

**DECENTRALISATION OF EMPLOYMENT POLICIES
AND NEW FORMS OF GOVERNANCE:
TACKLING THE CHALLENGE OF ACCOUNTABILITY**

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MAIN ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

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Decentralisation of labour market policy can best be viewed as a tool to improve local governance, as it brings decision-making closer to where problems and individuals are. Decentralisation raises a number of challenges, however, both in terms of the degree of flexibility in policy management that it can yield in practice and the capacity to guarantee public accountability. Additional efforts may need to be deployed to connect successfully labour market authorities at regional and national level and actors involved in economic development and social inclusion activities at local level. To this end, local partnerships are being established across levels and between the public, private and civil-society sectors, and new forms of governance are being experimented with.

Improving local governance

Efforts are devoted today to improve policy co-ordination, adaptation to local conditions and participation of civil society and business circles in the orientation of measures. Through improving local governance, governments seek to make their actions more coherent locally and enhance their contribution to solving local problems in areas falling between individual policy fields. Given its clear interactions with economic development and social inclusion initiatives, labour market policy has a key role to play in government initiatives to improve local governance (OECD, 2001*a*).

Co-ordinating labour market policy with economic and social policies has long been on the institutional agenda. Co-ordination between labour market and social policies is based on the need to improve the employability of disadvantaged workers through more effective active labour market policies (ALMPs) and on the evidence that re-integration into employment is effective in fighting social exclusion and poverty (OECD, 2001*b*). Basic facts also underpin the need to co-ordinate labour market policy and economic development. Tailored labour market programmes and training services can support economic development activities promoting entrepreneurship, enterprise networking and inward investment.

To enforce co-ordination in practice and enable a concrete articulation and use of synergies in the local implementation of policies, the two other key elements of local governance -- adaptation and participation -- need to be applied.

Adaptation. There are increasing calls to adapt labour market policy better to local conditions and needs. Training programmes must meet business demands for skills that change rapidly and adjust to forthcoming local investments. The delivery of employment services must take account of existing (and gaps in) infrastructure, public transport and municipal services. Labour market programmes are more likely to be effective when they take into account the local characteristics of the target groups and seek to match them with local labour market needs (Martin and Grubb, 2001). To generate sustainable outcomes, placement and training services of disadvantaged groups sometimes need to be combined with psychological assistance and traineeship in intermediate labour markets (ILM) or other organisations specialised in progressive re-integration in employment. Additional skills-upgrading measures may be required to ensure employment sustainability and progression for the low-qualified re-integrating the labour market after a long period of inactivity (OECD, 2002).

Participation. Successful policy co-ordination and adaptation require the participation not only of civil servants in neighbouring policy areas, but also of representatives of local civil society and business as both have helpful information on local conditions and needs (Greffe, 2002). For example, information provided by local employers and representatives of the target groups can help target labour market programmes better; in this way, they may contribute to reducing the substitution and displacement effects (respectively, non-subsidised workers and activities displaced by subsidised ones) and deadweight loss (jobs that would have been created anyway) associated with some ALMPs. Organisations of the civil society, including employer organisations and trade unions, often provide services that complement those of the PES, such as vocational training, placement and special re-integration services through ILMs, and joint steering is required to maximise complementarity while avoiding duplication (OECD, 1998).

Local governance and policy effectiveness

Improving policy effectiveness represents another driver for institutional reform. Yet the evidence to support this relationship is thin. From the available information, it is hard to draw any clear conclusions on the impact of changes in the institutional framework on the effectiveness of ALMPs (De Koning, 2001). An econometric analysis of decentralisation of ALMPs in Sweden has merely identified an increase of local initiatives as a result of greater involvement of municipalities in decision-making (Lundin and Skedinger, 2000). However, it is clear from the section above that improving local governance can help to enhance effectiveness. Adapting policies to local conditions means to put greater emphasis on identifying the characteristics of the target groups, a key factor of effectiveness for job subsidies and training services. Information provided by local actors (employers, trade unions, municipalities, community-based organisations) help identify those characteristics and contribute to tailor policies to local labour market conditions and other relevant elements of the local context. The use of superior information represents the main benefit from decentralisation following the principal-agent theory, which concerns the relationship between a principal (central government in this case) and an agent (for example, a lower level of government). Yet there are also costs associated with decentralisation.

