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Reflections on the public policy process in Ireland

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Prelude to policymaking

This article contains reflections on the making of public policy in Ireland. No judgements are being made about whether policies are a success. Rather it is the process that is being examined – how the business is done, who the main players are and what changes might improve the process. Making public policy is a complex business that involves many participants with different roles, responsibilities, interests, concerns and resources. It is never easy. The task is made more difficult in an increasingly complex, uncertain and unpredictable world. The making of public policy has been defined as the process by which governments translate their political visions into programmes and actions to deliver outcomes – from election manifestos to programmes for government. It suggests that policies are neat and tidy; not so. As G. Cunningham argued over half a decade ago, ‘Policy is rather like the elephant – you recognise it when you see it but cannot easily define it’ (Cunningham, 1963).

In the real world, policies are not always about vision either; many policies emerge as a response to a public problem or to a crisis that requires a solution. For good policy, solutions should be produced only after the problem has been defined, the options evaluated, consultation undertaken and a course of action identified. However, politicians do not always have sufficient time for all these stages. Decisions often have to be taken quite quickly, and sometimes with unexpected, adverse consequences. Moreover, enough time is not always given to do the ‘check-back’, to see if the course of action chosen has been the right one.

This article is laid out in the following seven sections:

- i. public policymaking as a process;
- ii. public policymaking in Ireland;
- iii. formulating policy;
- iv. evidence-based policymaking;
- v. enhancing capacity;
- vi. monitoring and evaluation;
- vii. conclusions.

Public policymaking as a process

How does the common good fit into public policy? Ideally, governments should be directing, structuring and operating in a manner which leads towards an optimum level of economic and social achievement and well-being for all citizens. In the real world, while governments have the objective of attaining the common good, this is continually under pressure from a variety of stakeholders, all pleading their own interests. Policy outcomes depend on the strength of governments in steering courses which are good for the whole society.

Most policy developments are initiated by, or have their initiation agreed with, government ministers. Specific policies are devised in response to government manifestos, EU requirements, court decisions, research evidence or demands made by other vested interest groups. Public policies are affected by history and culture, by competing ideologies and by conflicts within civil society. As Michael Hill points out, 'The policy process is a complex political process in which there are many actors: politicians, pressure groups, civil servants, publicly employed professionals, and even sometimes those who see themselves as the passive recipients of policy' (Hill, 2014). Policy can be either positive or negative in that governments can choose to act, or not. When the roadmaps for policy action are decided upon, they can take a range of different forms, including taxation and regulation, the provision of direct public services, the encouragement of voluntary change, as well as non-intervention.

There is no shortage of theoretical models that attempt to provide explanations as to how governments and public servants should devise public policies. Such models attempt to describe and analyse the process in a simple manner. Because it is not possible to capture all of the ingredients of policymaking in a single theoretical model, only a flavour of these models can be given in this article. The application of models is never simple, although listing the key stages may be simple,

from a start (proposal) to a middle (policy design and option choice), and then to an end (delivery). The following are examples of models:

- **Rational choice model:** This is based on the rational manner in which self-interested individuals and groups try to influence the policy process, to reflect their interests. Its application involves consideration of all possible policy alternatives during the process. This model has been developed particularly by those who think it preferable to use market mechanisms to settle collective choice problems (Hill, 2014).
- **Incrementalist model:** This simplifies the decision-making process by limiting the number of alternatives considered to those that differ in small degrees from existing policies. Instead of specifying objectives and then assessing what policies would fulfil these objectives, the decision-maker reaches decisions by comparing specific policies and the extent to which these policies will result in the attainment of objectives (Lindblom, 1979).
- **Variations on incrementalist model:** There are a number of models that are variations on the incrementalist model. They include 'policy on the hoof', 'policy of muddling through', 'policy by default' and 'responding to other people's policies'.

In an ideal world, policy would be linear: starting with a range of options that are then filtered down to 'politically' acceptable options before being refined by way of research, analysis, consultation and impact assessment into a single option to be drafted into legislation, adopted by government, debated in parliament, enacted, and implemented and enforced. The 'stages' of policymaking often overlap; indeed they are often inseparable. Policy problems and policy solutions frequently emerge together, rather than one after another. Things are rarely decided on a smooth basis, as the political world is full of sudden and unexpected changes and interventions. There may be plans available off the shelf before a need to act has even been identified; this can lead to poorly conceived policies. C. J. Friedrich summed up this phenomenon very well by arguing that 'Public policy is being formed as it is being executed, and it is likewise executed as it is being formed' (Friedrich, 1940).

