

January 2012

2

Understanding Policy
Development and
Implementation
for Children and
Young People

Briefing Paper



Briefing Paper

This paper provides a summary of the second report of the Children and Youth Programme which aims to provide academic analysis of a rights-based approach to policy in relation to children and young people in Ireland and Northern Ireland¹. The objectives of the report are:

- to explore the function of policy development and implementation;
- to map out the policy environment for children and young people in Ireland and Northern Ireland;
- to analyse policy provisions for children and young people in Ireland and Northern Ireland against the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child General Measures of Implementation, drawing primarily on state and shadow reports in both jurisdictions.

The Policy Landscape

A rights-based approach to policy making can enhance and embed children's rights in governmental planning thereby addressing a core recommendation of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (the Committee) and supporting the development and implementation of coherent policy that realistically connects the multi-faceted nature of childhood. Effective participation of children and young people can improve government decision-making and enhance children and young people's capacity to influence policy development and change, although the extent to which this happens is variable. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (the Convention) provides a framework from which to develop, monitor and evaluate policy and decision-making structures.

Government in both jurisdictions has established contrasting child-focused bodies for children and young people. While the children's strategies in both jurisdictions have been influenced by the Convention, its centrality in policy remains tenuous, problematic and incomplete. Limitations in governance structures, the lack of rights-proofing methodology and accountability mechanisms impede full compliance of the strategies with the Convention.

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child

The key to the success of the Convention is its co-ordinated implementation by Governments and government departments, as observed by the Committee. In Ireland and Northern Ireland commentators have been critical of co-ordination within core government offices, arguing that the main departments, in spite of their connections, are often working separately.

Robust, inclusive and disaggregated data is essential to monitor key areas of children's lives; lack of data limits information on specific vulnerable groups and impedes responsive policy planning and the allocation of resources. The absence of a comprehensive breakdown of expenditure means that policy initiatives (and corresponding resources) may risk becoming skewed, leaving priority groups or areas at risk of being overlooked or under-funded.

¹ taken with the first publication in the Children and Youth Programme (CYP) series, A Rights-Based Approach to Monitoring Children and Young People's Well-Being

Clear dissemination amongst those working with or on behalf of children and young people is also integral to increased knowledge and understanding of the obligations of the Convention.

The appointment of the first senior Minister for Children with a full cabinet position and the launch of the national strategy for research and data on children's lives in Ireland and the work of the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership in Northern Ireland are welcome recent developments in the policy landscape.

Key Conclusions

Drawing on the evidence, the following key conclusions have been identified.

1. The General Measures of Implementation are a clear bench mark for policy development

The General Measures of implementation set down by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child have been agreed as intrinsic benchmarks to the policy process and to fulfilling a rights-based agenda. In doing so, they also consolidate the inter-connected relationship between rights and well-being and the common intent of each to improve the lives of children and young people.

2. The core requirements of co-ordinated practice, comprehensive data, transparent resource allocation and wide-spread dissemination are the basic tools for 'good' policy.

The universal relevance of these core requirements is indicative of the ways in which they can be used to enhance the rights and well-being of children and young people:

- Standardised methods for the collection of disaggregated data can be replicated and mainstreamed within all government departments and public authorities to fulfil implementation of the Convention. This does not necessarily require additional resources, rather the optimised use of existing resources and curtailment of unnecessary expenditure.
- Collaboration with public agencies and research institutes can help to identify gaps in the data and compose a full picture of children and young people's lives.
- Robust financial systems based on the principles of accessibility, transparency and participation can offer some reassurance that government commitments are made with the best interests of children as the foremost consideration.
- The linking of both policy decisions, funding and outcomes will enable better identification of successful programmes and associated costs and ensure that resources are invested wisely and directed to those who need it most.
- Training and dissemination amongst those working with or on behalf of children and young people is essential to promoting an appreciation of the inter-related developmental processes of children's lives as well as knowledge of the obligations of the Convention.

3. Good policy intrinsically safeguards the general principles of the Convention and ensures that children and young people are the foremost consideration in any policy that affects them.

The circumstances of children's lives are not an unknown entity and a significant proportion of children continue to exist at the margins of society and have their rights denied. Children and young people have a significant role as active participants in the promotion, protection and monitoring of their rights as well as in their capacity to influence decision-making and achieve change.

Alignment of a rights-based approach with the whole-child framework is a powerful lens through which government actions and decisions affecting children and young people can be examined. By placing different aspects of childhood and adolescence within this dual framework, it becomes possible to explore coherent policy options that realistically connect and protect the singular experience of being young.

4. Collaborative partnerships across all sectors are essential if 'good' policy that protects the rights and well-being of children and young people is to evolve.

Almost every area of children's policy requires collaboration to ensure the development and implementation of programmes and services that meet the needs of the children and young people for whom it is intended. Adopting a collaborative approach has the potential to meet the obligations of the Convention, and to enhance policy and provision.

5. Training should be a statutory requirement for all professional groups working with children and young people

A statutory requirement for child-centred training creates capacity for a rights respecting culture where the guiding principles of the Convention should underpin policy decisions on issues affecting children and young people. This has implications for how policy is developed and implemented. The transformative potential of informed professionals to progress children's services from the concept of welfare to that of rights entitlement is to be encouraged.

The Children and Youth Programme (CYP), through the UNESCO Chairs, is committed to supporting a rights-based approach to policy development and implementation in both jurisdictions and will work collaboratively with key stakeholders to further this agenda. This will be achieved by applying the framework to monitor child well-being using a rights-based approach outlined in the first CYP report and by collecting, synthesising and making available information based, in the first instance, on the general measures. The CYP will begin to explore this through its Special Report Series, focusing on policy relating to youth justice, education, mental health and civic participation.

