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# **Evidence, policy and pragmatics: A case study on the development of the Irish *National Strategy for Research and Data on Children's Lives* and the role of knowledge exchange**

## **Abstract**

This paper presents a case study on the transfer of research into policy and describes how evidence was used to inform, develop, frame and ultimately agree a *National Strategy for Research and Data on Children's Lives* in Ireland. The paper highlights key issues arising in the research–policy exchange, but also argues that evidence on its own, while vital and helpful, is insufficient to develop strategy. The paper concludes by highlighting other brokering, pragmatic and strategic considerations that need to be addressed if implementation is to be agreed.

## Introduction

This paper focuses on the use of evidence in policy and presents a frank account of the development of the Irish *National Strategy for Research and Data on Children's Lives*

2011-2016 to illustrate issues arising in this process (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2011). These issues take account of the importance of having a policy mandate, of generating an appropriate and meaningful evidence base, and of meeting challenges arising in ensuring evidence is adopted and key actions are agreed for implementation.

The paper first considers the broader policy context for research and data, and situates the strategic development undertaken in Ireland in respect of children's lives within this context. This is followed by a brief overview of the key elements of the evidence base generated to support the development. The body of the paper is concerned with the process through which evidence was used to frame and agree the *National Strategy for Research and Data on Children's Lives*. It is argued here that while the generation of a strong, appropriate and meaningful evidence base is important, on its own it is insufficient to ensure policy implementation. Other factors such as strategic convergence, relationships between organisations and pragmatic concerns, including cost, feasibility and timing, are often equally important. Brokering knowledge in such circumstances requires considerable skills in communication and relationship development, as well as mutual respect and credibility.

## Policy context for research and data

There has been substantial investment in research and its infrastructure in recent years and this has led to an increasing prioritisation of specific areas to be funded. This approach is typified by the European Union (EU) where, since the adoption of the Lisbon Strategy in 2000, there has been a commitment to building a European Research Area (ERA) for the purpose of overcoming geographical, institutional, disciplinary and sectoral boundaries. One core mechanism for putting this into operation is the implementation of the EU Framework Programmes (FPs) on technological and research developments. These programmes have for many years

adopted a targeted approach to research across different areas. The current FP7 Research Programme, for example, identifies 10 research areas for funding (examples include health, information and communication technologies, nanosciences, nanotechnologies and socio-economic sciences and the humanities). Funding schemes operate in parallel with the priority areas and include, for example, specific funding calls for collaborative research, partnerships or development of networks. Similar developments have taken place in other international organisations, such as the United Nations, the OECD and the World Health Organization, indicating an increasing awareness that strategic approaches to data and research are likely to result in greater harmonisation, improved research and data, and better value for money.

Prioritised and funded approaches to research are mirrored in the Irish context, where the Irish Government has for some time been making an explicit and overt commitment to support Ireland's transition to a knowledge economy through investment in science, technology and innovation (Department of the Taoiseach, 2002, 2006a, 2006b and 2008; Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, 2009). Progress reports show that total research and development spending has almost trebled over the last 10 years, while investment in research in the Higher Education sector has almost quadrupled (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, 2009 and 2010). Most recently, the Government has adopted the findings of the Research Prioritisation Steering Group (Forfás, 2012), whose report identifies 14 priority areas that will become the focus of future State investment in research for the purposes of innovation. These priority areas will target public investment towards areas which can assist most in developing knowledge and innovation-intensive enterprises and jobs for the future. While such a focus is important, it is also clear that an understanding of the implementation, utilisation and effectiveness of policies and services across a range of areas requires a strategic approach to research and data. The report of the Steering Group, while acknowledging the roles of 'research for policy' and 'research for knowledge', presents no explicit priorities in these areas.

