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Reflections on post-bailout policy analysis in Ireland

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Abstract

This short article reflects on observations from the forthcoming volume *Policy Analysis in Ireland*, edited by Hogan & Murphy. The volume forms part of the International Library of Policy Analysis series, which covers more than twenty countries, published by Policy Press and edited by Michael Howlett and Iris Geva-May. While various themes emerge from the Irish volume, this article focuses on only one core question: whether and how the 2008 economic crisis contracted and expanded the capacity for policy analysis in Ireland. The troika of the International Monetary Fund, European Central Bank and the European Commission are associated with policy capacity innovation, but also with significant austerity. Both had a major and long-term impact on public services. While the article documents a range of successful post-bailout attempts to improve policy analysis capacity, it also points to often less conscious, but sometimes deliberate, decisions that diminished some forms of policy analysis capacity. We find economic policymaking capacity enhanced while changes to resources and policy opportunity structures depleted both space and the capacity for social policy analysis. This was particularly so within the equality and social justice sectors. Given ongoing social risks, the Covid-19 pandemic and the climate crisis, Ireland needs to adjust for a future of permanent uncertainty, or perpetual crises, and should seek to rebalance

investment in social policy capacity and to develop systems for integrated policy analysis.

Keywords: Policy analysis, Ireland, social policy, policy capacity, financial crisis

Introduction

The forthcoming volume *Policy Analysis in Ireland*, edited by Hogan & Murphy, constitutes the Irish element in the ever-expanding International Library of Policy Analysis series, edited by Michael Howlett and Iris Geva-May, and published by Policy Press. The volume provides a window into the research frontier of Irish policy analysis. The chapters, written by leading Irish academics and policy practitioners, examine the range of institutions and actors involved in policy analysis from across the government, the private sector and broader civil society. Over the past century, successive periods of boom and bust have contracted and expanded the capacity for policy analysis in Ireland. This article reflects on one key aspect of policy analysis in Ireland and is informed by the volume's chapters and an authors' symposium which took place in Technological University Dublin in late 2019.

The bailout in November 2010 was perhaps the seminal moment of the Great Financial Crisis, when Ireland ceded economic sovereignty to a troika of the International Monetary Fund, European Central Bank and the European Commission (O'Rourke & Hogan, 2014). Ten years on we use the book's content to reflect on Irish economic and social policy capacity. While this was a period of policy innovation which increased capacity in some areas, austerity also negatively impacted on public policy and wider societal policy capacity.

In the limited space available here our approach is to examine the post-bailout attempts to improve policy analysis capacity, while also drawing attention to often less conscious, but sometimes deliberate, policies that directly, or indirectly, diminished specific policy analysis capacities. We first draw on the forthcoming work by MacCarthaigh, O'Riordan & Boyle, Ruane, Connaughton and Harris to analyse a range of post-bailout innovations to improve policy analysis and develop capacity. This is balanced with forthcoming analysis from Dukelow, Murphy, O'Donnell, Murphy & O'Connor, and Adshead & Scully, who reflect on changes to resources and policy opportunity structures that depleted both space and the capacity for policy

analysis, particularly amongst wider societal actors and especially within the equality and social justice sectors. We conclude that more investment is needed to expand social policy capacity and systems for integrated policy analysis.

Concepts and context

Policy analysis focuses on the organisational processes, institutions and locations that contribute to the construction and supply of policy ideas, as well as methods of policy analysis and evaluation. Hecló (1974) was interested in the administrative capacity of the state and non-elected policy experts as an independent force in social politics and learning, particularly where uncertainty required the application of intellect to public problems. Howlett & Ramesh (2003) define policymaking as a problem-solving activity. The study of policy analysis is concerned with policy capacity, 'the ability to provide policy analysis and advice, participate effectively and exert influence in policy development' (Goodwin & Philips, 2015, p. 249). 'Policy analytical capacity' describes the ability of individuals in a policy-relevant organisation to produce valuable policy-relevant research and analysis on topics asked of them, or of their own choosing (Howlett, 2009, pp. 162–3). Communication and influence are part of analysis, hence advocacy skills are also part of policy analysis capacity.

While Ireland might be seen as a laggard, coming late to the profession of policy analysis, arguably policy responses subsequent to the bailout in 2010 changed the institutional and governance context, developing and strengthening Ireland's economic 'policy analytic style' while also reshaping social analytical capacity. Studying policy analysis allows us to raise key questions about policy capabilities in institutions and to enquire how policy analysis is impacted by the relatively pragmatic political culture in Ireland.

Key to understanding Ireland is appreciating the post-colonial adoption and adaptation of both the Westminster model (Connaughton, *in press*) of prime-ministerial-led parliamentary government, associated with centralised executive power and a compliant legislature, and the Whitehall administrative tradition (MacCarthaigh, *in press*), whereby the civil service is both apolitical and generalist and dominated by a strong and conservative Department of Finance. The Westminster style is evident in the degree to which policy analysis revolves around the cabinet, rather than parliamentary cycles, with power highly centralised and with local

administration rather than local government (Quinlivan, in press). The Proportional Representation Single Transferable Vote (PR-STV) electoral system promoted centrist political parties (Adshead & Scully, in press), and has influenced the development of a consensus political model and culture, delivering over decades corporatist, participative and deliberative forms of policy analysis, all varieties of networked governance. As a relatively small but open state (Cullina et al., in press), we might expect limits to policy analysis capacity; however, limitations were to some degree compensated by strengths, including flexibility, adaptability and international openness, as well as development of a range of government agencies tasked with policy analysis (MacCarthaigh, in press). For example, Ireland's engagement with international social protection policy networks, including the formal International Social Security Association and a more informal Commonwealth network of social security, offered capacity that usefully recompensed for internal deficits.