The principal-agent theory says that the main cost with decentralisation is the loss of control of the agent's actions, the size of which is proportional to the degree of divergence between the objectives of the agent and those of the principal. Yet, the concept of local governance welcomes such divergence to the extent where it serves co-ordination of labour market policies with economic development and social exclusion initiatives. Adapting policies to local conditions also means to reconcile further national and local objectives. Clearly, labour market policy implemented in a local governance perspective is likely to aim at a set of objectives broader than its dedicated, nationally-defined one. Consequently, despite a better use of the information available, institutional reforms may hardly be led in the sole name of policy effectiveness. (Exceptions are with decentralisation of the service delivery function and partnership with the private sector, which explicitly aim at cost-effectiveness -- see below the section on the challenges of accountability). To reflect the joint concern for greater co-ordination/adaptation of policies (better governance) and increased effectiveness, "appropriateness" is probably closer to the central objective pursued by institutional reforms, rather than effectiveness.

While co-ordination, adaptation and participation, together with effectiveness are the main principles that guide governments in their reforms to improve local governance, flexibility in policy management is the common mechanism implemented through those reforms. Administrative flexibility is needed in order to design specific programmes or adapt the implementation of existing ones, through modifying their terms, conditions and targets, in function of the local conditions identified, the information made available by other actors, the development strategies pursued and the initiatives led by other instances. Various tools have been experimented with to achieve this.

Decentralisation and flexibility in policy management

The main tool developed by governments to improve local governance is decentralisation. In the 1990s, several countries have undertaken to decentralise labour market policy so that it can be designed and implemented closer to where strategies for economic development are defined and social demands expressed. It has been widely agreed that decentralised decision-making promotes pragmatic solutions to local problems (OECD, 1996).

In principle, decentralisation gives more room for manoeuvre to area-based and integrated approaches. Programmes may be combined with efforts of local and regional governments, the private sector, trade unions and community groups to better support development strategies balancing concerns of economic development, social inclusion and the quality of life. Through greater flexibility in policy management, decentralisation is also expected to make it easier to respond to the growing concern with the inactive, i.e. lone parents, men in their 50s or people receiving disability benefits, who face complex issues and barriers that centralised employment services alone are unable to tackle. In practice, is it the case?

The various forms of decentralisation need to be explored to answer this question. There exist two main types of decentralised structure for the design and implementation of labour market policy (OECD, 1998). The first one is when, within the framework of an integrated, country-wide PES, programmes are designed and implemented at regional level, following guidelines or within a broad policy framework established at national level. This is often the case when the PES is managed in a tripartite fashion, involving trade unions and employer organisations, under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Labour. Austria and Denmark provide examples of this form of decentralisation. In this model there is a relative degree of freedom to deliver services tailored to the regional context. Quantitative objectives for each region are set at national level, or through regional-national discussions. Performance management systems are used to monitor the performances of regional PES in the pursuit of the targets set. Budget may be allocated to undertake 'join up' actions with other departments or in co-operation with civil society organisations.

Another form of decentralisation is when powers to design and implement policies are devolved to regional governments, which may then transfer the responsibility to their own regional PES. Elected assemblies at regional level ensure public accountability as does the national parliament in the case of centrally managed labour market policies. Some federal countries provide examples of this form of decentralisation -- Belgium, Canada (in most of the provinces), Mexico and Switzerland -- and so do unitary states, such as Italy and Spain. Some of these countries have recently devolved responsibilities in an asymmetric way, giving more powers to some of the regions in function of their administrative capacity and willingness to assume responsibility in the field of labour market policy. While this model normally provides greater flexibility at regional level than the integrated PES, it is worth noting that the central government often continues to play a strong role in the conduct of policy. Apart from Belgium, where there is a clear-cut distribution of powers between the federal state and the three regions, Bruxelles-Capitale, Flanders and Wallonia, which are responsible for ALMPs, in all countries the central government remains responsible for the broad policy framework and its funding, and may also design specific programmes to be implemented by regional PES. In Canada, even in the five provinces where policy-making powers have been fully devolved to the regional government, the federal government remains responsible for the main source of funding for active labour market policy through the Employment Insurance (EI) account and continues to be responsible for youth, women and indigenous populations for which it designs and delivers specific programmes. Provinces also fund social assistance and some ALMPs. Some other countries also have a mix of policies from national and regional governments being implemented by different networks of offices at local level. This is the case of the United States, where measures and services are provided in a multi-level governance framework involving the federal, state and local levels. To reduce the complexity of this system on the user side, the federal government supports the development of Workforce Investment

Boards (WIBs) to co-ordinate the delivery of programmes and operate one-stop shops. Agencies of this sort exist in several other OECD countries.