In addition to investment in research infrastructure in Ireland, development of a coherent national statistical framework across all areas of the economy and society

has also been prioritised. A report by the National Statistics Board (2003a) – the body responsible for national statistical strategy – on the implementation of the Irish *Strategy for Statistics 2003-2008* identified many areas where progress had been made. These included measures to support the maximisation of administrative data in generating statistical information; the development of protocols for accessing administrative records for analytical purposes; the initiation of an official statistics portal; and proposals for the development of a postal code system (National Statistics Board, 2006). A more recent report by the National Statistics Board (2011) concludes that a statistical system that can effectively link all relevant available statistical and administrative data is crucial to understanding and responding to current national and international challenges. Further, the report asserts that a joined-up Government approach to solving problems requires joined-up data. In order to achieve this, the National Statistics Board has prioritised the need for institutional commitment led by policy-makers, data infrastructure development to facilitate data sharing, introduction of standards and codes of practice and protocols, and addressing data protection concerns. These priorities are reflective of strategic developments taking place at international level in the area of official statistics, such as those by the United Nations Statistical Commission (2004) and Eurostat (2003 and 2005).

### **Mandate to develop a National Strategy for Research and Data**

It could be argued that the broader research landscape, both nationally and internationally, is somewhat weighted in favour of supporting employment and enterprise, and in that environment any deviation from this requires a strong policy mandate. In terms of the development of research and data on children's lives, this mandate was partially in place as a result of the National Children's Strategy (Department of Health and Children, 2000), which had included, as one of its three national goals, understanding children's lives better. This goal was articulated as follows: *'Children's lives would be better understood and their lives would benefit from evaluation, research and information on their needs, rights and the effectiveness of services'* (*ibid*, p. 38).

This goal has been put into operation over a 9-year period through a National Children's Research Programme led by a professional research team, employed as civil servants and based within the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), and formerly in the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA). The Research Programme incorporates four main elements: commissioned research studies, capacity building measures, infrastructural developments and the transfer of knowledge on data and research on children's lives.

By 2008, all relevant actions relating to research and data set out in the National Children's Strategy had either been implemented or were underway, and a number of additional actions had also commenced. In the meantime, the National Statistics Board (2003b, p. 8) had recommended that all Government departments should develop a 'data/statistics strategy' and this provided an important policy impetus to focus on data needs, especially on administrative datasets and the generation of statistical information. The National Statistics Board (2004) published *Best Practice Guidelines* for the development and implementation of such strategies and a number of Government departments developed and published their own data strategies, for example, the Department of Social and Family Affairs in 2005 and the Department of Education and Science in 2008. An explicit commitment was given that the OMCYA would lead the development of a strategic approach to data on early childhood care and education, and school-age childcare (Department of the Taoiseach, 2006a). This focus on childcare was specifically highlighted because of recent significant policy and financial investment that had taken place during these years. This mandate was further extended to include *all* children, which was critical in ensuring cross-Government cooperation and engagement from other Government departments. The cooperation was further facilitated by the positioning of the OMCYA's Research Team within Government, a factor previously found to be helpful in the production of the *State of the Nation's Children* reports (Hanafin and Brooks, 2009).

## Initiating the development

There is little consensus on how best to develop a more broad-based strategy for research and data, or even on the considerations to be taken into account when doing so. Where developments are reported in the peer-reviewed literature, the focus is almost exclusively on the prioritisation of research areas rather than on the breadth of the overall approach. An examination of the literature shows that even on the specific aspect of prioritisation, a consensus on best practice has not been reached. Approaches adopted include the use of a Delphi study (McKenna *et al*, 2010); bibliographic measurement and qualitative assessments (Grupp *et al*, 2009); a conceptualised approach based on the burden of the problem and the answerability of the questions (Child Health and Nutrition Research Initiative, 2008); systematic searching and analysis of topic and type of research (Stevens *et al*, 2007); the identification of common themes that emerge in the work of those involved in the area (Courtney, 2000); and an examination of the extent to which research is available in respect of specific topics (Share and Kerrins, 2009). Most recently, a checklist on priority setting for health research was published in December 2010 by the World Health Organization (Viergever *et al*, 2010).

While the prioritisation of research areas is a critical and central issue to be addressed, there are many other decisions to be made and issues to be resolved when developing national policy. In the development of the *National Strategy for Research and Data on Children's Lives*, issues relating to its scope, the generation of evidence, identification of gaps and agreement on core issues for implementation were all addressed. Some consideration is now given to these issues.

