

Symposium: The Evolution of Data Needs for Policy/Research in Ireland [Marking the Donation of Roy Geary's Papers to the UCD Geary Institute]

Data and Evidence in Policymaking since Geary

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Abstract: This paper reflects on the continuing importance of data and evidence in policymaking, taking Roy Geary's work and legacy as a starting point. It looks at how better data and analysis have shaped Irish policymaking in areas including fiscal policy, labour markets, housing and demographic change, while also highlighting some of the gaps that remain. The central argument is a simple one: data alone does not produce good policy, but good policy is rarely possible without good data.

Keywords: Roy Geary, Irish statistics, official statistics, evidence-based policymaking, data infrastructure

JELs: B31, C82

It is a great pleasure to be here to pay tribute to the long-lasting legacy of Roy Geary. Visitors to the ESRI building have probably noticed our portrait of Whitaker on the ground floor but slightly fewer of you may have seen that Geary's portrait is on the third floor just outside my office as Director, so he can keep an eye on me.

Patrick and Alan have given a great overview of Geary's life and contribution, but I do want to add one small anecdote, which is one of my favourite stories of the ESRI's foundation. So, we all know of Geary's contribution as the first director of the Institute, but his importance to its foundation is a bit less well-known. Securing external funding was crucial to establishing the Institute's independence, and the fact that someone of Geary's stature was ready to lead it helped persuade the Ford Foundation to provide the initial seed funding. Also important were the efforts of T. K. Whitaker and his junior civil servant, Thomas Kinsella – who soon afterwards went on to a very different career as a poet – who essentially stalked a Ford Foundation official on his daily walk to morning Mass in order to orchestrate the funding request.¹

Onto the present day and Geary's beliefs in the importance of data and evidence in policy-making are at least as important as they ever were and perhaps even more so given the constant flurries of commentary, disinformation and misinformation which policy makers have to navigate. Geary once described the publication of independent statistical information as "one of the greatest privileges and safeguards of a free democracy."² That phrase remains remarkably relevant today. Reliable evidence is central to enabling governments to identify problems earlier, allocate resources more effectively, evaluate outcomes more honestly, and adapt policy when circumstances change.

We often think about democratic institutions in terms of elections or courts. But democratic societies also depend upon trusted systems for establishing shared facts. In the absence of trusted evidence, public debate becomes increasingly fragmented. Economic discussion becomes vulnerable to misinformation, selective interpretation, or simple political convenience. The role of institutions such as the Central Statistics Office is therefore not just administrative. Independent statistics allow governments to be scrutinised, public spending to be evaluated, and national priorities to be debated on the basis of evidence rather than assertion.

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¹ Anne Chambers (2014). *T.K. Whitaker: Portrait of a Patriot*, Transworld. ISBN: 978-1-4481-7053-1.

² Roy C. Geary (1951) *The Official Cost of Living Index Number and its Critics*, Central Statistics Office, quoted in "A brief history of the CSO" at [CSO Marks 75 years - CSO - Central Statistics Office](#)

Similarly, the ESRI has played an enormously important role in Irish policymaking over many decades. Its work on labour markets, taxation, housing, demographics, education, and social policy has helped create a stronger analytical culture within Irish public administration. To draw on another quotation from a later ESRI director, Brendan Whelan, reflecting on Roy Geary's work, observed that "it is only by empirical analysis that the orders of magnitude so necessary for policy research can be established."³

That phrase captures something important about modern policymaking. Public debate often focuses on broad principles and the direction of an effect, positive or negative. But effective policy also depends upon scale, proportion, and measurement. How large is the problem? Which groups are most affected? What interventions are likely to produce meaningful effects? What are the long-term fiscal consequences?

These were some of the big questions of economic change that the ESRI was set up to examine. At the time, Ireland faced persistent economic stagnation, weak industrial development, and extraordinarily high levels of emigration. Hundreds of thousands of people were leaving the country in search of economic opportunity elsewhere. However, what Whitaker recognised was that economic decline was not inevitable. It reflected structural weaknesses that could be studied, measured, and addressed through policy.

More recently, the financial crisis of 2008 also demonstrated the consequences of insufficient analytical scrutiny. In striking contrast to the 1950s and 1960s, the years preceding the crisis were characterised by extraordinary economic growth, rising tax revenues, and widespread confidence in the durability of the Irish economic model. Yet beneath that growth were increasingly serious structural vulnerabilities: excessive dependence on property-related activity, unsustainable credit expansion, rising household indebtedness, and an overreliance on cyclical tax revenues linked to construction and real estate.