The main determinant of flexibility in policy management lies within the performance management system and more particularly with the targeting mechanism. In both models of decentralisation, broad policy orientations are given at national, or in a few cases, regional level. Some programmes, as well as most of the funding, come from the national level. Local officers are free to vary the use of the different measures available in response to the local conditions and requests, and in some cases to initiate new ones. However, this flexibility is matched by performance monitoring to ensure that progress is made with respect to targets set for a series of outputs (e.g. placements into jobs, referrals to various programmes, number of people trained), broken down by categories of users (unemployed, long-term unemployed, social assistance recipients, women, young, ethnic minorities, etc.) following management by objectives. Hence, the actual degree of flexibility depends on how these targets are fixed and by whom. Are targets set unilaterally at national level? Are they negotiated with the regional and local offices? Is there any role for other government departments, social partners and other local stakeholders?

The way to target measures varies significantly across countries. In France, Sweden and the United Kingdom, targets are allocated to the regional level in a top-down style, while in Austria, Denmark, and Germany, they are agreed in a decentralised procedure (Mosley, Schütz and Breyer, 2001). However that may be, only in a few cases do these systems involve local actors. Performance management systems are designed to maximise the output-based performance of the PES, which may be conflicting with local development preoccupations (e.g. fostering endogenous development, keeping young people in a depressed area, social inclusion of disadvantaged groups). For example, monitoring and evaluation of performance sometimes generate screening effects, privileging short-term unemployed over individuals with less skills and work experience, which may not be an acceptable outcome for local actors involved in social inclusion or economic development activities (Finn and Blackmore, 2001).

Another issue of concern with flexibility in decentralisation is linked with the frequent mismatch between the official and actual degree of decentralisation. There is always some extent of uncertainty with regard to how the new responsibilities will be assumed and managed once powers are passed from one government level to another. Decision-making power that lies with the local offices when labour market policy is under the jurisdiction of the central government may be re-centralised after powers are transferred to regional governments (OECD, 1998). Thus, even in a full devolution context, decentralisation may result in a loss of actual flexibility in the local management of policies.

Session I

Decentralisation: what difference does it make?

Questions to be addressed during the first session of the conference include the following:

- What, in practice, has been the result from decentralisation? Does decentralisation allow for integrated bottom-up solutions to be taken to complex problems?

- Does decentralisation enable to better connect labour market policy with social inclusion initiatives and economic development strategies? Can it facilitate the adaptation of policies to local needs and conditions, as well as a greater participation of civil society and local employers in decision making?

- What are the limits to flexibility imposed by these decentralised management frameworks, in the case of full devolution, integrated decentralisation and multi-level governance? Is management by objectives an obstacle?

Greater flexibility in policy management cannot be taken for granted as a result of decentralisation. Yet decentralisation raises more challenges.

The challenge of accountability

Public accountability and efficiency in service delivery represent challenges in a decentralised framework. Decentralisation implies a sharing of responsibility for decision-making among a number of actors, yet the main funding usually comes from the same source, i.e. central government. Thus, for full public accountability to be maintained, policy outcomes still need to be reported to the central government (and ultimately to parliament) with the same rigour as under a centralised framework. There are many obstacles to this.

In the case of devolution, it sometimes proves difficult to agree on an accountability framework politically acceptable to the various government levels concerned. Elected regional governments may pursue policy objectives different from those of the national government and may not consider the accountability framework as binding if not accompanied by financial penalties. The above-mentioned Swedish study identified significant divergences between local and national objectives for labour market policy. Sub-national governments can also transfer responsibilities to an agency and involve social partners and other organisations in the management of programmes, leading to a multiplication of intermediaries which may blur the lines of responsibility (OECD, 1999). All this may weaken the management of performances, and the performances themselves.