## Scope of Strategy

A multistakeholder, cross-departmental steering group was set up to oversee the development of the *National Strategy for Research and Data on Children's Lives*. Following discussions, a decision was made to broaden the scope of the development to include all age groups and to take account of the breadth of children's lives. Initially, however, a clear emphasis on statistics and data remained and the initial purpose of the development at that time was to '*develop an evidence-informed overarching Strategy which will set out the vision, goals, principles and*

*actions to guide and support the collection, compilation and dissemination of data, statistics on children and facilitate the utilisation of good quality, easily accessible, internationally comparable information about the lives of children in Ireland’.*

This was coherent with the approach recommended in the Government decision on data strategies and was similar to the approach adopted by other Government departments.

As the evidence emerged from the literature review and cross-national case studies, however, it was apparent that some consideration would need to be given to the development of a research agenda. At the most basic level, the creation of a reliable, comprehensive and robust data system would need to be scoped out through a determination of needs; to be supported in its use through capacity building in the area of data collection, analysis and synthesis; and to be utilised by regular reporting, including the interpretation of findings. These types of actions require an understanding and application of research skills and cannot take place in isolation from an overall supporting infrastructure. It was also evident that even the most exhaustive data system could not collect all the information required to provide an understanding of children’s lives.

For the purposes of guiding the development of the Strategy, the following definitions were used:

**Research** – defined as ‘the search for new knowledge using scientific methodologies and approaches’ (Iwaniec, 1998).

**Data** – defined as ‘the physical representation of information in a manner suitable for communication, interpretation, or processing by human beings or by automatic means’ (Eurostat, 2010).

Despite the issues outlined, it may not have been possible to extend the focus of the Strategy beyond the area of data in the absence of a policy imperative. However, as indicated earlier, almost all the research actions from the National Children’s Strategy (Department of Health and Children, 2000) had either commenced or were fully implemented. This resulted in a looming policy gap in terms of the research agenda on children’s lives and for that reason, an opportunity was taken to extend the Strategy to include research as well as data. While this was ambitious, and time and resource considerations featured strongly, it was, nevertheless, coherent with



theoretical understandings of children that are predicated on holistic, interlinked and multifaceted lives (Hanafin *et al*, 2009).

The main aim of the Strategy as now developed is to set out a plan to guide and support the development of research and data on children's lives over the next 5 years for the purpose of ensuring children and young people benefit from improved understandings of their lives.

### **Process of generating an evidence base**

A more detailed discussion on the evidence base created to support the development is presented in the Main Report of the *National Strategy for Research and Data on Children's Lives* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2011). In summary, a systematic and iterative approach was taken to developing the evidence base, the key components of which were:

1. an examination and analysis of existing research and data strategies;
2. a review of literature on data systems (Gavin *et al*, 2011);
3. a cross-national case study on children's data systems (Clerkin *et al*, 2011);
4. analysis of national policy recommendations;
5. inventory of national data sources (Roche *et al*, 2011);
6. a structured consultation processes with key stakeholders, including children and young people themselves (Roche *et al*, 2011).

### **Identification of gaps**

This multifaceted approach allowed for:

- the identification of research and data priority areas, as presented in policy documents and in the consultation, that was coherent with current theoretical developments on children's lives and directly linked to current national policy;
- a comparison between these emergent areas with research and data already in place;
- the identification of key areas remaining to be prioritised;
- the development of a typology of potential actions to meet gaps identified.

Two issues emerged throughout this process. Firstly, some submissions made in the consultation highlighted gaps and priorities for which research and data were already available but of which people or organisations were unaware. This was particularly the case in respect of data on alcohol and drug use by young people. A systematic process of comparison between gaps identified and the data available in the inventory meant that these were easily identifiable. Secondly, in some instances it was known that actions were already in place to meet a particular need that had been identified. However, the absence of a central repository or reference point for research and data developments meant that this information was not available in a coordinated or comprehensive way and again, this was identified as an area for action in the Strategy. This area is given further consideration below.

Overall, the process outlined resulted in about 900 potential actions for development and improvement of information on children's lives. These potential actions were then subjected to review through a policy–research knowledge exchange process, using a number of different consultative approaches described below.

### **Policy–research knowledge exchange**

From the outset, the ultimate focus of the Strategy was to ensure that children's lives would benefit from this development; in practice, this meant that a well-conceived strategy would be one that could be implemented. There were a number of key strategic decisions taken to support the exchange of knowledge, including:

- The inclusion of senior personnel working within organisations that had a statutory national remit in the area of children's lives as representative members of the Steering Group overseeing the formulation of the Strategy. This membership was helpful in identifying the challenges, obstacles and opportunities arising within their own and related organisations.
- Elements of a common analysis framework employed in the identification of information gaps were directly linked to policy areas on children's lives (e.g. children's health, education, economic security) and consequently, it was possible to extract, from the evidence base, recommendations and actions

that clearly aligned with the remit and responsibility of individual Government departments and agencies.

