton and Pollack, 2009: 115). Instrument selection, and particularly the decision to adopt ‘soft’ tools of governance, is often highlighted as a cause of this limited success (Mazey, 2002; Beveridge and Velluti, 2008; Beveridge, 2012; Lavena and Riccucci, 2012). From the outset, GM had been designed as a ‘softer’ alternative to the ‘hard’ regulatory equal opportunity and equal outcome frameworks, in keeping with the EU’s policy style at the time (Jacquot, 2010; Mazey, 2002; Bruno et al., 2006). As a result, there is a general sense that GM was:

1. a vague concept that led to plural and often poor national implementation (Booth and Bennett, 2002);
2. largely absent from enlargement policy at a crucial time (Bretherton, 2001);
3. unevenly institutionalized within the EU (Mazey, 2002; Young, 2000);
4. based on superficial understandings of gender relations (Lombardo and Meier, 2006; Verloo, 2005); and
5. subordinated to the needs of the market (Young, 2000).

Territorial divergences also remain, with certain member states standing out as being particularly active in combating gender inequality while others lag (Liebert, 2002; Mósesdóttir and Erlingsdóttir, 2005; Fagan et al., 2005; Sterner and Biller,

2007). Even in the ‘most likely’ case of Sweden—which had experience of GM predating its uptake by the EU, a well-established women’s policy machinery, and sustained political commitment to gender equality—progress has been incremental and cumbersome (Sainsbury and Bergqvist, 2009). The plurality of, and variable commitment to, GM policy across the EU highlights two important policy lessons. First, differences in interpretations of gender equality and gender mainstreaming, further mediated by strong interests that may not align with these objectives, can lead to significant policy divergence, even in the context of common membership of supra-national polities (Walby, 2018). Second, the impact of the EU on domestic policy is rarely, if ever, a straightforward story of convergence. Harmonization of regulation through the transposition of EU law into domestic legal frameworks has led to some increased similarity over time, but empirical research on Europeanization reveals continued diversity in policy outcomes, including in the area of gender equality (Liebert, 2003, Verloo, 2007; Clavero and Galligan, 2009; Lombardo and Forest, 2012).

In the *third period* (2000s onwards), GM became increasingly ‘hollowed out’ of its transformative ambition. It was operationalized as a largely bureaucratic instrument in the service of ensuring formal equality rights, including rights for self-employed workers and new rights to parental leave (Guerrina, 2020). This period is characterized by a gradual ‘dismantling by default’ of early GM efforts, where neglect, underfunding, and instrumental bureaucratization suggest a path to a future of symbolic rather than substantive policy action (Jacquot, 2017). While this period shows evidence of a ‘broadening’ of gender equality discourse to new policy agendas, including domestic violence and gender inequality in political participation, it did not amount to a concomitant ‘deepening’ of the understanding of gender relations (Lombardo and Meier, 2008). Dominant conceptions of gender equality were superficial and focused on formal equality of opportunity between men and women that did not entail systemic solutions to address structurally unequal power relations (Lombardo and Meier, 2008). This approach served to further frame the value of gender equality as a facilitator of economic growth rather than for its own sake (Elomäki, 2015; compare with *Equity and gender* in Chapter 7).

Within this period, the most recent trajectory of policy in the EU has been characterized by three new challenges:

1. the 2008 financial crisis and the ensuing domestic and EU policy responses, all of which had strongly gender-differentiated impacts (Rubery, 2015; Guerrina 2020; Kantola and Lombardo, 2021);
2. the rise of right-wing populist parties, which often feature strong anti-gender ideological undercurrents (Roggeband and Krizsán, 2018; Siim and Fiig, 2021); and

3. rising Euroscepticism, which contributed to intense political debates that minimize and draw attention away from the question of how to tackle gender inequality (Guerrina, 2020; Guerrina and Masselot, 2021).

As a result, over the last decade the retrenchment of EU gender policy has accelerated, with responsibility for developing gender equality programmes narrowed to fewer actors, less compliance being required from member states in terms of participation, and the dismantling of networks between civil society actors and EU legislators (Ahrens, 2018; Kantola and Verloo, 2018; Guerrina, 2020).

It is in that context that we should interpret emerging trends, including a nascent ‘gender+’ equality agenda which aims to tackle inequalities, including gender, in a more intersectional manner (Debusscher and Manners, 2020). Their ability to reduce gender inequalities remains an open question in light of the enduring genderedness of EU institutions and processes (Guerrina, 2020).

Multi-level challenges to mainstreaming gender: four trade-offs in policy and policymaking

This contrast between high rhetorical commitment and low impact has also been found at the level of nation states (Braithwaite, 2005; Rees, 2005) and other international organizations (Prügl and Lustgarten, 2006). Indeed, our qualitative systematic review of 147 research articles on GM (described in *Methods* in Chapter 1) reveals two different yet interconnected accounts for this limited success.

First, the conceptual vagueness of GM has hampered the ability to foster effective concrete action and harmonize it across a large and disparate territory. The moral of this story is that whatever gains can be leveraged from the flexibility of GM as a vague and malleable concept are overshadowed by the tendency for it to become *diluted* and *distorted* rather than effectively *translated* into action (Daly, 2005).

The second story presents GM as an extremely demanding strategy which, even if actors could agree on its precise meaning, requires the coherent and concerted action of a large number of actors, across numerous policy sectors, at multiple territorial levels (Hafner-Burton and Pollack, 2009). The moral here is that success is a high bar to reach, and varying degrees of failure are not automatic, but likely.

Both accounts suggest that the interpretation of GM as prone to ‘implementation gaps’ may be too simple (compare with HiAP, Chapter 6). There is very little clear and actionable learning that would help actors ‘narrow’ the gap. Instead, the paths from broad commitment to concrete action are plural and in all cases involve political dilemmas and trade-offs. The result is that both stories reveal four trade-offs that need to be addressed to reduce the GM implementation gap.

Trade-off 1: how to resolve conceptual vagueness

There is a fundamental lack of agreement about what gender equality means. The adoption of GM (in all levels and sectors) exacerbates this conceptual problem. This vagueness can be unintentional or strategic. Regardless, it leads to suboptimal policy design and implementation. There is no agreement about the level at which this vagueness operates: some hold it to be inherent in ideas at the very highest level (global norms); others point to a ‘loss in translation’ when global norms are transposed into local contexts. This debate has policymaking implications, since negotiating, refining, and temporarily settling the meaning(s) of gender equality requires continual effort. Time and resources spent on making the principle of gender equality intelligible for policy amounts to time-consuming ‘agenda keeping’, particularly in deeply contested cases such as reproductive rights (Çağlar et al., 2013; compare with Zwingel, 2019).

In many cases, GM efforts take on the mantle of symbolic politics. Symbolic policies have a greater communicative than substantive value, where policy has neither the organizational capacity nor resourcing required to produce concrete outcomes (Engeli and Mazur, 2018). Nevertheless, they are not empty of social and political consequences. It might be possible to capitalize on GM as a powerful discourse through which to capture and maintain political attention on the issue of gender inequality. GM may not have achieved the radical ambitions of its original proponents, but its ascendancy onto the policy agenda at national and international levels was impelled, and further facilitated, by the strong mobilization of feminist political and social movement actors. GM thus has a role in setting the agenda: allowing actors to deploy a high-level, abstract, but nonetheless largely unified discourse about the need to recognize and prioritize questions of gender in and through policy.

Trade-off 2: how to respond to multi-level and multi-sectoral policymaking

GM represents a successor to previous top-down models of institutionalizing gender equality and women’s rights. Its emergence as an alternative strategy served as a critique of a disjointed and ‘sectoral’ approach to gender equality and women’s rights, which saw the issue marginalized by being placed under the aegis of small and politically vulnerable women’s policy agencies with limited ability to address the many dimensions of gender inequality. Moreover, GM takes place in a context of multi-level policymaking. Policy-relevant ideas, norms, and information are diffused across different sectors, networks, and territorial levels. To inform action, lessons must be translated into each specific venue, reformulating what

these ideas mean for each context. As a result, localization—GM ‘à la carte’—is the norm (Daly, 2005).