Greater difficulty arises when two government levels are responsible each for funding one of two complementary financial assistance regimes, such as in Canada where the federal government finances the

EI account through contributions from employers and employees and the provinces provide the budget for social assistance. This system gives provinces incentives to place social assistance beneficiaries into ALMP programme slots which can serve to requalify them for EI, thereby lowering the burden on provincial budget (a so-called “fiscal displacement” effect)

Managing measures in a multi-level governance framework also increases the administrative burden associated with fulfilling accountability requirements. In several countries, the PES is responsible for implementing programmes designed at various levels, including national, regional and local. In the US the Workforce Investment Boards implement up to 27 labour market programmes administered at various levels. Each programme has its own accountability line, its own set of terms and conditions and its own timeframe for monitoring and reporting. Being accountable to various administrative layers on a plethora of measures may reduce the local capacity to take a strategic approach to policy implementation in a local governance perspective (OECD, 2001a).

Obviously, not all models of decentralisation are concerned to the same extent by these challenges. The model that often seems to provide most flexibility, devolution to the regions, is also one that is likely to create more problems in terms of public accountability as it involves various levels of government authority and sources of funding. However, while the countries which have decentralised labour market policy within their integrated PES may be more immune to such problems, in some cases their performance management criteria have also become more strict in recent years in response to mounting pressures to increase the efficiency of public services.

The concerns with efficiency have played an important role in promoting decentralisation of the service delivery part of policy implementation processes. Decentralisation in this case usually means the transfer of responsibility for service delivery to private or non-profit service providers. The Netherlands progressively privatised the PES in the 1990s. The PES has been split up into a public provider of basic employment services (placement and processing benefit claims) and a privatised company to compete with private service providers for contracts to promote return to work (see Struyven and Steurs, 2002). Placement and part of vocational training services are being transferred to the private sector in several countries, including Belgium and Denmark. In Australia, ALMPs are now delivered through the Job Network, a network of private/community partnerships under contract with the federal government. While contractors enjoy some operational flexibility they must deliver specified services (Job Matching, Job Search Training and Intensive Assistance) in all areas. They are held accountable by local offices of the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR). An advisory network of Area Coordinating Committees has been set up but it has little impact on the implementation of programmes. (See OECD, 2001c, for a descriptive evaluation of the Job Network). Clearly, decentralisation within this type of framework does not encounter the same problems of accountability as those reforms concentrating on improving governance and concerned with co-ordination, adaptation and participation. Private service providers focus on well-specified targets and report on the results obtained in a format agreed by both parties. Cost-effectiveness is the chief objective of this model and improved local governance should not be expected among its main outcomes. In the Australian case, it has been argued that competition and poor linkages within a federal system prevent effective co-ordination with economic development and social inclusion initiatives. Increased reliance on contestability and privatisation may reduce costs and increase efficiency in service delivery, but also create greater problems of fragmentation, with an emphasis on competition rather than co-operation (Considine, 2001).

Session II

Reconciling flexibility and accountability

Questions to be addressed during the second session include the following:

- In the case of devolution to the regions, a number of partners and levels of government enter decision-making processes. Who is responsible for what? How can full accountability of the actions undertaken be ensured while greater flexibility is being provided?*
- How can governments facilitate the local management of policies and programmes when there are multiple accountability lines relating to various government levels and departments?*
- How can the impact of greater flexibility, i.e. the benefits from decentralisation, be monitored and assessed? How can the impact from “taking an integrated approach” be valued?*

While solutions to the trade-off between flexibility in policy management and public accountability have yet to be identified, other tools exist to improve governance.

Partnerships and new forms of governance

Decentralisation reforms transfer extents of decision making mainly to the regional level. Recipients of powers through decentralisation of the PES are regional governments (in the case of devolution) and tripartite labour market councils (in the case of decentralisation within integrated public employment services, as described below), often at regional level too. Yet economic development problems and social exclusion concerns have a clear dimension at local level. Therefore, decentralisation *per se* cannot guarantee better co-ordination between labour market policies managed at regional level and economic development and social initiatives led at local level. Partner relationships between labour market authorities and local actors involved in economic and social development are required to complete the process successfully, as agreed at the OECD conference on Decentralisation of the Public Employment Service and Local Management of Employment Policies (Venice, 23-24 April 1998; see OECD, 1999).