- It was possible for the Research Team to build on previously developed relationships and every opportunity was taken to engage with stakeholders at multiple levels throughout relevant organisations. This was done in order to:
  - o promote an understanding of the systematic and rigorous approach being taken to constructing the evidence base;
  - o facilitate an exchange of information to inform the process of development since over the period of time this work was being carried out, many new developments, initiatives and needs had arisen;
  - o further develop and build relationships.

In addition to these decisions, there were also significant benefits in being part of a Government department since this ensured opportunities to comment and contribute to strategic developments around children's lives led by other Government departments or agencies. This meant that implementation levers that were emerging through the process (such as the identification of needs, gaps, priorities and potential resources) could be promoted, embedded and, at times, recommended in other strategies and developments. This also took place on a reciprocal basis and it was possible to embed in the *National Strategy for Research and Data on Children's Lives* actions that were being progressed elsewhere. There were considerable benefits in being seen as an 'honest broker', with a vested interest only in ensuring improved research and data on children. The impact of this positioning within the system cannot be underestimated in terms of supporting the use of evidence in policy.

### **Agreement on core issues for implementation**

The volume, breadth and diversity of research and data gaps identified demonstrated that many actions would be required at both strategic and operational level. It was also apparent that, while the Department of Children and Youth Affairs would have responsibility for setting a strategic direction and provide a leadership and coordination role, implementation of specific actions would need to be agreed,

where possible, with the Government department and agencies with primary responsibility for the subject area. This approach would not only facilitate implementation of actions, but would also ensure that the consequent information and knowledge emerging could inform policy and practice in each area. However, this also meant that many different organisations had to be convinced of the need for individual actions, as well as having the resources and structures to implement them. Such pragmatic concerns have not generally formed part of the discourse around putting evidence into policy, although there are some exceptions to this (Nutley *et al*, 2007; Freeman *et al*, 2011; Boaz *et al*, 2011).

### **The role of organisational culture**

Culture is deeply embedded within organisations and is rooted in its historical and social context. Hellriegel *et al* (1992, cited in Morley *et al*, 1998, p. 186) define organisation culture as '*the philosophies, ideologies, values, beliefs, assumptions, expectations, attitudes and norms shared by members of the organisation*'.

It became clear in the course of formulating and agreeing recommendations for this Strategy that the culture of individual organisations had a significant impact on whether it was deemed feasible to agree to an action for implementation. There were two main determinants in this regard – (1) in terms of how (and whether) research and data were valued within the organisation and (2) in respect of beliefs held about where (and whose) responsibility for progressing this agenda resided. An organisation might, for example, agree that a particular action was needed, but they might not agree that their organisation had responsibility for doing so. In order to achieve this, strategic convergence had to be achieved (*see below*).

### **Strategic convergence**

The final phase in this process of developing the *National Strategy for Research and Data on Children's Lives* was to reach agreement on individual actions for inclusion in the Strategy's Action Plan. This involved a series of iterations with more than 20 statutory organisations identified as being central to the actions proposed. The first step in these discussions was to agree a point of strategic convergence – that is, to

arrive at a common position between both parties on the strategic importance of the identified gap or need or priority. This convergence needed to take account of the broader policy agenda for the organisation in question and other organisation-specific issues, such as whether the organisation had a legitimate policy mandate in the area; the political impact of carrying out such an action; the prevailing organisational culture; and the extent to which this action could help the organisation to deliver on its own priorities. Without agreement on such issues, it was almost impossible to achieve a successful conclusion to the negotiation.

However, strategic convergence on its own was usually insufficient to achieve a successful conclusion to the negotiations and many additional constraints had to be overcome. Several other factors were also important considerations for implementation, such as resource commitments, competing priority areas, feasibility of implementation at this time, presence of a 'champion' of research and data development, identification of potential mechanisms through which the action could be implemented, and a willingness to overcome institutional barriers. These issues arose at different times and in varying degrees, but in order to agree an action that was specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound, each had to be addressed. The identification of mechanisms through which individual actions could be aligned with or embedded within an existing initiative was a critical success factor. This was relatively straightforward for some organisations, while for others consultation and negotiation took place over a considerable period of time.

