

Evidence-based Policy: Separating Science and Codology

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Originally promoted by the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) in 2005, a now defunct social partnership body that included the community and voluntary sector, very few of those working in or supporting the community sector had expressed doubts about the concept of evidence-based policymaking. However, many more joined the ranks following its adoption and integration into state funded programmes delivered by community or local development organisations. Like many other innovative concepts, evidence-based policy approaches drifted across the Irish sea, it being a central element of the so-called Third Way promoted by Tony Blair's New Labour Party in the UK. Blair contended that policy could and should be implemented in a non-ideological manner based on evidence and fact. Blair's Third Way soon collapsed when its impact became indistinguishable from Toryism. Margaret Thatcher later contended that her greatest legacy was New Labour, which says everything about non-ideological approaches.

Government describes evidence-based policy making as referring to *analysis of policy choices based on objective evidence and research. This is achieved through ensuring both that high quality empirical evidence is available and accessible, and also that this evidence is used to inform the policy-making process.*¹ No mention is made of how or by whom this evidence is selected.

Whereas policy models imported from other countries are usually adapted or altered through a healthy critique from non-state stakeholders before full implementation, this did not happen with evidence-based policy, largely because its onset coincided with a state directed flattening of the community sector. This fact together with the reverence given to the science-based nature of evidence-based policy approaches meant that there was little critique from the sector best placed to provide it; having been dissed by the state it was unlikely to be listened to, in any event.

Such was its acceptance, that evidence-based approaches to poverty were promoted by the Combat Poverty Agency before it too became a victim of government cutbacks. In due course, as the shift from critical community activity to a more passive service delivery role was imposed, evidence-based delivery became widespread across the programmes and activities implemented by the community and voluntary sector. Funding was dependent on compliance, and ensuring compliance prevented any deviation from centrally set goals and objectives.

In those early years, one of the greatest champions of evidence-based policy was the Centre for Effective Services (CES), itself the brainchild of senior civil servants anxious to please politicians disquieted by the growing autonomy of civil society organisations. It was CES staff that came up with the logic model, which was applied through the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP). Youth services were quick to follow, the City of Dublin Youth Services Board (CDYSB) setting down very comprehensive templates to ensure an evidence-based implementation of their programmes. Very soon, evidence-based policy making was the order of the day, complementing other managerialist concepts such as value-for-money and commissioning. The approach was endorsed by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) giving it significant status.

Keith Adams of the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice in his excellent article *In Evidence We Trust*² makes the point that any examination of evidence-based policymaking '*needs to be made within the*

¹ *Supporting Evidence-Based Policy Making*: Dept of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sports and Media Nov 2019

² *In Evidence We Trust*: Keith Adams in JCFJ Working Notes Issue 85 October 2019

interconnecting nexus of neoliberalism, austerity and governmentality'. Neoliberalism, with its emphasis on the efficiencies deriving from a reduced state provides the rationale for evidence-based policymaking, while the austerity response to the economic collapse in 2008 provided the occasion for its introduction. Governmentality refers to the methods whereby the sovereign authority achieves the consent of the governed in formulating and delivering its policy priorities. Ireland is a constitutional democracy but also a very centralised state. Local government is restricted in its authority and scope, taxation is largely centralised and politics has a built-in adversity to anything that threatens its proclaimed generosity. The community sector's independence and critical stance stuck firmly in the throat of government and evidence-based policy was the elixir.

Foucault's ideas of power in a modern state being about the management rather than the domination of the population are especially relevant to the enthusiastic implementation of evidence-based approaches by senior civil servants. Civil servants, compelled as they are to think in terms of achieving longer term objectives, take comfort in their ability to push gradually and resolutely towards desirable goals. As Adams points out, *'The production and selective management of evidence in the government of the population is a vital component in the manufacture of legitimate authority to implement desired ideological reform agendas'*. Evidenced-based policy approaches are a discrete means of dampening critique and manufacturing consent towards such desirable goals.

So, does evidence-based policy have any merit? That is difficult to ascertain given that the accompanying evaluation frameworks are set by the same centrally decided evidence paradigm, so the value placed upon evaluation is dependent upon its adherence to the pre-decided evidence. In other words it only measures what it values.

The affect of evidence-based policy making on the broad community sector has been profound, especially when set alongside other trends embraced by the state and by measures imposed by successive governments. Active citizenship, the brainchild of Bertie Ahearne but now firmly embedded in the Department of Community and Rural Affairs and within local authorities as a result of the *Putting People First* policy, is anything but the promotion of a more active role in policy making for civil society, especially that section of civil society who have long sought mechanisms to address the participation of marginalised groups in society. Volunteerism and the promulgation of a very passive notion of citizen participation make for a very compliant sector. Similarly, the deliberate destruction of the community sector and its supporting infrastructure meant that there was little effective counterforce through which a critical analysis could contribute to vital areas of policy. The state's restructuring of the community sector towards a service delivery role completed the rout and prepared the ground for the application of centrally devised solutions.

Evidence-based policy making is not science. It is the about selecting what sits within the framework of acceptable evidence to meet pre-decided ideological goals. The evidential framework is then passed on to implementing bodies, including the community sector, to deliver on prescription. The centralised and concealed ideological basis of evidence-based policy making blocks the creative energy of the community sector, deprives the state of a constructive critique that would aid the formulation and delivery of effective policy measures and undermines attempts to complete the participation of all citizens in the democratic decision-making of the state.

In due course, evidence-based policy making will flounder because it is based on uncritiqued assumptions, excludes the meaningful participation of vital stakeholders and is fundamentally dishonest, making it impossible to objectively defend.

For a more comprehensive analysis of this subject read the aforementioned article by Keith Adams, which inspired and informed this short paper