A very practical guide on policymaking has been prepared by the Northern Ireland authorities. In 2003 the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland published the *Practical Guide to Policy Making in Northern Ireland*. In the foreword to the guide,

Nigel Hamilton, Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, opined that ‘policy development should not be seen as the preserve of a few specialists. Those involved at the “front line” of service delivery, whether in schools, hospitals or social security offices, have a vital role in helping to gauge what is deliverable. They have a keen awareness of what really matters to the citizen’ (Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2003).

Public policymaking in Ireland

The making of public policy in Ireland is no different from that of other countries. Only the actors are different. Key decisions are taken by the government meeting in cabinet and then approved by the Oireachtas.¹ A briefing note by Oireachtas Brief points out that ‘Many key decisions will be made by the weekly cabinet meeting, but are then adjusted (but rarely overturned) by the Oireachtas. Decisions are normally preceded by a *Memorandum to government* by a minister and his or her department proposing a particular course of action which is then agreed and which all members of the government then support, under the principle of collective responsibility’ (Oireachtas Brief, n.d.).

In making policy, government is advised by its officials and dedicated advisors. The key role of departments is described by Oireachtas Brief as follows: ‘Despite the importance of cabinet government and the Oireachtas, many decisions and proposals emerge from government departments. Each department will have an agenda of business which it will build up over time, developing its own momentum of reform and desirable improvements in public administration, most of which will be uncontroversial’ (Oireachtas Brief, n.d.).

The provision of professional advice is not confined to central government. There are many organisations, both governmental and non-governmental, that provide advice. The National Economic and Social Council (NESC) is an example of an official organisation. It was established in 1973 and advises the Taoiseach on strategic policy issues. From 1986 to 2006 NESC produced strategy reports that were the basis for negotiating the social partnership agreements, as well as

¹ In Ireland, fifteen ministers, each of whom heads one or more government departments, collectively form the government. Executive power is exercised by, or on the authority of, the government.

contributing to development of overall government policy.² The council is chaired by the Secretary General of the Department of the Taoiseach and contains representatives of trade unions, employers, farmers' organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), key government departments and independent experts. Reports produced by the council are published on www.nesc.ie.

In the case of advice on budgetary policy, there is a myriad of economic commentators, many with vested interests, who make their views known annually to the Department of Finance at Budget time. In the case of the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council, it has a legal obligation to make its views known to government. It was legally established under the Fiscal Responsibility Act, 2012. And that Act states that the council shall be independent in the performance of its functions. Those functions include (a) providing an assessment of the official forecasts and (b), in relation to each Budget, providing an assessment of whether the fiscal stance is, in the opinion of the council, conducive to prudent economic and budgetary management, while having regard to the provisions of the Stability and Growth Pact. The council is required to publish its assessments (Ferris, 2014a).

There are a number of other organisations that offer their views on the public policymaking process through research, training and education, and the arranging of seminars and conferences. These organisations include:

- Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI): an independent research institute, which has the status of a not-for-profit public company (company limited by guarantee with no share capital);
- Institute of International and European Affairs: an independent, not-for-profit organisation with charitable status;
- Institute of Public Administration (IPA): a public service development agency focused exclusively on public sector development;
- Nevin Economic Research Institute: a research organisation supported by a number of unions affiliated to the Irish Congress of Trade Unions;
- Public Affairs Ireland: a non-specialist education, training and research institute;

² In January 2012, the sustainable development role performed by Comhar: Sustainable Development Council was integrated into the work of NESC.

- Publicpolicy.ie: an independent organisation fully funded by Atlantic Philanthropies;
- TASC: an independent think-tank which is registered as a public-education charity.

Many of these organisations not only help policy-watchers keep up to date with new public policy developments but also provide commentaries on whether public policies are succeeding.