Translation is risky, since key elements may be deemphasized or become lower priorities, shedding much of their transformative substance. Nevertheless, each passage between territorial level and institution turns the meaning of GM into something concrete and actionable which can be integrated into existing agendas (Cavaghan, 2017). Multi-level contexts therefore present a challenge for GM policymaking and effective gender equality policy (Stratigaki, 2004). The trade-off concerns central control versus local appropriateness. In the former, conformity may allow more coherent policy design and instrument selection, but with the risk of imposing inappropriate frameworks on populations without due regard for their specific needs and interests. In the latter, localism can underpin innovation and the development of place-appropriate policies, but diversity of action may lead to issues such as (1) externalities and feedback that affect policy coherence at a system level, and (2) an unfair ‘postcode lottery’ of services and programmes across regions (compare with health equity in Chapter 6).

Trade-off 3: how to balance collaboration versus contestation

To be transformative, GM entails not just the systematic consideration of gender equality in public *policy*, but also the modification of the behaviours and practices of policy *actors*. Gender inequalities are the result of policies (or their absence), and originate in the policy processes and practices. Addressing gender inequalities therefore requires a meaningful understanding of (1) gender, and (2) the structural nature of inequalities, neither of which have taken significant root in institutions or individuals (Cavaghan, 2017). Advances in GM are held back not only by issues of effective design, instrument selection, and effective implementation, but even more fundamentally by the ‘genderedness’ of organizations (Benschop and Verloo, 2006). Challenges appear because GM is supposed to act *through* and *on* institutions and policy systems to delivery equality, yet these institutions and systems are themselves deeply gendered and gendering. Resistance to GM can therefore appear at different levels, from active political resistance to the gender equality agenda, through to the deprioritization of gender in relation to competing policy issues.

Institutional resistance and a lack of a structural understanding of gender relations can influence the pursuit of an integrationist or agenda-setting approach to GM (Beveridge and Notts, 2002; Lombardo, 2005; Walby, 2005; Daly, 2005). An *integrationist* view presents GM as a *collaborative object*: a set of decisions, strategies, policies, and programs developed to deliver concrete action. Integrationist GM is treated as a routine element of bureaucratic practice, and, by being handed over to ostensibly politically neutral public servants whose role is to apply

concrete tools and procedures to address an issue, gender and gender inequality are depoliticized. An *agenda-setting* perspective considers GM to be a *contestatory process*. The emphasis shifts from implementation and impact to the continuous work done between actors to negotiate and (re)define the meanings of key concepts (like ‘equity’ or ‘equality’) in an often agonistic manner (Cavaghan, 2017).

Some argue that, as a result of the way it has been constructed over time, there is something inherent to GM that makes it easier for a technocratic ‘integrationist’ approach to prevail (e.g. Daly, 2005). Here, the trade-off involves bypassing the politics of gender that may hamper progress by adopting a specialized ‘toolbox’ of instruments—at the risk of diminishing GM’s transformative potential—or repoliticizing gender and risking generating unresolvable debates over what *ought to be done* that detract from *concrete action*.

Trade-off 4: ‘soft’ versus hard policy instruments

The conceptual ‘fuzziness’ of GM has direct implications for its operational expression. Technical-bureaucratic forms of GM prevail because its vagueness allows for a selective deployment of certain tools, and most notably those associated with measurement and benchmarking. Examples include gender disaggregated statistics, gender impact assessments, gender planning procedures, and gender sensitive and feminist approaches to program and policy evaluation. Dominant policy practices show a clear preference for ‘soft’ bureaucratic instruments over ‘harder’ statutory ones. Further, problems of partial implementation associated with symbolic GM policy remain a significant barrier for achieving gender equality as an *outcome* (Zwingel, 2012). Undertaking GM in the context of a complex policy process risks it being submerged by other concerns and interests to the point of disappearing. Making GM everybody’s responsibility risks it becoming nobody’s responsibility if specialized women’s equality institutions are dismantled for being extraneous.

As such, the trade-off concerns the challenge of designing coherent gender equality policy via hard versus soft instrument selection. For example, GM may be considered effective only when adopted in complement with, rather than as an alternative to, other policy approaches to gender equality, such as statutory equality frameworks and dedicated programs and policies to tackle specific inequalities (e.g. electoral and corporate gender quotas) (Roggeband et al., 2019: 9).

Contemporary gender equality frameworks have accrued over time at the nation state level, as laws and programs are layered onto each other or altered to fit new contexts and demands (Jacquot, 2015: 178–179). They represent the gradual and cumulative (re)combination of instruments and action. Policy coherence in this context may therefore be better understood as the extent to which instruments

and actions work effectively together over time, rather than at specific moments. Gender equality policymaking, and policymaking to reduce inequalities more broadly, is recast as a diachronic process where coherence and meaningful impacts are continually achieved only through (1) the selection of mutually reinforcing instruments and strategies that are (2) assessed continually to adjust and refine them to meet changing contexts and needs.

What can governments learn from the most effective countries?

Achieving gender equality through the establishment of statutory rights, development of affirmative action programmes, and mainstreaming of gender, represents a complex and large-scale task. Despite a consensus that most gender equality policy (1) tends to have a less significant impact than its architects hoped for, and (2) is the subject of problematic implementation gaps, some criteria for good quality gender equality policy have been identified by scholars. The quality of gender equality policy is associated with criteria such as:

- internal consistency (Lombardo and Meier, 2009);
- external coherence with other policies (Allwood, 2013);
- the explicitness of gender in agendas and policies (Lombardo and Meier, 2006);
- a structural understanding of gender inequality (Daly, 2005);
- comprehensiveness rather than selectivity (Walby, 2009);
- the prioritization of gender equality as inherently worthwhile (not simply in the service of other aims) (Stratigaki, 2004);
- democratic inclusiveness (Shaw, 2002; Krizsan and Lombardo, 2013); and
- intersectionality (Krizsan and Lombardo, 2013).

Few countries have managed to adopt gender equality policies that feature all of these characteristics, and none have managed to mainstream gender into the policy process in a way that comprehensively reflects all these dimensions. Nevertheless, there is a strong sense that certain countries and regions have managed to design more effective gender equality policies than others (Cairney et al., 2021). As a result, certain policy innovations tend to diffuse internationally through processes of learning and transfer (although see Chapter 2). Because of the multi-level nature of policymaking, learning has tended to operate at two different territorial levels: (1) between states and/or regions, and (2) from and through supra-national networks and organizations.

Learning from national ‘leaders’

There is a strong pattern of inter-state and regional policy learning and diffusion. As with health and education (Chapters 6 and 7), this pattern is characterized by the primacy of a few countries associated with ‘best practice’. In particular, the Nordic region (Finland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Iceland) has been a dominant focal point for international policy actors seeking to reduce gender inequalities. Nordic countries consistently rank at the top of gender equality indexes, feeding into the perception of a Nordic ‘gender Nirvana’ (Lister, 2009) from which others can and should learn. Two interrelated explanations are put forward to explain this region’s strong performance.

The first concerns the fundamental organization of Nordic states, which features: active and interventionist government, a large public sector, a tradition of strong public responsibility for social welfare, and dedication to universalism and equality (Kautto, 2010: 587). Moreover, Nordic countries set up women’s policy infrastructures early (from the 1970s), have feminized their political elites, and feature strong ties between women’s movements and feminist policy actors (Åseskog, 2003; Borchorst and Siim, 2008). Success is linked to the organization of policy processes: state structures comprising institutions designed to foster deliberative and consensus politics, with sustained participation from social movement actors, are considered more amenable to generating women-friendly policies (Hernes, 1987).

The second explanation concerns policy outputs more than processes. The self-positioning of these countries as leaders in gender equality has impelled a progressive ‘race to the top’, using policy innovation as part of broader efforts at nation-branding and reputation building (Larsen et al., 2021; compare with Chapters 3 and 5). Indeed, Nordic countries have produced a number of distinctive policies aimed at reducing gender inequalities that have been studied and (comprehensively or partially) transferred by many other states. This is the case, for example, with shared parental leave (Karu and Tremblay, 2018; Windwehr et al., 2021; von Wahl, 2021: 18), feminist foreign policy (Zhukova et al., 2021), the criminalization of the purchase of sexual services (Kingston and Thomas, 2019), and approaches to GM itself (Mazey, 2002: 230; Daly, 2005).

