

On the need for accurate social analysis

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The policy decisions Government should take as it threads its way through the current series of crises is seriously contested. People differ, sometimes very strongly, on what is required if Irish society is to move from its present very difficult impasse to a more desirable and viable future.

Should economic policy be prioritised ahead of all other areas? Or should economic, social and environmental policies be addressed simultaneously within an overall lens of sustainability? Should reducing Ireland's borrowing be prioritised over job creation? Or is there some way in which both of these goals can be achieved simultaneously? These are just a few of the many questions that have been discussed at some length both before and after the recent Budget.

Most people would agree that policy proposals should be based on accurate social analysis. Yet discussion is often characterised by a selective use of data, which in turn produces an inaccurate social analysis which in turn leads to inappropriate policy proposals being made and, in some cases, being implemented.

It isn't just in newspaper columns or in current affairs programmes that this has been happening. In recent times we have seen both the 'troika' and the Irish Government publish material that appears suspiciously close to selective use of data.

One example of this is the recent discussion concerning the rates of social welfare payments made to people who are unemployed. Recent 'troika' publications note that Ireland's job-seekers allowance does not fall over time. This contrasts with the situation in many other EU countries. The 'troika' has argued that Ireland should follow the example set by some of our continental neighbours.

This analysis however is based on a selective use of data. It fails to inform the reader that in these other EU countries people receive a high level of social welfare payment when they first become unemployed – often a high percentage of their salary prior to becoming unemployed. Over a period of time the level of this payment is reduced.

By contrast in Ireland there is no such high payment. The very first payment made to a person who becomes unemployed in Ireland is below the poverty line and remains that way for the duration of their unemployment. Once this fact is revealed recommendations urging its reduction so as to be in line with other EU countries are exposed as being inappropriate.

Another example of the selective use of data can be seen in the Budget documentation produced recently by the Department of Finance. In asserting that its Budget was fair it cited a study conducted in 2011 which, it claimed, showed that Ireland had done better than other EU crisis countries in protecting those who were vulnerable. Again, the Budget documentation omitted the fact that the study referred to did not include the impact of cuts to services (like health, social care or education) which impact most on those who are poorest, especially in the long-term. The researchers who produced that study noted clearly that their analysis did not represent the full picture of the impact of austerity measures. The Budget documentation also cited a study showing the impact of Ireland's Budget adjustments in the 2009-2012 period had been progressive. Again, a

part of the study's findings was omitted – the part which showed that the present Government's Budget for 2012 was deeply regressive.

These are simply two examples of a process which sees selective use of data producing an inaccurate analysis of the situation which, in turn, produces inappropriate policy.

Social Justice Ireland is an independent think-tank focused on producing accurate social analysis. It is made up of organisations groups and individuals committed to building a just society where human rights are respected, human dignity is protected, human development is facilitated and the environment is respected and protected. Membership is open to all. (It is not a rebranded CORI as was wrongly claimed in the Sunday Business Post last week).

We have long argued that policy development should always be built on accurate social analysis. The choices Government is making each year in its annual Budget are, in fact, societal choices with major consequences for the future shape of Irish society. The policy initiatives should be based on the best analysis available which, in turn, should be firmly rooted in the best data available. They should be based on what is best for Ireland and its future and not on the effective lobbying of the rich and powerful. Evidence-based policy-making seems a no-brainer. Yet Ireland is in real danger of its policy-making being based on what benefits what benefits the better off rather than on what would produce a just and sustainable future for all of Ireland's people. Selectively choosing data to support the former over the latter should not be acceptable.