Some actions, for example, could only be implemented by a single organisation and if they did not agree to the action, then that action could not be included in the Strategy. In some cases, the actions agreed were contingent on support or leadership from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, and the resources implications of this had to be balanced with the priority attached to the action. For other actions, however, there were potentially a number of organisations that could assist. For example, children and young people had identified a need to have a more coordinated approach to information about local services available from a reliable source and that gap could potentially have been met by a number of different organisations. One organisation agreed to develop this and to work with others in compiling the information. In a small number of cases, it was not possible to reach

agreement in time for inclusion in the Strategy, but it is intended that further iterations or new approaches will take place around these. Westley and Vredenburg (1994, p. 386) suggest that in these situations, success should be judged less by consensus around the negotiated issue and more in terms of:

- the endurance of the linkages formed between organisations;
- the success in advancing the articulation of the problem domain in the form of shared values, terminology, norms for interaction and mapping the boundaries of the problem;
- the ability to secure internal commitment to engaging in these types of activities;
- the ability of an organisation to balance its own self-interest with domain concerns.

## **Evidence into policy**

In general, substantial support for the implementation of the key components of the *National Strategy for Research and Data on Children's Lives* has been achieved and this is evident in the Strategy's Action Plan, which includes more than 58 actions across 24 statutory organisations, including Government departments and other agencies. While the extent of the commitment by individual organisations differs and the focus on individual outcome areas is diverse, there are, nevertheless, sufficient actions to address information needs across the breadth of children's lives. In addition, a number of cross-cutting actions will be addressed, including specific developments to increase harmonisation of existing data across Government and to focus in particular on sub-national data in order to increase usability at the level of local and regional structures and services.

The Strategy itself provides leadership in understanding the lives of all children and has a particular focus on children with additional needs. A coordinated approach, combined with the identification of priorities, will minimise duplication of effort and maximise value for money. The systematic approach to building capacity will have spin-offs in terms of access to funding, as well as creating a workforce fit for purpose in this area. The explicit commitment to the utilisation of research and data will lead

to improved practices and policies in this area, and through that, to improvements in children's lives.

## Conclusion

This paper has provided a transparent account of the development and agreement of the *National Strategy for Research and Data on Children's Lives 2011-2016* for Ireland. The Strategy and supporting documents are available at [www.dcy.a.ie](http://www.dcy.a.ie). The development, led by a professional research team employed within Government's Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), takes account of the breadth, scope and linked nature of the lives of children and young people, and is also directly aligned with policy developments in the area. The existence of a mandate to develop such a policy was critical to the process and while the scope of the Strategy expanded from the initial approach envisaged, this resulted in increased linkage with broader policy developments.

The availability of a strong evidence base played an important part in ensuring the identification of gaps and in developing priorities and mechanisms for addressing them. It also formed a compelling foundation for discussions with stakeholders across a range of areas and agencies, and allowed for issues of strategic convergence to be identified. The overriding impetus for the Strategy, however, was to improve the lives of children and this could only be achieved in circumstances where the Strategy was formulated and developed in such a way as to ensure it could be implemented. The positioning of the Research Team within Government allowed for early engagement with key statutory organisations in the formulation of the Strategy and a number of core strategic decisions — including the appointment of a multistakeholder Steering Group, a proactive approach to promoting the Strategy and the adoption of a systematic, transparent and consultative approach to the development — were all central to achieving cooperation and commitment to implementation.

Achieving consensus on the actions to be implemented in the Strategy sometimes required a pragmatic approach, harnessing existing resources and building on

strategic collaborations. Ultimately, 24 different organisations agreed to carry out actions to support improved knowledge of children's lives. This paper concludes that while an evidence base was important, helpful and actionable, it was, on its own, insufficient to ensure implementation. Processes of knowledge exchange, respectful and mindful of the constraints faced by individuals and organisations in implementing policy, were required to achieve agreement on actions for implementation and these, in turn, were assisted by the development of organisational-level relationships and a willingness to collaborate.

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