Many of those warning signs were visible in the data. One of the central analytical failures before 2008 was the confusion of temporary revenue with permanent national capacity. Rapidly rising property-related taxes created the impression of sustainable fiscal strength when in reality significant elements of state revenue depended upon an unsustainable economic cycle. This is a concern being emphasised strongly once again by economists in terms of the extent to which our public finances have become reliant on corporate tax revenues from a small number of firms.

Since the crisis, Ireland has significantly strengthened its fiscal oversight structures, macroprudential regulation, banking supervision, and economic forecasting capacity. Policymakers became more attentive to stress testing, scenario analysis, and long-term sustainability. In other words, evidence became more deeply embedded within policymaking processes precisely because the costs of insufficient scrutiny had become so apparent.

The importance of evidence-based policymaking is perhaps especially visible in labour market policy, where relatively small analytical differences can have significant implications for living standards and social equality. Over recent decades, Irish policymakers have increasingly relied on detailed labour market analysis in areas such as skills shortages, workforce participation, migration, educational attainment, and income distribution. Research from the ESRI and the CSO has informed debates on everything from childcare policy to regional employment patterns and the long-term effects of demographic change on labour supply.

But these discussions also illustrate an important point: the quality of policy analysis depends heavily upon the quality of the underlying data infrastructure. Even in a country with comparatively strong statistical institutions, important gaps remain. For example, analysis of issues such as minimum wages, low pay, underemployment, and gender pay disparities is often constrained by limited availability of sufficiently detailed and timely data on hours worked. Earnings data alone can provide an incomplete picture of labour market inequality if policymakers cannot accurately distinguish between hourly pay, part-time work patterns, or variations in labour force participation.

That may sound like a technical issue, but its implications are substantial. The design of wage policy, social protection systems, childcare supports, and measures aimed at improving gender equality all depend upon understanding how people actually participate in the labour market. And that points to a broader lesson. Evidence-based policymaking is not simply about analysing existing information. It also requires sustained investment in the systems that produce reliable information in the first place.

³ ESRI Annual Report 2005 [THE ECONOMIC & SOCIAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE](#) (page 1)

We can see similar issues arising in areas such as housing policy. Housing is a core social good but the housing market involves measurable relationships between population growth, household formation, infrastructure provision, construction capacity, financing conditions, planning systems, and land availability. Good housing policy therefore depends heavily upon good data. Without accurate information on demographic trends, vacancy rates, rental inflation, regional demand, and construction bottlenecks, governments risk responding either too slowly or inappropriately. Equally important, transparent evidence allows the public to assess whether policy interventions are actually improving outcomes. Housing policy also illustrates a challenge in democratic policymaking: political cycles are often short, while structural problems develop slowly. Data and long-term analysis help governments look beyond immediate pressures and think more seriously about sustainability.

The importance of long-term evidence is especially clear in relation to demographic ageing. Ireland remains younger than many European countries, but the underlying demographic trends are unmistakable. Over coming decades, the ratio between working-age populations and retirees will change significantly, with major implications for healthcare systems, pensions, taxation, housing, and public expenditure.

What matters here is not simply the existence of demographic change, but the ability to anticipate it early enough to plan effectively. Population projections, labour force modelling, and long-term expenditure analysis help governments move beyond short-term political cycles and think more seriously about sustainability over decades rather than years. Demographic policy is therefore one of the clearest examples of why evidence matters. The consequences of ageing unfold slowly, but they become far more difficult to address if governments fail to respond until pressures become immediate.

Statistics can be incomplete and economic behaviour changes over time. In addition, not everything that matters socially can be easily quantified. Some of the most important dimensions of social wellbeing — social cohesion, trust, community resilience, cultural life, environmental quality — are not always easily captured through conventional economic indicators.

Artificial intelligence, climate transition, energy security, demographic ageing, productivity growth, and housing affordability will all require long-term policymaking under conditions of uncertainty. Countries that succeed in navigating these pressures will not necessarily be those with the loudest political debates or the simplest ideological answers. They will be those most capable of learning, adapting, measuring outcomes honestly, and responding pragmatically to evidence.

In summary, in a way that I think is very much in the spirit of Roy Geary: data alone does not produce good policy. But good policy is rarely possible without good data.