It will be obvious from the foregoing that there is a wide range of organisations that help to shape or influence public policy in Ireland – many governmental and many non-governmental. One website – Oireachtas Brief³ – has produced a very helpful ‘map’, observing that ‘policymaking in Ireland comprises several main clusters of bodies, each with an important role’ (Oireachtas Brief, n.d.). The list is as follows:

- the government, which at its core are the fifteen ministers of the cabinet and below them fifteen ministers of state, or ‘junior ministers’;
- departments, each of which has a minister responsible, staffed by civil servants;
- state agencies, which number about 600, and include development bodies, regulatory agencies, commercial bodies, service providers (e.g. Health Service Executive) and advisory groups, staffed by public servants;
- social partners, who comprise five ‘pillars’: business and employers, trade unions, farmers, environmental NGOs and the ‘community and voluntary pillar’, which comprises seventeen community and voluntary organisations;
- political parties, which generate policies for their parties and have a mobilising role at elections;
- think tanks, such as TASC and the ESRI. Private consultancies may also be commissioned to provide policy research and advice for government;
- the EU, which has an important role in determining, with Ireland’s participation, policies in key areas such as trade, development, agriculture, the environment and equal opportunities;

³ Oireachtas Brief is described as ‘an information service for social justice NGOs and voluntary sector activists interested in issues of poverty and social exclusion in the Oireachtas’ (see www.oireachtasbrief.ie).

- the media, which provide the channels whereby policy issues are debated and discussed, or not.

It is clear that the list is not definitive. Indeed one could argue that every individual or social group concerned about a collective problem addressed by a policy might be considered a potential lobbyist. Lobby groups are frequently criticised because they work in the shadows and spend large amounts of money to try and influence policy, and thereby limit the ability of governments to take decisions that benefit society as a whole (Ferris, 2014b). This matter is currently being addressed under the Registration of Lobbying Bill, 2014. The draft legislation is designed to allow for the establishment of a web-based register of lobbying activity and to deliver appropriate transparency on 'who is contacting whom about what'. It also sets down draft rules concerning the practice of lobbying. Lobbying occurs where specified persons lobby about the development/zoning of land; the initiation, development or modification of any public policy/programme; the preparation of legislation; or the award of a grant, loan or contract by the state. Where such lobbying occurs, the lobbyist will have to register with the Standards in Public Office Commission and declare lobbying activities.

If enacted, this legislation will have relevance for most sectors of the economy. The draft bill recognises that there might be a need to revisit the legislation after the current bill is enacted. Specifically, the draft bill contains a provision that the relevant minister should review the operation of the lobbying legislation no later than one year after the commencement day, and every five years thereafter. Such a provision will enable any significant adverse, unintended effects that might arise under the proposed legislation to be addressed. The overall objective should be to have lobbying legislation that operates as effectively and efficiently as possible, while taking lobbying 'out of the shadows'. Even before this legislation has been enacted, many government departments, in undertaking consultation processes, alert interested parties to the fact that any views submitted are likely to be published.

Even newspapers and the media can at times engage as lobbyists. In this regard, *The Economist* has argued that British newspapers 'tempt governments into policymaking by headline, a method that prizes speed, simplicity and emotional satisfaction over sober analysis of costs and benefits' ('Tabloid rule', 2010). In Ireland, radio phone-ins on current topics not only attract political responses but on some occasions have even become the subject of parliamentary questions on

the Dáil's Order of Business. Issues raised by these phone-ins or by other social media outlets, such as Twitter and Facebook, offer a place for citizens' opinions, in a setting which was usually the preserve of broadcasting professionals, politicians, journalists and expert commentators. Politicians who ignore this new stream for airing current issues do so at their peril.

Formulating policy

The government has collective responsibility for formulating policy. A method frequently used to formulate policy is publication of Green Papers, White Papers or discussion documents. There is no significance in the colours or even in the titles. The 'paper process' usually starts with a Green Paper, which is a discussion document, in which an issue is outlined, various options are suggested, and the advantages and disadvantages of those options are set out. Generally, the public are asked for submissions on the options proposed. After this process is completed, a White Paper is drawn up, setting out the government's policy on the issue and what it intends to do. The proposals in White Papers can then be implemented through legislation or institutional reforms.

There are many variations in the process. Sometimes the titles Green and White Papers are not used; instead they are called discussion documents or something similar. Sometimes White Papers are published without Green Papers preceding them. Sometimes the process is carried through and then nothing happens. Sometimes papers are published which have the same effect as a White Paper, but are called strategy documents or background policy papers. The actual public consultation process varies as well.