Inter-region learning and pressures to conform

We identify three instructive comparisons here with health and education (Chapters 6 and 7). First, unlike health and (to a lesser extent) education, the ‘cautionary tale’ from Nordic countries is not a central feature of learning. Rather, the ‘Nordic model’ of gender equality is an abstract and reductive ideal-type that acts as a powerful symbol for a specific way of making policy to reduce gender

inequalities. In practice, Nordic countries do not live up to this uniform gender equality ‘model’. There are important country variations in terms of institutional organization, political orientation, and policy design (Borchorst and Siim, 2017). Further, no Nordic country has ‘solved’ gender inequity (Lister, 2009). Gender pay gaps and unequal labour market participation persist (Grönlund et al., 2017; OECD, 2018), parity in politics has not been reached, and there exists a ‘Nordic paradox’ of persistently and disproportionately high levels of violence against women (Gracia and Merlo, 2016). Many of these disparities are exacerbated for ethnic minority women (Siim and Borchorst, 2017). Consequently, while it may be possible for other countries to achieve comparable policy, policy learning and transfer should prioritize issues of technical feasibility and political desirability in each new context (Cairney et al., 2021).

Second, there is a similar tendency for a small number of ‘Western’ country experiences to dominate debate. The dominance of the ‘Nordic model’ of gender equality has tended to undermine policy attention to other sources of policy learning to reduce inequalities. For instance, countries in Latin America are leading the way in adopting policies to prevent and reduce violence against women in politics, though significant issues remain concerning the implementation and enforcement of these new laws (Sanín, 2020). Still, patterns of adoption of different kinds of electoral gender quotas are often parochial, suggesting neighbours often learn from neighbours rather than casting a wider net, and that Western European states may therefore opt for less radical forms than many other parts of the world (Krook, 2006).

Third, as compared to health, gender equality policy diffusion features a stronger tendency for less-than-voluntary imposition. As with education, the uptake of gender equality policy does not always take the shape of ‘shopping’ for the best ideas from abroad. Motivations for adopting certain laws or programmes can also stem from pressure to conform, including:

- *Normative pressure.* The strong association between gender equality and ‘modern’ government can incentivize the signature of international treaties like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, especially in contexts where social movement actors agitate for change and country neighbours set an example (Weldon and Htun, 2013).
- *Economic pressure to conform.* Politics may feel the need to conform to access certain funding opportunities. For example, the conditions for accessing development aid or budget support may include provisions for gender equality (Holvoet, 2010; Debusscher, 2019). Conformity may also alleviate the risk of sanctions. For instance, the United States Department of State uses annual benchmarks for international anti-trafficking efforts, and threatens sanctions against those countries that fail to conform to its standards, which include

highly contentious normative and programmatic ideas concerning the need to forcibly ‘rescue’ women in prostitution (Peach, 2011).

- *Membership conditionality.* Gaining membership of inter-governmental organizations often requires conforming to certain standards, including some associated with gender equality. In the case of the EU, the will to access membership has compelled countries like Turkey to enact (albeit not fully implement) new gender equality laws (Stivachtis and Georgakis, 2011).

In some cases, these pressures to conform can—in theory—lead to a virtuous ‘race to the top’, as gender equality norms and policies diffuse globally and become institutionalized. Nevertheless, the implementation gap between adopting a policy and enacting it via effective reforms limits this potential. This is particularly the case when gender equality policy outputs are generated as a tick-box exercise to access resources but without the capacity or will to see them implemented on the ground. Moreover, international power asymmetries can produce the diffusion of contestable policy frameworks that may further undermine rather than enhance the welfare of vulnerable individuals.

Overall, this review of experiences suggests that: (1) exemplars abound, but policymakers have a tendency to focus on a very narrow range of countries from which to learn, (2) drawing negative lessons (i.e. about what *not* to do) may be as valuable as positive lessons when seeking to avoid the frequent implementation problems experienced with these policies, and (3) a substantial amount of policy diffusion is driven by top-down and bottom-up pressures to conform, which limit the scope of action for national-level policy actors.

How would governments learn?

As Chapter 3 shows, multi-level and multi-sectoral policy learning is easier said than done. To demonstrate, we follow Chapters 6 and 7 in using an illustrative example to ask an ostensibly simple question: how would policymakers in the UK learn lessons from comparable experiences in Sweden?

We describe these countries because they represent archetypes of different variants of GM strategies. Cairney, St.Denny, and Kippin, (2021a) describe Sweden as embodying a *maximal* variant in which there is a system-wide commitment to its central features. There is high buy-in across different levels of government, including at the national, regional, and municipal levels (Table 8.1). Its political system is ‘top heavy’, granting a strong role to the national government and national agencies tasked with administering and implementing central government decisions. A large component is the presence of the Gender Equality Agency, which coordinates, monitors, and supports actors to implement gender equality policy (Olivius and Ronnblom, 2019: 77). For instance, it enjoys the ability to codify relevant regulatory measures as they relate to employment or education policy, *and* to establish

Table 8.1 Gender policy competences in Sweden

	Direct competence	Indirect competence
EU	European Gender Equality Strategy. European Gender Law (inc directives on equal pay, equal access to goods and services, social security, and legal protection).	Interpretation of European Law. Limits on national fiscal deficit. EU citizenship requirements. Internal market regulations. Consumer protection. Schengen Area.
National	Overall responsibility for gender policy. Overall responsibility for market and employment policy. Labour and wages policy. Policy and legislation on women's and reproductive health. Equal pay legislation. Gender equality regulations. Domestic violence penalties. Setting of parental leave entitlement. Regulations on classification and censorship.	Regulation of media. Control of healthcare system. Ability to sign international treaties. Energy security and infrastructure maintenance. Employment legal and regulatory framework. Crime and justice legislation and policy. Fiscal and economic policy. Housing and social security policy. Consumer affairs.
National agency	Analysis and follow-up of the development towards gender equality. Monitoring and assessment of gender impact of government programmes. Collaboration with other parts of government in pursuit of gender equality. Allocation of grants to gender equality projects and women's organizations. Assist the government with expertise in international gender equality cooperation. Long term strategic planning on gender equality.	Management of unemployment benefits. Unemployment insurance. Labour courts. Administration of compulsory and pre-school education system. Medical regulation and data gathering. Development of activities and rules to improve public health. Business regulation. Medical and pharmaceutical licensing and regulation. Courts system. Social order, policing, and public safety. Safeguarding of consumer interest.
Regional	Public health, including healthcare and medical services. Cultural institutions. Public transport.	Implementation of national social security guidelines. Workplace health and safety enforcement. Economic growth and development. Administering European Social and Regional Structural Funds. Regulation of charitable organizations.
Local	Social welfare provision. Health protection. Elder care. Child care.	Administration of schools and compulsory education bodies. Local unemployment offices. Social and public housing allocation.

Sources: Swedish Gender Equality Agency, Swedish Government, [European Committee of the Regions, 2021c](#); [Wikigender, 2015](#); [Ravenna and Licucci, 2012](#); [UK Practical Law, 2021](#).

Table 8.2 Gender policy competences in the UK

	Direct Competency	Indirect Competency
UK/Great Britain Level	<p>European Employment Strategy. European Women's Lobby. Analysis and dissemination of gender research. Crime victims' rights. European law on trafficking Sectoral gender equality monitoring. EU funding for gender equality initiatives. Promotion of female entrepreneurship. Gender budgeting.</p>	<p>Fiscal policy. Structural Funds. Social security directives. Citizenship policy. Fundamental rights. Research funding. Criminal law. Domestic violence prevention. Asylum, refugee, and immigration policy. Careers guidance. Personal, social, and health education (national curriculum). Welfare and social security policy provision. Women's empowerment programmes in international development. Prison and detention service management. Pensions. Transport provision. Funding for equalities training and awareness. Trade union relations. Labour market regulation. Overall fiscal and budgetary policy and strategy.</p>
UK/GB National Agencies	<p>Monitoring and recommendations on equal opportunities. Support for women seeking political office.</p>	<p>Media regulation Serious organized crime policing (human trafficking). Immigration, refugee, and immigration processing and management.</p>
Devolved level	<p>Implementation of equality strategy. Sexual discrimination and equal pay laws. Overall equalities strategy. Public sector equality duty. Statutory guidance for schools on equal opportunities. Armed forces gender policy and recruitment. Employment regulation (including equal pay). Voluntary equal pay agreements with employers. Childcare and early-years provision. Maternity and paternity leave allowances.</p>	<p>Criminal law. Domestic violence prevention. Asylum, refugee, and immigration policy Careers guidance. Personal, social, and health education (national curriculum). Welfare and social security policy provision. Women's empowerment programmes in international development. Prison and detention service management. Pensions. Transport provision.</p>