The most common form of partner relationships is found within area-based partnerships, bodies involving government services, local authorities, employers, trade unions and community-based organisations working together to design area-based strategies, adapt policies to local conditions and take initiatives consistent with shared priorities. After the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s when those partnerships were mainly the result of isolated local initiatives in distressed areas, governments have come to use them as a tool to improve governance and address more systematically issues of economic development, employment, social cohesion and the quality of life throughout the country.

National governments and partnerships

National governments have created, or supported, most of the networks of partnerships that today exist in OECD countries. Through these networks, governments seek the co-operation of partners from the private sector and civil society in the pursuit of various objectives, from stimulating economic development to promoting social cohesion.

Ireland provides good illustrations of such initiatives, which have served as a model in several European countries. Through successive steps, in 1991 and 1994, the government launched a network of 38 partnerships aimed at improving social inclusion. It repeated the experience in 2000, establishing development boards in all counties and cities of the country, tasked with the design of economic, social and cultural development strategies. Another country where partnerships have become a significant element of the institutional framework is Austria. In each of the nine *Länder*, a partnership supported by the federal government now co-ordinates employment measures and provides a platform for co-operation between the main actors in this field, particularly the regional governments, the public employment service, the social partners and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

The development councils of the *pays* promoted by the legislation in France, the regional growth agreements in Sweden and the local strategic partnerships in the United Kingdom are all a part of this trend. Partnerships also flourish in Canada and the United States, where they have long been involved in diverse tasks ranging from co-ordinating government policies in the labour market to pooling resources for economic development. In the US, the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 has led to the creation of partnerships in charge of co-ordinating a broad range of policies, from employment and social assistance to education, including those measures targeted on youth. In Norway, a reform proposing the creation of regional partnerships responsible for co-ordinating the implementation of policies, including those issued at national level, is being debated by parliament.

Source: OECD, 2001*a*.

A study by the OECD (2001*a*) has identified the main mechanisms through which partnerships impact on local governance. Partnerships: i) stimulate the take-up of government programmes that are consistent with priorities shared locally; ii) identify local synergies and combine government programmes with local initiatives to enhance their impact; and iii) assist government officers in targeting national programmes to match local conditions. In doing so, partnerships often manage to fill policy gaps and help communities meet their needs. The study also highlighted that improving local governance should be considered as the main outcome of area-based partnerships. While in some countries, networks of partnerships are better known for the services they deliver directly to the community, evidence shows that this aspect of their work remains fairly limited in practice. Analysis of the budget of partnerships in Ireland, a country where partnerships are particularly active, demonstrates that the measures directly implemented by partnerships amount to only three per cent of the total budget for ALMPs annually. Similar ratios have been obtained for other countries. It appears clearly that the Irish partnerships play a more significant role in terms of stimulating the take-up of government programmes that are compatible with the priorities defined locally and adapting them to local needs. For example, the Community Employment (CE) framework agreement requires local PES offices to agree with the partnerships on the terms and conditions and targets to be given to the implementation of the CE job subsidy, which is one of the main ALMP in Ireland in terms of budget allocation (403 million EUR in 2000). The PES remains fully in charge of the delivery of the programme.

Partnerships bring a useful contribution to local governance, yet their work raise challenges for accountability and policy effectiveness. Partnerships seek to raise their profile as direct providers of services to the community, taking advantage of the sluggish capacity of the public sector to respond to changing local situations. Legitimate though it may be, the resulting distribution of responsibilities may not be optimal since public services are endowed with greater financial resources and better skills to provide efficiently the services required. An additional difficulty arises when a partnership gets involved in the implementation of a programme managed by a public service partner as both have incentives to report on positive outcomes while ignoring failures. Double reporting on job creation involving both the PES and a partnership has been signalled in several countries.

The weak response from national ministries represents another challenge for partnerships. The limit to what partnerships can achieve in terms of policy co-ordination at the local level is provided by the degree of coherence at national level. Government departments should make their missions and goals consistent and compatible with the goal assigned to the network of local partnerships if the latter are to generate any significant and sustainable outcomes. Partnerships are often supervised by a single ministry or agency, and other departments face little incentive to get involved. Instead each ministry is tempted to set up its own network of partnerships, which may then be used to legitimise new government action.