When the *Statement on Sectoral Economic Regulation* was published by government in July 2013 (Department of the Taoiseach, 2013a), it impacted on a number of departments and regulators. The statement lists a series of key regulatory actions for the different economic sectors. The statement poses new challenges for the different government departments. To help develop the statement, the Department of the Taoiseach had organised a consultation process in early 2013. This was designed to ascertain the public's views on national economic regulatory policy and how the role of sectoral regulators might be improved. The final document states that the main objective is to provide a clear strategic context in which departments

can demonstrate, in legislation, their policy directions. Accordingly, the statement requires that, apart from any other legislative changes arising from policy or mandate reviews, sectoral ministers should introduce legislative changes to:

- provide for the setting of a hierarchy of policy objectives with national-level objectives prioritised;
- provide for policy/mandate reviews on a statutory basis at least every seven years;
- provide for a performance and accountability framework for regulators and regulated sectors.

In addition to updating legislation and mandates, the government statement seeks general improvements in the operation of the sectoral departments and regulators, through increased shared services and greater staff efficiencies. As regards the role of the different actors, it states that, within the overall regulatory framework, the role of policy departments is to set policy goals, decide on regulatory structures and provide general guidance on the required policy outcomes, while the role of economic regulators is to independently decide how to implement the decisions to effectively achieve these outcomes. These outcomes in turn should contribute to a better overall outcome for consumers. The principles, designed to provide a sharper focus for economic regulation, as set out in the statement, are as follows:

Effectiveness

- The economic regulatory framework should form a key part of the government's broader policy approach.
- The economic regulatory framework should be flexible to be able to anticipate and respond to market conditions as they evolve.
- Effective mechanisms should be in place to rigorously assess whether objectives are being achieved and if these mechanisms are sufficient to protect consumer interests and promote healthy competition and investment.

Predictability

- The economic regulatory framework should provide a stable environment that facilitates long-term investment decisions along with efficient delivery of services.

Accountability

- Ensure that economic regulation takes place within a statutory and accountable framework set by government and the Oireachtas.
- Who is responsible for what must clearly be articulated.

Transparency

- Ensure regulatory decisions are being made on an impartial basis and are open to scrutiny through effective consultation mechanisms. (Department of the Taoiseach, 2013a, p. 8)

Evidence-based policymaking

There is an increasing requirement for policy options to be based on rigorous analysis of available evidence. This requirement is intensified by virtue of the increasing complexities of today's society, as well as a much greater demand for transparency and accountability in relation to how policy is formulated, delivered and implemented. In this regard, in July 2013 the US Office of Management and Budget (OMB) directed departments and agencies to ensure that 'major new policy proposals, and agency performance plans, should be accompanied by a thorough discussion of existing evidence, both positive and negative, on the effectiveness of those proposals in achieving the policy objective or agency priority goal. Such evidence includes evaluation results, performance measures, and other relevant data analytics and research studies, with a preference for high-quality experimental and quasi-experimental studies' (OMB, 2013).

In recent years, there has been a discernible shift towards evidence-based policy in Ireland. Frances Ruane has pointed to the growing emphasis on this topic in Ireland, with it receiving increased attention at conferences and in lectures over the past decade (Ruane, 2012). The use of evidence is increasingly seen in evaluative programmes, such as expenditure reviews undertaken by government departments; greater use of research in the social sciences; and policy-proofing tools to underpin key policy objectives, e.g. reducing poverty and promoting gender equality. The provision of evidence was at the heart of the EU-IMF programme of financial support – the troika 'bail-out' – where Ireland was committed to implementing a range of reform measures in the area of budgetary management, including multi-year fiscal planning and effective prioritisation of public expenditure over the medium term.

Evidence comes in many forms and from many sources. It includes new and existing statistics, new and existing research, corporate memory and external expert knowledge. In addition, evidence includes the results of consultation processes, the results of economic or statistical modelling, and information derived from the Internet. However, evidence must be treated with a certain amount of caution for a number of reasons. First, it takes time to collect evidence; governments often have to take decisions before data can be fully assembled and analysed. Second, there is always the risk that evidence might be misused to justify decisions that should in fact be rejected. Third, the quality of evidence can vary considerably. In this regard, Sir Peter Gluckman has illustrated how all evidence is not of equal quality: 'for example, anecdotal recall of recent weather events does not have the same validity or credibility as a systematically compiled set of long-term climate records' (Gluckman, 2011).

Training and awareness-raising, and development of policy tools and techniques can create a more favourable climate for evidence-based policy. In this regard, the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) held a conference in February 2005 on the topic of evidence-based policymaking.⁴ The conference afforded participants the opportunity to discuss and debate the complex and challenging issues around the design and implementation of public policy. The proceedings are available on the NESF website under the apposite title of *Getting the Evidence, Using the Evidence and Evaluating the Outcomes* (NESF, 2007).