Continued

Table 8.2 *Continued*

	Direct Competency	Indirect Competency
	<p>Women specific health issues and screening. Reproductive health provision. Tax credits. Pensions. Child poverty reduction. Carer's allowance. Forced marriage policy, outreach, and casework. Domestic violence courts. Training for justice system employees. Rape support centres. Funding for women's organizations. Anti-female genital mutilation (FGM) strategy and awareness.</p>	<p>Funding for equalities training and awareness. Trade union relations. Labour market regulation. Overall fiscal and budgetary policy and strategy.</p>
Devolved agencies	<p>Prisons and sentencing. Social security payments Promotion of awareness, understanding, and respect for human rights. Councillor and public sector codes of conduct.</p>	<p>Public sector pensions management. Charity regulation. Courts and tribunals. Housing regulation. Safeguarding children's rights. Immigration, refugee, and immigration processing and management.</p>
Local Government	<p>Implementation of public sector equality duty. Anti-violence against women and girls strategies. Women's political representation strategy. Social care provision.</p>	<p>Recruitment, pay, and conditions of local government employees (including gender wage gap). Women's peer-support networks. Targeted apprenticeships for women. Demographic monitoring and data collection. Funding for community organizations. Jobs guarantees and employment schemes. Equalities awareness projects. Relations with local employers. Housing allocation. Trading standards. Environmental health. Local licensing of businesses.</p>

Source: author's own, adapted from Cairney et al., 2021a: 419–421

or maintain a national framework to which policy actors operating at different levels of government must respond.

Cairney, St.Denny, and Kippin, (2021a: 414) describe the UK as exemplifying a minimal variant. Table 8.2 identifies the formal division of responsibilities to make, influence, deliver, and monitor gender mainstreaming policy in the UK, with particular reference to the devolved system in Scotland.

However, it does not capture key dynamics that are essential to the process of learning and responding to lessons (2021a: 418). First, the tendency for most issues is to be processed in relatively informal ‘policy communities’ with their own rules, norms, and ways of defining and addressing policy problems (Jordan and Halpin, 2006). As such, it underplays the pervasiveness of policy ‘silos’ with their own logic, which undermines the likelihood of routine joined-up policymaking (Carey and Crammond, 2015: 1022–1028). Second, there is the tendency for a state government to maintain *and* delegate control, such as to hold a devolved government responsible for its own equality duty while retaining the measures most likely to fulfil it. Third is the low status of gender in policymaking, which undermines the likelihood of sustained high attention to translating broad aims into specific sectors. Finally, a high commitment to policy coproduction is a key aspect of gender mainstreaming (Engeli and Mazur, 2018). As such, the tables may describe multi-level responsibilities but not how policymakers and stakeholders make sense of them in collaboration with each other and other levels of government.

Ultimately, the cross-cutting nature of GM accentuates the issues of policy and policymaking complexity that we describe in Chapters 2 and 3. These two country’s regimes demonstrate the national contexts through which this complexity is filtered, and the high potential for incoherence. The Swedish example demonstrates that high and sustained political attention and commitment to GM can help overcome some of these barriers, while the UK example represents a cautionary note for equity advocates seeking the direct translation of lessons from elsewhere (Cairney, St.Denny, and Kippin, 2021a).

Conclusion

The EU, its member states, and many regions have a longstanding commitment to reducing gender inequalities. Over time, EU-led ambition has been translated into a wide range of different rules, norms, and concrete policy programmes, reflecting shifting conceptions of the problem and how to address it. Earlier efforts to introduce laws enshrining equality have been succeeded by specific interventions, particularly to enhance women’s presence in politics and the workforce. The advent of ‘gender mainstreaming’ as a global inequality reduction agenda transformed discourses and policy activity at the EU level. The emphasis shifted towards making gender a key consideration in *policymaking* across all sectors,

rather than the subject of targeted affirmative action or the sole responsibility of specialized women's policy machinery. Within this context, member states' commitment to gender equality also changed over time, as a result of EU policy being transposed into domestic law *and* domestic responses to the global diffusion of gender equality norms.

Yet, while the EU boasts a number of gender equality 'leaders' in global benchmarking exercises, and most notably among its Nordic member states, gender equality in key areas such as labour market participation, political representation, and interpersonal violence continues to remain elusive. Moreover, gains in inequality reduction are fragile, with rapid loss of progress during periods of crisis such as the 2008 financial crisis or the COVID-19 pandemic. These experiences align with many gender scholars' conclusions that, while rhetorical commitment to gender equality is generally uniformly high in Europe, practical commitment falls away quickly in the face of competing priorities. In some cases, the focus on gender equality disappears completely. In many others, gender and equity are de-emphasized and put to the service of alternative goals without meaningful consideration of the likely contradictions and incoherence this produces (a development it shares with health and education equity initiatives, which tend to be subordinate to neoliberal approaches).

There are three main explanations for the continual marginalization of gender in policy and policymaking. The first concerns the gendered nature of institutions and the role of institutional resistance. Here, the very institutions and processes that are supposed to give rise to transformative change are themselves problematic and, in particular, serve to reproduce inequalities even as they work to reduce them. The second concerns trade-offs in instrument selection, generally favouring 'soft' instruments, the impact of which is often eclipsed or undone when they interact with the 'hard' levers deployed in higher priority areas, such as to seek economic growth. The third speaks more fundamentally to the persistent suspicion that most policymakers do not understand what 'gender' means in this context. In other words, they do not appreciate its structural nature, relying instead on reductive and simplistic binary beliefs concerning 'men' and 'women' as if these two categories represent fixed and internally consistent political constituencies.

Policy learning and transfer are not impossible in these conditions. There is ample evidence that policy innovations have diffused internationally in key areas such as women's participation in formal politics, their ability to reconcile work and family life, and their right to exist free of violence and discrimination. Nevertheless, patterns of diffusion reveal: (1) a strong tendency for policymakers in the EU to look to a narrow range of countries for opportunities to learn, and (2) the fact that gender policy innovations can be adopted for reasons other than achieving gender equality. Policy learning, in this sense, does not compensate for the need to grapple with inevitable trade-offs concerning how to make effective gender equality policy.

These challenges are particularly visible in the context of the still dominant 'gender mainstreaming' policy paradigm. GM represents a critique of traditional policymaking processes which put gender policies in silos. It entails the diffusion of responsibility for gender equality; everybody is responsible for making gender equality happen. It challenges the existence, autonomy, and authority of actors specifically dedicated to ensuring progress in this area. Yet, at the same time, evidence suggests that gains in gender equality require constant and resource intensive stewardship from actors within and outside of the state. For most gender equality researchers, this contradiction is revelatory of a fundamental challenge associated with using policy to design out inequality.

Two key messages emerge from scholarship on gender equality and mainstreaming policy. First, the belief that transformative change can be achieved through policy alone is flawed. Policy is a key factor in shaping the opportunities, status, and rights afforded different groups, but it is not the only factor. Policy shapes but is not wholly determinative of society, and therefore it alone cannot eradicate inequality. Feminist policy scholars thus draw attention to the need to better understand the relationship between policy and society to comprehensively address inequalities (Daly, 2005; Jamil et al., 2020). Second, gender inequalities do not operate independently of other forms of socio-economic inequalities and consequently cannot be resolved without meaningfully addressing all other forms of stratification and inequities.

As we discuss in Chapter 9, these wider lessons inform the general study of equity policies and the specific study of spatial justice. One key theme is the shift in approach to territorial cohesion, in which equal access to public services is an indicator of equity and multi-level policymaking is a vehicle to that destination. As in Chapters 6 and 7, studies of gender equality policy warn against defining policy aims so narrowly and placing too-high expectations on policymaking. Studies of the latter highlight inevitable political trade-offs, such as between centralization and decentralization, rather than the ability to use intergovernmental cooperation as a technical fix to policy aims. Further, many studies highlight the benefits of politicizing these aims to keep gender equality on every relevant agenda. In other words, multi-level policymaking is a venue for necessary and positive contestation, rather than a means to depoliticize policy agendas.

Conclusion

Introduction: why do governments struggle to reduce inequalities?

There are three general explanations for the lack of policy progress to reduce inequalities. First, inequality is an ambiguous, complex, and contested problem. The nature, importance, and cause of the problem is highly contested, leading to unresolved debates on whose inequality matters and whose responsibility it is to act. Second, governments describe the problem, and the policy process, in a misleadingly simple way. For example, their aim is to make it *seem* like they are willing and able to make a difference, often by treating the problem as amenable to a technical fix, via an optimal policy mix and joined-up government. Third, governments tend to redescribe rather than solve the problems they face, particularly in relation to low priority problems such as inequalities.

