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## How to tackle ethnic diversity at the local level: Examples from policy practitioners in Amsterdam and Berlin

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**How can we improve the position of ethnic groups and avoid tensions among them?**

**For policymakers and policy practitioners who are working on inequality issues**

**Summary** Many European cities suffer from social problems in which ethnic diversity plays an important role. Such diversity can often lead to a sense of inequality among groups. Focusing on the dynamic of groups in an effort to promote equality, however, can create tensions among people, particularly when policymakers focus on groups defined on the basis of ethnicity. A major policy question therefore is: how can we improve the position of deprived ethnic groups while simultaneously delimiting, if not altogether avoiding, the build up of tensions among them?

**Firstly, this brief provides a theoretical analysis of the policy paradox at hand and presents three possible frameworks and related strategies:** *accommodation, denial* and *replacement*. Secondly, it makes the observation that practical policy responses aiming to resolve problems of numerous inequality issues are, across many European cities, rather similar – in spite of the fact that policy frameworks differ. Amsterdam and Berlin here provide examples of two different approaches. With such knowledge, this brief thus suggests to step away from abstract policy frameworks for dealing with inequality, and instead, to engage in practical solutions. This does not mean that policymakers should ignore socioeconomic inequalities or social tensions. It does mean, though, that inasmuch as groups within the population itself are involved in the problem, they are part of the solution. The dissolution of tensions, after all, begins at the local level. Collaborative efforts from different political institutions, organisations and the groups themselves can bring about serious change. Politicians and the public, both, need to endorse such intensive cooperation. This policy brief is meant for policymakers and policy practitioners, specifically at the local level, who are working on inequality issues.

This policy brief is based on the workshop ‘Successes and Challenges of Local Integration Policies’, which was held in Berlin in December 2006, and on the work of political scientist Frank de Zwart, a keynote speaker at the workshop. The workshop was organised jointly by IMISCOE and the Netherlands Institute for City Innovation Studies (NICIS).

**The policy paradox: specific policies can accentuate group distinctions**

**The policy paradox: the dilemma of recognition** By focusing on the way governments respond to inequality in socially or culturally diverse societies, political scientist Frank de Zwart (Leiden University) points to a policy paradox that seems to underlie the challenge of dealing with diversity and inequality. In an effort to reduce inequality, many governments develop redistributive policies. These policies require not just recognition of the ways in which groups may experience deprivation, but also the tricky project of categorising people within these groups on the basis of certain criteria such as ethnicity. Thus, a dilemma arises: in recognising that particular populations such as ethnic or migrant groups require specific policies, policymakers actually accentuate distinctions among the groups. Calling attention to these distinctions may work to inflame tensions across the population, particularly if outsiders to group question the needs or rights of that group. Furthermore, identifying a group as a deprived population makes the individuals associated with it vulnerable to stigmatisation. Social stigmatisation often jeopardises chances for people to improve their socioeconomic position.

**Three solutions to the paradox: accommodation, denial and replacement**

**How can governments cope with this policy paradox?** According to De Zwart, there are three strategies to deal with the dilemma of recognition: *accommodation*, *denial* and *replacement*.

**Accommodation: policies focusing on specific groups**

**Accommodation allows policymakers to formulate targeted policies for specific groups**, thereby designating the beneficiaries of these policies according to a population's variegated group membership. Up until the early 1990s, policy for minorities in the Netherlands (and Amsterdam, in particular) exemplified such a framework. To accommodate a range of officially recognised so-called cultural minorities, the Dutch government implemented an array of redistributive policies such as special education and structural subsidies for ethnic organisations. This approach, however, ignored what damaging side effects might arise from defining target groups in the first place, and it also ran the risk of a policy's negative ramifications outweighing its positive ones.

**Denial: policies focusing on individuals**

**Denial insists that redistributive policies should not benefit any particular group but only individuals.** Denial may work for an ideal-typical liberal state that stresses individual rights and refrains from recognising any pre-existing structure to society. The French integration policy is based on such an approach: an individual's relation to the state holds overriding importance (*contrat social*), as collectivities are denied and perceived to be a threat rather than a resource. Though denial befits the ideal-typical liberal state, in France, as in most other liberal states, inequality among the population is a major problem that only seems to be worsening over time. In other words, denying the existence of inequality linked to pre-defined groups does not seem to be the best solution to promote equality either.

**Replacement:  
policies introducing  
new social  
categories**

**Replacement combines the mechanisms of accommodation and denial.** In this case, a government pursues redistribution that benefits ethnically defined groups, but it also constructs newly named social categories, which are usually broader than the ethnic categories they have come to replace. An illustration of such a replacement strategy would be the designation of a geographical area and its corresponding population according to where a target group strongly represents. The purpose of such a reconstruction is to avoid formal recognition of social divisions based on ethnicity, while still permitting redistribution to benefit disadvantaged ethnic groups. Replacement policies, however, can generate their own problems. Firstly, they may create new inequalities: for example, when groups who happen to have the greatest capacity for mobilisation fall first in line for policy benefits. Secondly, replacement categories may provide ample opportunities for political entrepreneurs to mobilise ethnic collectivities and subsequently pressure the government to recognise claims for their ethnic constituency. While this could work to enhance ethnic group identities, it may also accentuate group distinctions and inflame tensions across the population.