Another difficulty with partnership lies with the evaluation of performances. If their main outcome is to improve local governance, then partnerships must be evaluated against changes in governance as a result from working in partnership. Performance management should seek to monitor and assess what has changed from working in partnership. What is the result of a better policy co-ordination, adaptation to local conditions, and participation of civil society and the private sector? Consistently, their performances should not be assessed in terms of policy impacts (e.g. number of jobs created, business start-ups), which are indeed the result of the actions of their own partners, unless the partnerships' staff themselves deliver the services. This calls for the challenging task of identifying governance indicators, which can be meaningful and give partners incentives to sustain participation (Giguère, 2002). The issue of evaluating partnerships properly should be clearly distinguished from that of evaluating local development initiatives and programmes. As a recent OECD conference on Evaluation of Local Development and Job Creation (Vienna, 20-21 November 2002) showed, good quality evaluation is essential in appraising the merits of different policy approaches, and this obviously applies to measures to promote economic development and social inclusion at local level. In creating the conditions for identifying new opportunities and areas for synergies, partnerships may be at the origin of some of these initiatives. But partnership is a mere way of working, not a substitute for the public service or the private sector. In the absence of explicit delegations of powers, the partners remain responsible for the respective programmes and initiatives they manage and fund.

The uneven capacity of the partners is another weakness of partnership as a form of governance. For a partnership to generate fruitful and effective co-operation, its main partners must share a similar degree of legitimacy. Yet the means of the three main sectors of society that are normally represented in partnerships -- public, private and civil society -- differ significantly: the largely unstructured civil society is often represented on a volunteer basis and on the leisure time of its members. The NGOs that often volunteer to represent civil society indeed represent the interest of their respective members and not that of the wider local community, generating conflicts of interest and undermining the accountability of partnerships as a whole. In various circumstances, business, and in particular the small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs), also finds it difficult to be represented appropriately. As a result, partnership may set objectives for local development and labour market policies that do not portray representative priorities, as they would be expressed and addressed in a wider and more balanced partnership. For the various sectors to be in a position to play a significant and comparable role in partnerships, mechanisms enabling broad representation, the definition of mandates and reporting structures need to be designed and implemented.

The stronger partners (i.e. the government) may have a role to play to help build the capacity of the weakest parties.

While more work needs to be done to tackle these challenges, new forms of governance have learnt the lessons from the early experience of networks of partnership and are now flourishing in OECD countries, promoting cross-cutting and integrated approaches in policy-making. Co-operative agreements are established among the public services, and between public agencies and other partners; local and regional strategies involving a wide range of policy areas and reflecting local priorities are designed to guide the implementation of national policies; framework agreements are set up to give a role to civil society in adapting public policies to local needs (such as in Ireland). These initiatives do not make formal devolution of responsibility a necessary condition, but instead emphasise the duty for public officers to co-operate with other stakeholders and to form partnerships to make their actions more appropriate at local level.

Labour market policy has a key role to play in these initiatives to improve local governance. Can policy management frameworks and decision-making processes for labour market policy incorporate local governance principles and promote co-ordination, adaptation and participation? According to the current trends, this may mean: a) regional administrative layers adjusting policies in function of shared area-based strategies; b) ministries, represented by their local offices, consulting local stakeholders on the terms and conditions and targets to be given to policies; and c) strengthening the capacity of the civil society and business circles to participate in strategic planning exercises. More work needs to be done on these issues to identify what incentives are required for employment services (both public and private) to form the right partnerships in a local governance perspective.

Session III

New forms of governance in practice

Questions to be addressed during the third session include the following:

- Are new forms of governance fulfilling their objectives? Do they provide sufficient leeway to the management of public programmes at local level so that public service officers can participate in integrated projects relevant in a local development perspective?*
- Are public accountability requirements satisfied? Do new forms of governance incur a loss of accountability and how can this be surmounted?*
- Can new forms of governance support decentralisation, or should they be considered as a substitute for it?*
- Could a rethinking of management frameworks and decision-making structures in a local governance perspective help better achieve the goal of an integrated approach?*

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