This dynamic relates partly to *choice*, when their values and other, higher, priorities rule out the redistributive policy instruments that would have the most obvious impact on economic and social inequalities. This choice is often labelled as ‘neoliberal’, to describe low state intervention in favour of market forces and individual responsibility and treating the state primarily as a vehicle for economic growth. It also relates to *necessity*, when policymakers find that the policy process is beyond their knowledge and control, which undermines the idea that they could solve fundamental socio-economic problems with less radical and more simple technical fixes.

Consequently, the gap between their vague expectations and actual outcomes is inevitably wide. We describe this gap in relation to the difference between their requirements and actual practices and outcomes. Policymakers would like to have a simple policy problem, the availability of technically and politically feasible solutions, an optimal distribution of policymaking responsibilities, and an orderly policy process amenable to their control. They actually face complex and contested problems, in which tough choices and winners and losers are inevitable, and fragmented policy processes that are not conducive to policymaker direction or coherent multi-level action. Overall, policymakers may not want, or be able, to make and implement the choices that could produce the biggest difference to inequalities.

These general answers have particular importance across EU states and regions. EU policymakers have been reconsidering how to conceptualize and address

inequalities. First, they have adopted general principles such as *spatial justice*, and the more specific aim to reduce *territorial inequalities*, to recognize the important connection between spatial inequalities and policymaking rescaling. This approach suggests that there are many important inequalities within and across EU regions, and many different governments and organizations have some powers to address them. Second, the EU territorial cohesion agenda has shifted somewhat, from a high-level focus on more equal regional gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, towards encouraging decentralized approaches to spatially equal access to public services. As such, the responsibility for economic and social welfare is no longer assumed to be scaled up to the EU or situated at the level of the nation state. Rather, policymaking functions and capacity have migrated to new scales below the EU member state, and the responsibility to address inequalities is distributed across multiple levels of government.

Consequently, we *may* be witnessing a radical shift of scale to address inequalities, to give EU regions more autonomy to imagine and pursue new approaches to reducing inequalities. However, the nature of this change is an open, empirical, question. In that context, we draw on policy process insights to show how new EU agendas amplify general problems, in the following ways.

There are multiple layers of ambiguity in policy and policymaking

Initially, ambiguity helps to take equity and justice agendas forward. Many actors can commit to the same vague ideas without making firm commitments, engaging with trade-offs, or making tough choices. Subsequently, there is contestation to determine (1) the meaning of social and economic inequalities, whose inequalities are a priority, and how these inequalities relate to territory and vague ideas such as spatial justice, and (2) who or what is responsible for defining and addressing these policy problems. These general agendas have little meaning until policy actors make sense of them in relation to different contexts. Yet, the policy process to make sense of inequalities is also unclear.

Inequalities policies are multi-sectoral as well as multi-level

General aims such as equity, or to reduce unfair inequalities, have sectoral-specific reference points. A newly-described focus on territorial inequalities, in relation to equal access to public services, relates *somehow* to established agendas in policy areas such as health, education, and gender. While the overall pursuit of equity is ostensibly inter-sectoral, there are distinct sectoral approaches to this problem in relation to territorial welfare, health, education, and gender equality agendas (and others). Each approach has its own frames of reference, ideas, networks, and

institutions, and the multi-level division of responsibilities to address inequalities varies by sector. Further, each of these sectoral equity frames are subordinate to higher priority cross-sectoral aims, such as to boost economic activity and growth ('neoliberalism' is a core feature of debate in each sector). Overall, equity agendas tend to be introduced in fragmented policy systems, accompanied by relatively low or fleeting support to prioritize inequalities and produce effective intersectoral responses.

The division of policymaking responsibilities across levels and sectors of government results as much from political as technical choices

It is common to describe the search for a technically optimal division of responsibilities, but policymaking rescaling is a political process in which responsibilities result from contestation or negotiation. Some debates relate to guarding territory, such as when member states protect their responsibilities from alleged EU interference, or professions associated with each sector resent interference from their counterparts in other sectors (even when in the name of intersectoral action). Some relate to territorial identity, in which nation and region building reflects or reinforces demands for autonomy, and these demands are to maximize the powers to make policy. Both sources of debate undermine the sense that political actors will necessarily prioritize collaboration across territory and sector. Rather, the dynamics described pejoratively as turf wars, silo mentalities, and fragmented government are routine features of politics. We may witness the appearance of policy incoherence overall, but each contribution to alleged incoherence may make perfect sense in relation to the 'rules of the game' in each level or sector of government.

New policy directions reflect a degree of policy and political failure

Multiple IMAJINE studies suggest that the search for new approaches followed the perceived failure of previous territorial cohesion policies (Chapter 1). Over several decades, it has been difficult to produce a concrete agenda with tangible results: regional disparities have not decreased, and regional economic agendas have not helped to reduce opposition to further EU integration. The push for new ways of thinking, to focus on individual perceptions of regional variations in access to public services, and new hopes for multi-level policy systems, to focus on regionalism, reflects frustration with low progress rather than well-founded expectations for future progress.

The unusually large gap between expectations and reality

Each of these factors highlights an unusually large gap between (1) what policymakers want and need to happen, versus (2) their ability to deliver. Policy ambiguity and policymaking complexity are routine features of politics, but multi-level and multi-sectoral issues, such as inequalities, are particularly problematic.

Overall, it is difficult for policymakers to know how to make sense of new equity and justice agendas if they do not know how all of the existing activities, across many levels and sectors of government, already connect to each other. In that context, it is tempting to use the metaphor of a jigsaw puzzle, in which each level and sector may represent one piece, without anyone being able to coordinate the activity to produce the full picture. However, this metaphor suggests that policy actors are visualizing and working towards a common aim, when in fact no-one can agree on what the puzzle would look like when assembled (see also Chapters 6–8 on the often-misleading term ‘implementation gaps’).

Policy learning and transfer: new possibilities for innovation and emulation?

Policy learning and transfer represent commonly proposed solutions to these problems (Chapter 2). Multi-level and multi-sectoral policymaking offers the possibility of policy innovation and diffusion, as state and sub-state governments experiment and learn from each other’s experiences. As such, learning feeds into routine processes of policy analysis and design, where policy actors seek to define policy problems, generate solutions, compare their likely effect, and recommend the adoption of one or more policy instruments. Such approaches focus on agency or intention, highlighting the aims of each government and what they require to translate them into action. Learning from others is a process to identify solutions worth adopting and the skills to adapt and implement them in new contexts.

In contrast, policy studies tend to highlight two qualifications to the idea of policy innovation and emulation via learning. First, policy learning, and deciding whether or not to learn and import policy from others, are political processes. They involve contestation to define the policy problem, identify from whom and where to learn, debate values, and use values to compare the political feasibility of solutions. Policymakers can learn by listening to experts and/or engaging in deliberative processes, or treat learning as a way to work out how to win disputes and influence other governments. This contestation occurs within and across different levels of government.

Second, learning and transfer take place in policymaking environments over which no-one has full knowledge or control. Policymakers face limits to their ability to pay attention to issues, and to diverge from policies and rules that they

inherit from their predecessors. Advocates of policy learning and transfer engage with a multi-level or multi-centric environment in which it is difficult to ‘map’ the responsibilities of each relevant organization or government, and each policymaking venue has its own rules and norms, networks, and dominant ideas that can constrain or facilitate policy change. Further governments may adopt different models of learning and transfer, such as relatively centralized models to identify evidence of successful interventions and roll them out uniformly, or decentralized models that encourage collaboration and deliberation to coproduce knowledge and policy.

In that context, we identify three guiding questions that could inform the (1) *pursuit* or (2) *study* of policy learning and transfer:

1. *What is the evidence for one government’s success, and from where does it come?* The pursuit of learning requires analysts to rely on multiple sources of evidence for success in relation to a government’s aims. The study of learning suggests that policy actors debate what counts as credible and policy relevant evidence, with no obvious way to adjudicate between competing sources and interpretations.
2. *What story do exporters/importers of policy tell about the problem they seek to solve?* To establish comparability and policy relevance, analysts need to identify how policymakers define the policy problem, and analyse the feasibility and success of solutions in that context. However, it is difficult to identify the motives of policymakers, particularly when many governments (and sectors) contribute to an overall outcome.
3. *Do they have comparable political and policymaking systems?* Analysts may be more able to compare the formal and written rules of political systems, but less able to piece together the unwritten rules, informal networks, and taken for granted paradigms that are essential to in-depth policymaking system comparability.