A key requirement for progress in policymaking is the availability of better statistics for policymakers. In this regard, it should be noted that the National Statistics Board is responsible to government for developing its statistical strategy. This responsibility includes the setting of priorities for the compilation and development of official statistics in Ireland and guiding the strategic direction of the Central Statistics Office (CSO). The board stated, in December 2012, in its implementation of the *Strategy for Statistics 2009–2014* that its 'overarching priority is the full realisation of an effectively functioning Irish Statistical System, i.e. the development of a coherent whole-system approach to statistics that would link CSO-generated statistics

⁴ In March 2010, following the government's decision to streamline the work of policy advice within the National Economic and Social Development Office, NESF was absorbed into NESF. This decision was taken in light of the report of the Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes (McCarthy report).

with administrative data holdings so as to maximise the statistical potential of all available data sources' (National Statistics Board, 2012).

The CSO is the premier source of statistics in Ireland. It continues to expand the range of national economic, social and environmental statistics. An example is the series entitled *Measuring Ireland's Progress*, which contains a very useful set of national progress indicators. The most recent publication in this series is the set of indicators relating to *Measuring Ireland's Progress 2012*, published in January 2014 (CSO, 2014). In addition, the CSO serves the needs of the wider national and international community (media, researchers, students, businesses, representative organisations, the EU, international organisations and the public generally) for impartial and relevant information on social and economic conditions.

In recent years the government has been taking steps to introduce performance budgeting into Ireland. In that context, the government has launched a new website to provide a consistent basis for measuring performance. It is called *Ireland Stat*. The 2013 progress report on the programme for government pointed out that *Ireland Stat* 'is a new whole-of-performance website for citizens... It presents accessible information for programmes on activity, costs, achievements and international comparison' (Department of the Taoiseach, 2013b). This should allow goals to be measured over time by linking them to relevant outcomes and outputs. Up to now it would only have been possible to assemble such policy information, with some difficulty, by drawing together information from several different publications, including statements of strategy, annual reports and output statements, and by accessing statistics from the CSO, Eurostat and the OECD. The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform has taken the lead in rolling out the new website at www.irelandstat.gov.ie.

As circumstances change, evidence for policymaking needs to be updated and re-evaluated. In light of the economic crisis, the ESRI began a series of research studies in 2011 to explore what evidence might inform policy in the future. A key feature of each of the projects was the focus on the evidence that the international literature provides in informing policymakers in Ireland about the relevant actions they might want to consider. The research has been brought together in a book edited by Peter Lunn and Frances Ruane of the ESRI (Lunn & Ruane, 2013). Entitled *Using Evidence to Inform Policy*, the book is of interest to a range of different readers. It has the potential to provide

guidance to those engaged in policy analysis, to inform policymaking and to provide material for those engaged in teaching or studying the policymaking process. A common theme is that good evidence is likely to result in better policy decisions, but that good policy cannot be deduced from evidence alone. The following is a snapshot of the sectors examined by the ESRI researchers (Ferris, 2014c):

- i. Public infrastructure: Suggested improvement in the cost–benefit evaluations of major infrastructure investments, with recommendation that all evaluations be published.
- ii. Loan-to-value: Examination of international evidence regarding the introduction of loan-to-value limits for mortgages, as a means for reducing the risk of housing bubbles.
- iii. Healthcare: Examination of international evidence in relation to pay-for-performance (‘P4P’) in healthcare. However, the introduction of ‘P4P’ in Ireland is not recommended.
- iv. Education: The international analysis shows a number of areas in which research evidence can contribute to enhanced policy and practices at school level.
- v. Enterprise sector: The analysis shows potential for a mix of policies to support innovation in enterprises.
- vi. Labour markets: Identification of a range of active labour market policies, in response to the challenge of getting unemployed people back to work.
- vii. Competition and regulation: The economic impact of relaxing competition and regulatory policy, against perceived potential benefits for insecure workers, is examined.
- viii. Financial services and consumers: The challenges facing policymakers in the financial services sector, and the impact on consumers, are examined.
- ix. Adjusting fiscal policy: Adjustment to fiscal consolidations in Ireland and elsewhere.
- x. Earnings and labour costs: Discussion of what might be done to help the quantity of labour supplied equal the demanded quantity of labour.
- xi. Public services: Evidence that the perceived quality of some Irish public services is lower among the more economically vulnerable, leading to the question of whether these services can be improved for this most disadvantaged group.