**Two cases on the  
local level:  
Amsterdam and  
Berlin**

### **Policy frameworks at the local level: Amsterdam and Berlin as examples**

The dilemma of recognition appears at the local level as well. To reduce inequality and alleviate tensions among a population's myriad groups, local authorities throughout Europe have applied the frameworks of accommodation, denial and replacement. Amsterdam and Berlin, as examples of two Western European capital cities, have dealt with similar social problems related to immigration and diversity. These include: high unemployment among immigrant groups (particularly of youth); high levels of school dropout among immigrant youth and a dysfunctional school system that especially affects them and their prospects for success; housing and school segregation; increased tension between native-born and Islamic immigrant groups; and low rates of social and political participation by immigrant groups. In response to these problems, Amsterdam and Berlin have each formulated different policies, which have uniquely evolved over the course of time and, to a large extent, have been related to developments at their respective national levels.

**Cities with social  
problems related to  
immigration and  
diversity**

**The Netherlands  
and Germany:  
opposing policy  
frames**

**The Netherlands of the 1980s stood as an example of a policy regime** that displayed a receptive attitude towards immigrant groups by providing easy access to citizenship, offering financial support to immigrant organisations and including immigrant organisations in the policymaking process. By contrast, Germany was long exemplary for its exclusive approach, whereby immigrants and their descendants were given only limited access to the political community due to the highly set standards for naturalisation and the government's refusal to offer financial support for immigrant organisations.

**Amsterdam: from accommodation to replacement**

**Keeping in line with the Dutch national policy regime, in the 1980s, Amsterdam formulated an accommodative approach** towards the population's growing diversity by engendering targeted policies and granting subsidies for the ethnic organisations. By the 1990s, however, increasing criticism compelled Amsterdam authorities to change their response. The new diversity policy, as it was called, was believed to better serve the divergent city population by focusing on differences between individuals, rather than among groups. It also stressed the value of what each person could offer in terms of his or her own capacity to participate. Amsterdam's current diversity policy may be best characterised as a replacement policy: it attempts to replace the notion of ethnicity-based diversity with a much broader definition of diversity.

**Berlin: from denial to accommodation**

**Berlin, on the other hand, long maintained a framework of denial.** City politicians were wont to formulate restrictive measures for control over the growth and integration of the immigrant population. There was no official integration policy, and policymakers did not designate specific immigrant groups as the beneficiaries of particular policies that could improve the overall situation of immigrants in the city. In 2006, however, Berlin transformed its approach into a more accommodative one, whereby specific problems among immigrant groups began getting recognised. Since, the city has seen the establishment of immigrant organisation advisory councils, an official integration policy framework and an appointed Senator for Integration Affairs.

**Amsterdam and Berlin: similar practical solutions to combat inequality**

**Despite contrasting developments in official policy frameworks, both cities have yet to solve the basic policy paradox.** It is therefore worthwhile to survey some of the practical solutions these cities have come up with to combat inequality among their citizens. As a recent workshop came to reveal, policy practitioners have come to formulate their own practical responses to the dilemma of recognition.

**A wide array of practical answers: denial is not an option**

**Practical solutions for the dilemma of recognition in Amsterdam and Berlin** The workshop 'Successes and Challenges of Local Integration Policies', held in Berlin in December 2006 by the European Commission-sponsored Network of Excellence IMISCOE and the Netherlands Institute for City Innovation Studies (NICIS), served as an opportunity for policy practitioners from Amsterdam and Berlin to explain how they deal on a daily basis with matters of diversity and inequality. What became apparent is that local policy practitioners in Amsterdam and Berlin are not only familiar with the dilemma of recognition: they have already formulated a wide array of practical answers in an endeavour to solve it. These answers may not always be in line with the official integration policy framework of a city and will differ according to their context, but the bottom-line is that many of these solutions have resonance across the board. Policy practitioners from both cities all take the specific problems of deprived immigrants seriously: denial is not an