A focus on functional requirements versus actual practices helps to identify key limits to inequalities policy and policymaking. Further, the lens of policy learning (to inform debates on potential policy transfer) helps to compare (1) what policymakers need to aid learning, and (2) the limits associated with the practical realities that they face. Analysts soon find an ambiguous policy problem where the definition is not in their gift, policy issues in which their main audience and source of lessons is unclear, and an existing literature not conducive to accumulating lessons for policymaker audiences.

As such, it is impossible to study multi-level and multi-sectoral experiences to produce a manual of best practice, but we can show how inequalities policies are shaped in many different contexts. These insights inform a more realistic account of policy analysis than found in textbooks and training manuals, and warn

against too-high expectations for the role of agency in relation to institutional and structural context. However, are they actually useful to policy analysts seeking specific advice on how to act? Research-informed policy analysis could produce more useful ways to foster policy learning and transfer. Theories help break down policymaking into a manageable number of concepts, offer guidance on how to respond to contextual factors, and encourage critical thinking. As such, they aid analysts and policy designers committed to ‘intelligent policymaking’ built on ‘pragmatism, evidence, and learning’ and the acceptance that policy emerges from complex systems in the absence of central control (Sanderson, 2009; Cairney, 2021). These insights come with the need for continuous reflection. They encourage analysts to accept that even the most skilful analysts engage in policy processes over which they have limited understanding and even less control, epistemic learning is only one of many possibilities, and lessons from other countries are only one of a large number of sources of information and influence on an importing government’s policies. Policy process research provides general cautionary tales to encourage analysts to manage their expectations rather than specific tools to improve their effectiveness.

Mapping policy to aid learning: do governments know who is responsible for what?

The diversity of multi-level policymaking models presents a further practical problem for analysts seeking to engage in policy learning and encourage policy transfer. The absence of a typical division of responsibilities, or approach to inequalities, may encourage learning from diverse experiences, but also makes it difficult to know who does what, and why.

To some extent, using categorizations of policy tools and instruments can help to make sense of these possibilities. Analyzing policy tool mixes helps to establish how governments can act independently, or together, to produce different models of inequalities. Policy tools perform different functions, to: share information from the centre or coproduce knowledge for policy, regulate or ‘nudge’ behaviour, tax, spend, or provide resources to deliver policy commitments. Further, the mix of tools can help identify how far governments are willing to go to reduce inequalities. For example, the state can play a minimal role, to provide a welfare ‘safety net’ and prioritize public education to influence individual ‘lifestyles’. Or it can play a maximal role, combining redistribution, ‘hard’ regulation, high funding, and comprehensive public services.

Governments inherit and add to commitments periodically, rather than writing a completely new and comprehensive strategy on a blank page. Therefore, within this range of models are more inconsistent approaches, adding new instruments on an ad hoc basis and, each time, trying to balance technical and political

feasibility. The most technically feasible instruments to address inequalities are (often by definition) *redistributive*, while more politically feasible options are *distributive*, *regulatory*, or *exhortative*. The result may be policy mixes that contain many instruments selected for different purposes at different times. Further, some instruments are designed explicitly to reduce one form of inequality, while others have a broader and indirect—but often more important—effect. As such, describing approaches as *models* of inequalities policy may exaggerate their coherence, underestimate the spill-over effects from each level or sector, and underestimate the continuous contestation to determine the role of the state.

Consequently, it is difficult to connect abstract ideal-types to concrete examples of multi-level policymaking. Indeed, the simple process of tabulating responsibilities helps to expose key analytical trade-offs, such as to: (1) focus on multi-level policy instrument responsibilities in relation to their direct versus indirect impacts or their policy tool categories, (2) identify single strategies or complicated policy mixes, (3) select which countries to compare, and (4) select which sectors on which to focus. Further, these tables only identify the formal division of responsibilities. They alone do not account for the informal use of power and interplay between levels or sectors of government, such as when supranational organizations direct or suggest policy change, national governments tolerate more or less regional innovation, and regional governments possess enough or too few responsibilities to have an incentive to innovate.

These mapping exercises therefore offer *some* insights to policy designers seeking to learn from other country experiences, while largely helping researchers visualize and reflect on policymaking complexity. For example, Table 3.2 explores the often-unclear and varying scope for governments to reduce inequalities via the combination of tax and social security spending (including minimum income guarantees), public service subsidies and charges, and active labour market policies. Tables 3.3, 6.1, and 6.2 try to make sense of, and assign responsibility for, the ‘upstream’ and ‘preventive’ policy tools that are central to stories of Health in All Policies. Tables 3.4, 7.1, and 7.2 compare the policy instruments that may be used for ‘neoliberal’ versus ‘social justice’ approaches to education equity, with the latter representing education’s equivalent to the ‘upstream’ focus in health. Tables 3.5, 8.1, and 8.2 give a sense of the amplified—and potentially overwhelming—complexity when intersectoral strategies seek to mainstream equity initiatives by making them the responsibility of all levels and sectors rather than a specific organization.

In each of the latter three cases—health, education, gender—the tables explore what and how to learn from ‘leading’ countries such as Finland, Norway, and Sweden. They highlight the difficulties in assigning and comparing responsibilities, even when only one importing and one exporting country is involved. This exercise helps to reinforce the sense, explored in Chapter 2, that potential importers tend to focus on a small number of reference points when seeking lessons. This

choice may be based not only on *politics*, when policymakers seek lessons only from the policymakers that share their beliefs or problem definitions, but also *technical limits*, when they struggle to understand how one initiative fits into a much bigger picture.

Policymaking rescaling: new possibilities for regionalism?

Policymaking rescaling offers new possibilities for innovation and learning, but also the potential for more fragmented government. On the one hand, the shift of the EU's approach to territorial cohesion, and the challenge to the nation state's monopoly over redistributive policy instruments, have prompted the rise of a 'regional' (or meso or sub-state) level of government with more powers to address inequalities. On the other, the role of regional governments is uncertain and contested, regarding what their powers should be, how they should be used, how they relate to shared agendas with other levels of government, and what level of policy divergence they could cause (Chapter 4).

Consequently, it is not realistic to maintain a depoliticized or solely technocratic focus on multi-level governance to deliver an optimal division of powers. Experiences of regional contestation suggest that no clear models of regionalism have emerged and there is not one best way to organize policymaking responsibilities. Rather, many different expectations for rescaling have influenced regional approaches, based on distinctive regional party politics, territorial policy communities, and more or less policy capacity.

These differences inform different ways to contest the appropriate balance between (1) EU, national, and regional responsibilities, and (2) economic and social policies, in (3) more or less concertation with representatives of capital, labour, and social interests. There are pressures to maintain responsibilities at the level of *the EU*, to foster EU-wide principles and standards, the *nation state*, to maximize the benefits of pooling and redistributing resources and sharing economic risks, as well as *regions*, to negotiate to tailor general aims to specific local contexts. There is pressure to *race to the bottom*, to reduce taxation and regulatory burdens and compete with each other regions in a global economy. There is also an incentive to *race to the top*, to demonstrate the ability of regional governments to deliver economic and social benefits, and public services, to become more than simply the administrative arm of national governments. The balance between the two forces may generate a race to the middle, or political isomorphism, which involves learning how to converge on a safe balance rather than innovate and represent an outlier.

Rescaling social and economic policy strategies: have models of new regionalism emerged?

Do regional policymakers possess the willingness and ability to redesign policy, and pursue differing priorities, within national systems of social welfare? They may now have greater powers to address inequalities, but there is no typical division of responsibilities. Further, their role in defining and addressing inequalities remains contested.

Comparisons of Belgium, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom help to identify how different regional-level governments make sense of inequalities policies, but key examples of policy tools also highlight how difficult it is to piece together information to describe coherent models. There is some, patchy, evidence of some regions introducing more progressive tax levels, but within a wider national system that reduces the incentive to diverge and limits any divergent effect. There is some evidence of innovation to produce minimum income guarantees, with entitlement often linked to labour market policies. Some centre-left regional governments have reduced or abolished service charges in health, social care, and higher education. However, these actions do not produce a clear or unequivocal reduction in inequalities (for example in relation to universities, where the better off are more likely to take advantage of subsidized fees).