Enhancing capacity

It is important that the Irish public sector has the capacity to ensure that the resources provided by taxpayers are managed carefully, and that their use has an optimal impact on society. In this regard, the government established the Irish Government Economic & Evaluation Service (IGEES) in 2012, under the wing of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. The overarching goal of IGEES is to build capacity and expertise within the national government in the first instance, and to enhance the role of economics and value-for-money analysis in public policymaking. It is a cross-government service, and currently involves nearly all central government departments and offices who have established and resourced designated economic and evaluation units. These units build on the processes, procedures and guidance that have been in existence in the public sector for some time, designed to ensure that public money is well spent. IGEES now brings a new capacity to help ensure that decision-makers have sufficient economic and evaluation capacity within their departments. This increased capacity is intended to support continuing improvements in policy design and formulation.

An oversight board has been convened to consider how best IGEES can be developed and deployed in support of evidence-based policy formulation. One key objective of the oversight board, which includes external academic representation, is to ensure that IGEES's staff receive appropriate in-career training and development in specialist skills areas, and that the analytical resource is applied consistently and effectively across the civil service.

A recent IPA publication has acknowledged that IGEES is an important initiative (Boyle, 2014). However, it suggests that IGEES needs to be further developed and monitored. In particular, it recommends that 'The expansion of IGEES units to cover all departments should be pursued as a matter of priority. Thought should be given to how best to maintain expertise within IGEES and for the expertise not to be dissipated as with previous initiatives of a similar nature... The IGEES management and oversight boards should periodically review outputs and outcomes from the activity of IGEES to determine the value added of the service'.

In tandem with IGEES, a Public Service Evaluation Network (PSEN) was established by government in 2012. This network comprises civil servants who are engaged in policy-related analytical work and experts in economics and related areas from the universities

and other research organisations. The purpose of the PSEN is to provide a forum for those engaged in policy analysis to share experiences and expertise, to peer-review analytical work, and to facilitate the flow of information between the public service and external experts regarding evaluation, appraisal and policy analysis. Seminars have been held to promote cooperation between public service evaluators and external bodies such as the universities, the ESRI and European experts. Outside the public service, the Irish Evaluation Network fulfils a similar role for all evaluators in Ireland, including those working in the private, voluntary and community sectors (Boyle, 2014).⁵

Monitoring and evaluation

In completing the policy cycle, policies should be monitored and evaluated to see whether policies are succeeding. Put briefly, monitoring is a systematic assembly of information to determine ongoing progress in the delivery of policies. By contrast, evaluations are carried out less frequently – usually after a policy has been in operation for a number of years, or when a new government comes into power. The objective of any evaluation is to determine the continued relevance of a policy and whether it should be discarded or amended.

Evaluations are vital in order to help improve the quality of future policymaking. In many countries, recent experiences and reforms have highlighted the importance of having high-quality, relevant and timely evaluations available to decision-makers. This point was echoed in the recently published *Comprehensive Expenditure Report 2015–2017*, which states that the continued focus on reforming the quality and effectiveness of public services has two components: ‘the first is bedding down a culture of evaluation that will better inform decisions on resource prioritisation and allocation, the second is maintaining momentum on improving how these resources are invested and used to deliver public services’ (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2014).

Time needs to be set aside to do the evaluations, to see if the policy courses of action chosen have been successful. Evaluations involve examining how public resources are used, how spending programmes might be reformed and whether or not resources might be better used supporting the implementation of different policies. Whoever

⁵ See www.dcu.ie/education_studies/ien/index.shtml.

conducts such evaluation work needs to have the right structures and frameworks in place to ensure that the best possible value for money is obtained. Also evidence on the roll-out of policies should be gathered in such a way that the impact of policies can be measured.

Ireland has developed a Public Spending Code in recent years to guide policy analysts. It provides a consistent set of rules and procedures to ensure that these standards are upheld across the Irish public service (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2013). The IPA has recently suggested that the Public Spending Code should be modified to allow greater use of providers, external to the civil service, in the conduct of evaluations (Boyle, 2014). Moreover, it argued that ‘a key requirement is that civil servants have the capacity to manage evaluations effectively and be “educated consumers” of evaluation’. The following is the overview of the Public Spending Code, as defined by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform:

All Irish public bodies are obliged to treat public funds with care, and to ensure that the best possible value for money is obtained whenever public money is being spent or invested.