**Analyse problems on individual level**

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| <b>Give attention to group characteristics</b>                               | option. They avoid lumping together all immigrants into one group or identifying every problem as being immigration-related. Instead, problems are analysed – and dealt with – mainly on an individual level, with intensive attention given only to group characteristics where relevant. As some examples given at the workshop well illustrate, these practical solutions often share a basic form.  |
| <b>Amsterdam’s youth employment programmes</b>                               | <i>A worthy example of a practical solution developed at the local level can be found in Amsterdam’s programmes targeting youth unemployment.<sup>1</sup> Unemployed youth who do not attend school are not entitled to unemployment benefits, as some other cities may offer. Rather, they are forced to return to school or to enlist in one of the municipal work projects created for young people to learn a certain vocational trade. This is the general policy for all youth in Amsterdam, but the majority of whom it impacts come from an immigrant background. Most of these unemployed immigrant youngsters have good work skills, but they lack social skills, have a mix of severe social problems and cannot be easily persuaded to enrol in a government programme. Different municipal institutions (such as schools, social workers, labour offices and the municipal police department) thus cooperate to set rigid guidelines compelling youngsters to either participate in such programmes or to return to school. As soon as one of these aims is reached, authority figures continue to guide the youngsters along as they ascertain additional skills that will enable them to find a place in the labour market. This method is meant to provide youth with intensive personal attention in an approach that is positive and forward-looking. The ultimate goal of the policymakers is to make youngsters aware of their own responsibilities and potentials. Amsterdam authorities have thus consciously come to embrace a general policy that is free of ethnic categories and specific target groups, yet their strict guidelines that hone in on an individual’s development have proven especially effective for immigrant youth. The approach is general – it applies to all youngsters in the city – but at the same time, it remains sensitive to the nature of collectivities and how they can breed a sense of inequality between groups.</i> |
| <b>Make youngsters aware of own responsibilities</b>                         |   |
| <b>Remain sensitive to the nature of collectivities</b>                      |   |
| <b>Berlin’s neighbourhood and social participation programme</b>             | <i>In Berlin, Neighbourhood Management provides another example of a project productively carried out in local practice. The project oversees the establishment of small offices that work to enhance the social participation of local residents in deprived neighbourhoods often comprising a high percentage of immigrant residents. Again, this is a general policy that is implemented on the local level, yet it manages to sharpen its scope to see the specific problems of each neighbourhood’s residents. By setting up a network comprising institutions, organisations and the residents themselves, policy practitioners in Berlin, much as in Amsterdam, endeavour to use the available skills of the people living in the neighbourhoods that are being managed. Across 33 Berlin communities, Neighborhood Management directors work together with local groups and individuals to develop action plans focused on the needs of each particular neighbourhood, dealing with various issues such as employment, education, recreation, organisational capacity and housing. Different methods are used to empower residents and to integrate marginalised people into community organisations. This necessitates approaching different groups and individuals directly, and encouraging them to enter into discussions with one another.</i>   |
| <b>Empower residents: approach different groups and individuals directly</b> |   |

<sup>1</sup> For description of presentations and panel discussions, see policy workshop report: Floris Vermeulen, Rosanne Stotijn and Karl Lemberg (2007), *Successes and Challenges of Local Integration Policies*, Amsterdam: IMISCOE.

- Conclusions:** **A comparison of policy frameworks and the real life solutions that are used to deal with diversity and inequality reveals one primary distinction:** the latter do not oversee official formulation of target groups. Nevertheless, practitioners remain receptive to specific needs and, at the same time, advocate personal participation of the very people involved as the best way to combat inequality. Such practical solutions at the local level stress, furthermore, the importance of collaboration among different bureaucratic institutions.
- **Practical solutions at the local level**
  - **Avoiding the language of formal policy frameworks**
  - **Successful solutions take specific needs into account**
  - **Collaboration among different bureaucratic institutions**
  - **Successful integration programmes are ‘pretty intensive pieces of work’**
- Avoiding the dilemma of recognition: a question of resources?** Of course not all practical solutions prove successful. Both Amsterdam and Berlin still face social problems, especially among immigrant populations. It is important, however, to recognise that many practical policy approaches at the local level have been a conscious choice: to avoid the language of most formal policy framework and thereby evade the dilemma of recognition. This means that policies do not identify particular target groups in need of socioeconomic betterment nor, however, do they deny the fact that diversity may indeed produce a sense of inequality and instigate tension among groups. Rather, successful solutions do take into account the specific needs for those people involved and acknowledge that it takes the combined effort among many parties to even begin solving complex problems. Such solutions take an individual approach whenever possible, but still recognise group-related problems as they emerge.
- Successful integration programmes are ‘pretty intensive pieces of work’**, as one of the workshop participants, a policymaker, described upon considering the major collaboration required from different actors. Berlin’s Neighbourhood Management and Amsterdam’s youth employment programmes both require a concentrated investment of effort, in terms of both personal and financial resources. The fundamental political issue is about just this investment, not about the form of any abstract integration policy framework. Financial investments and a comprehensive yet individual-based approach make a real difference in effectively targeting group inequality. Resources are therefore of utmost importance: politicians and the public must always be cognizant of the fact that it takes time, money and effort to tackle complex socioeconomic problems effectively, whatever official policy framework may be at stake. It is not easy to avoid the dilemma of recognition. However, when all participating actors work together to make sure that individuals can receive adequate resources to improve their positions, policy practitioners show that it is possible.

## Further reading



*The immigrant organizing process. Turkish organizations in Amsterdam and Berlin and Surinamese organizations in Amsterdam 1960-2000.*

Floris Vermeulen (2006). IMISCOE Dissertations.  
Amsterdam: AUP



*Successes and Challenges of Local Integration Policy*, Floris Vermeulen, Rosanne Stotijn and Karl Lemberg(2007),

Working Paper-Conference Report No. 17

Frank de Zwart (2005), “The dilemma of recognition: Administrative categories and cultural diversity”, *Theory and Society*, 34: 137–169.

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**IMISCOE**

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