Overall, there is insufficient evidence of policy change (or divergence from national policies) to identify distinct regional welfare regimes. Rather, we identify *tendencies* to relate policy rhetoric, and some substantive action, to different ideal types, including: the social democratic ideals of universalism, public provision, social inclusion; Christian democratic traditions of solidarity and cohesion in relation to voluntary or religious provision and a focus on the family, and; neoliberal approaches, emphasizing low spending and taxation, competitive regionalism, and contracting out of services to market providers.

Perhaps more importantly, the parties leading regional governments refer to these ideal types to boost their equivalents of nation-building projects. They combine a reference to policy change with claims to territorial autonomy, emphasizing not only the policies themselves but also the right of regional governments to gain or retain ownership of policymaking responsibilities. They provide no way to determine if greater decentralization would actually help to reduce inequalities within regions. This situation limits the scope for policy learning and transfer based on well-established success stories. Indeed, regional autonomy movements may seek primarily to learn how to make their case.

The pursuit of equity and justice: from levels of government to policy sectors

Policymaking is both multi-level and multi-sectoral, and variations by sector may be as important as variations across territories (Chapter 1). This general insight is well-established in policy studies, which highlights the distinctive practices of sub-sectoral ‘policy communities’, which process specialist policy problems out of the public spotlight (Richardson and Jordan, 1979). The practices and ‘rules of the game’ in these policy communities vary across territory (Keating et al., 2009; Howlett and Tosun, 2019), but also exhibit distinctive ‘sectoral policy styles’ (Cairney, 2021b).

The EU spatial justice agenda accentuates this intersection between multi-level and multi-sectoral action. A new focus on equal access to public services highlights the importance of sector-specific approaches, which we explore in separate qualitative systematic reviews of published research (Chapter 1). We find sectoral approaches to intersectoral action, in which policy actors tend to operate within their own fields, and interact infrequently with actors in other sectors even when they need to influence policy elsewhere. These distinctive dynamics in each sector inform an overall process of cooperation and competition to define equity and pursue the reduction of inequalities.

The health equity implementation gap

Most studies of the health equity strategy Health in All Policies (HiAP) describe a major gap between rhetorical versus substantive support for health equity measures. On the one hand, the EU, member states, and some relevant regions have signed up to deliver the same strategy. HiAP describes health as a human right, focuses on the evidence of the ‘social determinants’ of population health and health inequalities, and expresses the need for ‘upstream’ solutions backed by intersectoral action and strong and enduring political support for radical policy change. Social determinants include inequalities in income and wealth, education, housing, transport, and access to safe social and physical environments. Therefore, HiAP’s favoured upstream solutions foster the redistribution of resources, and population-wide preventive measures by the state, as well as support for many other public services, rather than simply emphasizing equal access to reactive healthcare or individual responsibility. This approach requires intersectoral action because almost all of the identified instruments to address determinants of population health are not in the gift of health departments.

On the other hand, the EU and most member states do not back up this commitment with substantive action. Further, their more routine activities undermine their HiAP commitments. The EU’s higher priority commitment to economic

activity, and ‘neoliberal’ approach, is at odds with the spirit of HiAP. Further, the European Commission largely used HiAP as a vehicle for collaboration across sectors and with non-governmental bodies, including with the commercial industries (in alcohol and food) that public health actors would seek to exclude from health policy. Some member states offer ‘best case’ examples, including the Nordic welfare state systems that are conducive to HiAP’s focus on redistribution and high state intervention, and policy innovation in Finland and Norway. However, most HiAP research identifies major gaps between commitment and action: national level strategies and legislation empower municipal governments to act, but there is patchy evidence for intersectoral action with a substantive impact on health equity. Further, the wider European country experience accentuates such findings.

There is some evidence of progress to rescale health equity agendas, such as via new healthy city initiatives, and in relation to regional governments with health responsibilities. However, in such cases, these substate organizations do not control the non-healthcare instruments (such as fiscal powers) described by HiAP. Further, the regional race to the top *might* encourage policy innovation, but in the context of high attention to the idea of a ‘postcode lottery’ in which variations in access to health services are more salient than variations in population health. As such, the EU’s new definition of territorial cohesion, in relation to equal access to public services, may exacerbate a tendency for governments to sign up to HiAP but pursue policies that undermine it, while treating it as little more than an impetus for intersectoral action. In each case, it is difficult to identify success from which governments can learn.

The pursuit of education equity: social justice undermined by neoliberal approaches

In health, HiAP studies describe a coherent and well-supported plan undermined by a greater commitment to neoliberal policies. In other words, the spectre of neoliberalism is *external* to public health policy networks. In education, most research describes the marginalization of a social justice approach and dominance of a neoliberal approach *within* education networks. The social justice approach shares many elements with HiAP, emphasizing the emancipatory and wellbeing contribution of education, and identifying the need for high state intervention beyond the education sector to address the ‘out of school’ factors—such as inequalities of income, or poverty—that can have more impact on unequal outcomes than schools. The neoliberal approach emphasizes the contribution of education to economic competitiveness in a global knowledge economy, focuses directly on the role of education systems, and identifies the benefit of equal access to high quality schools and teachers in the public and private sectors. As such, it offers some lessons for the new EU territorial cohesion agenda by explaining how to

foster equal access to high quality services via accountability and performance management tools.

Most education research (in our review) identifies a twin-track approach to education equity, where the EU and national and regional governments make a relatively vague rhetorical commitment to social justice approaches (fostering more equal *outcomes*) while pursuing concrete measures to underpin neoliberal approaches (fostering more equal *opportunities* or *treatment*). As a result, the latter undermines the former. The pressure for education systems and schools to compete with each other to race to the top of performance league tables produces perverse incentives for schools to segregate marginalized populations—in relation to race, ethnicity, and/or immigration—by describing them as in greater need of ‘special needs’ education (which is often exempt from the same high stakes competition).

In that context, Nordic countries provide (again) the most regular sources of best cases and cautionary tales. Finland has become an international reference point for advocates of equality via comprehensive state schools, while Sweden and Denmark shows that external influences and neoliberal approaches can make profound changes to Nordic models.

There are multiple spatial elements to these dynamics. First, the neoliberal approach creates tense central-local government dynamics, such as by encouraging decentralized models of service delivery (in a quasi-market of state and private schools) but also centralizing performance management and accountability via examinations, inspections, and league tables. Second, some regional governments have responsibility for school policies (and their own education systems) and could foster different relationships with local governments. While there is some evidence that centre-left governments pursue social justice approaches, experiences from countries such as the UK suggest that devolved governments are also—partly voluntarily—locked into international agendas that emphasize high stakes testing and performance management. Even in these cases, we do not know what a rhetorical commitment to social justice means without relating it to a more substantive commitment to a neoliberal approach.

The pursuit of gender equality: mainstreaming as a symbol of ‘soft’ approaches

Studies of gender equality highlight distinctive elements, such as more intense debates on what gender means, and an increasing focus on intersectional approaches to examine the source and impact of multiple—mutually reinforcing—forms of discrimination. However, they also reinforce the more general sense that government policy exhibits a gap between vague rhetorical commitment and concrete impact. As with education, this problem relates partly to ambiguity and high

contestation to define gender equity in relation to policy. Advocates may seek equal treatment, opportunities, or outcomes. Further, they may foster ways to improve women's representation and influence in existing institutions, or describe gendered institutions as a big part of the problem and pursue more radical transformations to the state and society. These debates can translate into a range of approaches, such as by introducing specific units to improve the representation of women or seeking to mainstream gender equality policies in all levels and sectors of government, and using 'hard' versus 'soft' policy tools (e.g. laws and regulations versus recommendations and benchmarks).

Studies of EU policy suggest that the use of hard tools in the 1980s, to establish new rights, gave way to the use of soft tools from the 1990s, using the idea of gender mainstreaming (GM) to encourage EU states and regions to reform. While the EU had a clear impact on member state agendas, its voluntary approach produced inconsistent policy changes within EU institutions and across states and regions. States such as Sweden became EU (and global) leaders, pursuing a 'maximal' variant of GM, while states such as the UK exhibit a tendency towards 'minimal' approaches (Chapter 8). However, unlike in health and education, Nordic approaches are not routine sources of cautionary tales. Rather, they contribute more to international normative pressures—often backed by economic pressures from high-influence countries and international organizations—to conform to modern standards in government. In theory, these pressures could encourage a race to the top, but in the context of a largely voluntary approach to implementation. Actual gains in gender equality are modest, elusive, and fragile, and often subordinate to higher profile economic and governance agendas. As in health and education, the policymakers responsible for gender equality policy may project strong rhetorical commitment to progress but also hinder that progress.