The Public Spending Code is the set of rules and procedures that apply to ensure that these standards are upheld across the Irish public service. The Code brings together in one place all of the elements of the value-for-money framework that has been in force up to now, updated and reformed in some respects. The Code is maintained on this website under the management of the Central Expenditure Evaluation Unit of the Department of Public Expenditure & Reform as a resource for the entire Irish public service. In September 2013, Departments and Offices were formally notified by circular that the Public Spending is in effect. (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2013)

Focused policy assessments (FPAs) are another innovation of relevance to policymaking. These are designed to answer specific issues of policy configuration or delivery, and complement the more extensive value-for-money evaluations that are undertaken to examine the full range of value-for-money questions such as rationale, efficiency and effectiveness. The FPAs are overseen by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. The IPA, in its recent report, argued that departmental-level FPAs should concentrate on specific, identified aspects of effectiveness and/or efficiency (Boyle, 2014).

Conclusions

These reflections on public policy in Ireland contain no panacea. Making policy is never easy and never will be. It is the job of the relevant ministers and civil servants to develop appropriate policies, based on sound principles, to the best of their ability to deliver on government strategies. The measure of success is the quality of the outcomes and the extent to which they successfully deliver on the government's objectives. However, there is always scope to develop and implement policies more successfully. Improvements in two areas merit particular attention – policy capacity and evidence-based analysis.

In the case of policy capacity, every effort should be made to:

- define problems carefully, at an early stage, to avoid unnecessary and inappropriately designed policy solutions;
- provide early 'roll-out' of proposed policy options to test their viability and practicability;
- ensure wide consultation, at an early stage, to ensure that all relevant stakeholders are contacted and their views considered;
- expand the IGEES units to cover all departments as a matter of priority, in order to up-skill departments' analytical capacity;
- have the IGEES management and oversight board periodically review outputs and outcomes from the activity of IGEES to determine the value added to the service;
- ensure that full use is made of the PSN to share the experiences and expertise of those engaged in policy analysis, to peer-review analytical work and to facilitate the flow of information.

In the case of evidence-based analysis, every effort should be made to:

- incorporate objective evidence as a fundamental underpinning of policy, so that the options and implications of various policy initiatives can be measured;
- ensure that the evidence is objective, in order to ensure that such evidence is not misused to justify decisions that should be made (or rejected) on the basis of other considerations;
- recognise that evidence will not of itself lead to improved policies; evidence needs to be used effectively and proportionally;
- recognise that good evidence is likely to result in better policy decisions, but good policy cannot be deduced from evidence alone;

- use evaluation results to shape improvements in amended policies;
- examine different policy approaches used in other countries or organisations; for example, the Campbell Collaboration should be consulted.⁶

While good policy capacity and good evidence are fundamental to good public policy, they cannot assure it. Public policy is influenced by a variety of stakeholders, analysts and decision-makers, who will tend to interpret evidence through a particular prism based on their own values, perceptions and interests. Governments often have to take ‘hard decisions’ in a ‘heated’ political environment, on behalf of segments of society with differing policy objectives, e.g. the introduction of water charges in Ireland in 2014. Regardless of the amount of advice (or criticism) any government receives, in the final analysis it has to prioritise choices and balance political needs with social good, within budgetary constraints. In Ireland the progress of policy formulation, from government decision to law, is laid down in the *Cabinet Handbook* (Department of the Taoiseach, 2007).⁷ The handbook provides guidance for ministers to facilitate the dispatch of government business. In the final analysis, government performance, over the full range of its policies, is measured by the electorate at election time.

Acknowledgement

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⁶ The Campbell Collaboration is an international research network that produces systematic reviews of the effects of social interventions in crime and justice, education, international development and social welfare. See www.campbellcollaboration.org.

⁷ It is usually the government of the day that proposes new laws. A minister presents a ‘bill’ to the Dáil or Seanad for discussion and decision. A bill is proposed legislation. It is only after it is passed and signed by the President that it is called an ‘Act’. Each bill has to go through a number of ‘stages’ or ‘readings’. It can be defeated at any of these stages and, if this happens in the Dáil, the process ends there. The Seanad can obstruct bills.

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