Implications for the future of justice and equity policies

This comparison of sectors and intersectoral initiatives raises issues directly relevant to spatial justice and territorial cohesion. Most importantly, these approaches are connected to each other by a wider policy agenda. Each review of sectoral experiences highlights a common focus on the spectre of 'neoliberalism', with sectoral-specific ways to describe it: 'upstream' measures for health, 'social justice' measures for education, and 'maximal' versions of gender equity policy are supported rhetorically but not substantively by many governments. Instead, governments tend to prioritize spending on healthcare and a focus on individual lifestyles in health, pursue equal access to schools in education, and treat gender mainstreaming as an extension of economic strategies. The use of soft tools to support equity measures ensures that they do not fare well in relation to higher priority agendas supported by harder tools.

Such experiences suggest that the new EU spatial justice agenda will follow the same pattern, in which a focus on economic redistribution gives way to softer policy tools. They also suggest that this focus on more equal access to public services provides a poor proxy for territorial equity, with the potential to undermine more substantive means to produce policy change.

These findings from each sector tend to apply across multiple levels of government, and can be as applicable to regional governments if they enjoy delegated powers. If so, we can produce two very different expectations from Chapters 5 to 8. First, we may expect each wider national or regional approach to inequalities to have an impact on equity strategies in each sector, for example by producing social democratic or neoliberal approaches to equity in relation to public services. However, these models are ideal types rather than actual practices, and they are often used largely rhetorically as part of nation or region building. Second, we may expect that these rhetorical commitments to different national or regional models provide little more than a veneer to hide similar neoliberal approaches to health, education, and gender equity. Further, their tendency to focus on high salience issues such as hospitals and schools may come at the expense of wider public health or social justice approaches regardless of the scale at which policy is made.

These insights from sectoral and multi-level policymaking help to produce some general principles to inform the study of inequalities policies and policymaking. First, the general problem with assessing policy progress is that governments want to pursue many—often contradictory—policy aims, prompting them to make trade-offs and prioritize one aim over another. In the case of inequalities policies, a government may desire to carry out key principles but, at the same time, prioritize the practices that undermine them. Presenting such aims as a dichotomy discourages the perpetuation of common governmental platitudes, such as that policymakers can achieve both aims and, therefore, that short-term inertia masks slow and long-term progress. Rather, we can produce more accurate general guidance, including:

- *Rhetorical commitment to inequalities strategies provide a very poor predictor of substantive action.* We cannot understand the meaning of inequalities policies until policymakers make sense of their vague commitments and produce concrete policy tools.
- *We cannot understand substantive commitment to inequalities policies in isolation.* While governments may produce some policy tools to address inequalities, they are often ‘soft’ measures that are overshadowed by commitments to other aims. Examples include major imbalances in funding for reactive versus preventive services (such as healthcare versus public health), the establishment of small specialist units to address problems that span the whole of government, and the use of educational or voluntary measures when other commitments are backed by statute. Further, incremental shifts

towards more ‘preventive’ policies are vulnerable to crises and partial reversals, such as when public health funding is used to plug deficits in healthcare budgets.

Second, these contradictions also apply to policymaking. EU policymakers see value in rescaling to the EU level, to foster uniform or minimum standards, *and* to the regional level, to tailor general principles to more local contexts. National policymakers seek to decentralize, to encourage the co-production of policy with local stakeholders or competition between service providers, *and* centralize, to avoid a ‘postcode lottery’ of standards or services. Regional or local policymakers may seek autonomy to go their own way *and* choose to converge on the same model as their neighbours. As such:

- *Rhetorical commitment to policy rescaling provides an incomplete predictor of multi-level policymaking.* We cannot understand the meaning of the delegation of some policy instruments without knowing how all relevant instruments (controlled by multiple levels of government) contribute to an overall policy mix.
- *We cannot understand substantive commitment to policymaking innovations in isolation.* Policies to address inequalities are often accompanied by a commitment to new forms of policymaking, such as to decentralize evidence-gathering or policy learning to coproduce knowledge and policy. Yet such innovations represent a small proportion of government business, exaggerating changes to the routine (and relatively centralized or insular) business of government. Policymakers often pay lip-service to decentralization and local empowerment while holding on at the centre.

Third, focusing on contestation and trade-offs helps to challenge a misleading focus on technical fixes. Governments, facing unpalatable trade-offs between policy aims, often find solace in unrealistic ambitions for policymaking reforms. In this case, a common theme is the need for collaborative multi-level governance *and* intersectoral action to address a policy problem that cuts across policymaking scales, traditional sectoral boundaries, and boundaries between state, market, and individual action. Yet, they are describing functional requirements rather than the following more realistic expectations:

- *Multi-level policymaking is characterized by an unclear relationship between collaboration versus contestation.* There may be scope to negotiate roles and collaborate across levels of government, but in the context of a tendency to guard the autonomy of each government.

- *There are many sectoral approaches to intersectoral action.* Each intersectoral strategy has its own reference points, with minimal evidence that researchers and policy actors in each sector are aware of developments in the others.
- *There is a strong rationale for apparently sub-optimal policymaking.* Protecting national or regional responsibilities relates to maximizing autonomy rather than agreeing how to distribute responsibilities optimally. Sectoral silos make sense to their participants, who seek to specialize to address technical problems and protect their work from unwanted interference. Short-term electoral imperatives trump long-term thinking.
- *If policy is everyone's responsibility, maybe it is no-one's responsibility.* The idea of completely shared responsibility is at odds with conventional ways to manage accountability. If so, innovative ways to foster accountability—across levels and sectors, and inside and outside of government—often give way to higher profile ways to hold central government leaders to account in regular high stakes national elections.

Finally, it is unrealistic to expect to find a coherent overall vision to reduce inequalities across the EU. Instead, many contested visions coexist in different countries, levels of government, and policy sectors. These alternatives emerge partly from specific debates on how to define and pursue equity. For some, all inequalities are unfair and their reduction should be a top priority for the state (this is a feature of HiAP). For others, many inequalities are fair, relating to individual effort and choices, outcomes of the market, and opposition to high state intervention (a feature of education debates). A common outcome is to describe fairness in relation to inputs and processes—ensuring that everyone has the same opportunity to access public services and governmental support—rather than outcomes. This approach receives continuous critique in critical policy studies and sectoral-specific research, since it tends to downplay and perpetuate inequalities in relation to poverty, race, ethnicity, and migration (Chapters 6 and 7). However, it is rare to find any shift of government policy to respond to these reasonable concerns.

These alternatives also emerge from the policy designs built into sectoral strategies. In particular, health and gender agendas focus primarily on *mainstreaming* equity or equality issues across all levels and types of government. This approach appears to rule out a single vision of equity, in favour of delegating problem definition and solution selection to many authoritative venues. From one perspective, the overall result may be policy incoherence and the dilution of an initial top-down mandate. What begins as a radical policy strategy to solve profoundly unfair inequalities ends as a coopted strategy to justify the business-as-usual practices that perpetuate inequity. From another, this approach is crucial, to use continuous contestation to keep equity high on the policy agenda and respect the autonomy of many centres of government. It would be arrogant to impose a single

central vision, which is anathema to principles of decentralization, deliberation, and collaborative governance.

Overall, we find that EU, national, and regional governments promote many separate equity, equality, or justice initiatives, across territories and sectors, without knowing if they are complementary or contradictory (Cairney et al., 2021). This approach could reflect the simple fact that ambiguous policy problems and complex policymaking processes are beyond the full knowledge or control of governments. It could also be part of a strategy to exploit these limitations. The latter would help them make a rhetorically radical case in the comfort of knowing that they will translate into safer policies. It also allows them to replace important political debates on values, regarding whose definition of equity matters and which inequalities to tolerate, with more technical discussions of appropriate policy processes, including coproduction events with stakeholders and 'evidence based' policymaking to define problems, and performance management to monitor solutions.

In other words, in spatial justice strategies, a shift away from tangible economic measures and hard tools to manage regional GDP could offer the prospect of new perspectives on spatial justice and territorial inequalities. Or, it could provide yet another way to reduce political attention to inequalities.

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