Strengthening economic policy analysis

The Great Recession, and austerity period, was, among other things, a focus for assessment of failures of policy analysis and attempts to redress capacity deficits. Irish policy analysis capacity had expanded significantly since the 1980s economic recession into a more complex policy analytical and advisory landscape involving the state, traditional social partners, experts, the non-governmental sector, as well as international actors. MacCarthaigh (in press) observes that the civil service retains, in the Whitehall tradition, its centrality and right to present final policy options to government. However, the Irish state's administrative system is today formally more open to external input in the policymaking process and is a strong advocate of open data with better and more routine flows of information and collaboration between the civil service and research institutes such as universities. New models for longitudinal studies are yielding major insights, including TILDA, Growing Up in Ireland and the Job Seekers Longitudinal Database in the Department of Social Protection, as are new forms of experiential and qualitative data. In this context, while generalist public service career patterns and 'on the job' skill development remain central, there is more need for sophisticated policy analysis requiring professional career streams. O'Riordan & Boyle (in press) highlight how the financial crisis of 2008 threw into sharp relief the policy analysis capacity of the civil service. They

conclude that while the focus is still on generalists with broad conceptual skills, there is now more balance with more specialists with quantitative and other analytical skills. Enhanced policy analysis, particularly in the economic sphere, is evident in entities like the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service (IGEES) and processes like organisational capability reviews in the civil service. Such positive developments lead to a stronger evidence base to better inform policymaking and capacity to provide well-judged, evidence-informed, independent and timely counsel to the political system. However, as discussed later, it is not clear if the entire political system has sufficient capacity to process and appropriately weigh such advice.

The state remains the largest source of continuous statistical data for the country, across a multitude of domains, including quantitative and qualitative data, and has, following international norms, shifted to use of more empirical evidence in policymaking. Ruane (in press) argues that a more pragmatic approach to policy analysis favours an evidence-informed, rather than an evidence-based, approach to policymaking. Post-bailout developments in the Central Statistics Office have been central to more open data and the provision of high-quality data sets to inform policy. More recent investments in skill sets in the IGEES are also pivotal to enhanced capacity. This capacity, however, is largely quantitative in style and consistent with an evidenced-based policymaking focusing on 'what works'. This more technocratic analysis, associated with economists and behavioural social scientists and management consultants, has been critiqued for over-reliance on quantitative analysis and under-engagement with the learned experience of civil society and academic analysis (Harvey, 2014; Walsh et al., 2013). That said, political actors do bring into policy discourse an evidence base derived from direct contact with individuals and businesses. While often critiqued as 'anecdote', this less technocratic form of evidence has some validity as a form of 'lived experience' that acts to balance more quantitative, evidence-informed policy analysis arguments.

That said, Irish official statistics are trusted and well regarded, being overseen by high governance standards. This is crucial in maintaining trust in the statistical system. The Institute of Public Administration offers a Professional Diploma in Official Statistics for Policy Evaluation to decision-makers throughout the public service. However, there remains a need to resource greater statistical literacy in the broader civil society, particularly in an era of fake truths and distortions.

What of capacity in the political system? The imbalance in policy analysis capacity between the government and parliament has meant that the role of the Oireachtas in policy analysis has traditionally been underdeveloped and regarded as ‘puny’ with respect to policymaking. Connaughton (in press) offers three insights regarding post-2011 developments: enhanced efforts to improve access to information and research capacity for policy analysis, including, for example, the emerging Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO) and its potential to enhance the budgetary cycle, and the Oireachtas Library and Information Service; greater development and resourcing of the parliamentary committee system to support individual legislators; and more participation in inquiries with potential to spotlight the failures of oversight of public policy and abuses in public office.

The post-crisis impact of the EU on Irish policy capacity is partially captured by the degree to which Irish budgetary processes are embedded in the EU Semester process with greater national institutional capacity for budgetary and fiscal analysis, including IGEES, the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council (IFAC) and PBO, and greater focus on data for budgetary proofing processes. While Murphy (in press) acknowledges EU membership aided Ireland’s global positioning and ability to cope with international competition, she also observes how membership continues to constrain the policy analysis process. Post-bailout budget deficit rules and legal commitments limit autonomous action by national actors, while some EU policy initiatives have challenged conservative domestic constituencies – for example, in relation to environmental, water and taxation policy. On the other hand, EU membership is credited with advancing a policy analysis and evaluation culture, particularly in the context of the Structural Funds, and it is widely accepted that EU membership is essential for Ireland as a small open economy. This is something that has been made all the clearer in the context of a UK animated by Brexit and an insular nationalism.

Capacity for social policy analysis

Dukelow (in press) situates policy analysis within a social policy context, stressing its early theocratic formation up to the 1950s, after which social policy analysis began its journey towards modernity. This mobilised a range of new actors and institutions creating new forms of knowledge in the context of a globalising society with new social challenges, a process often politically driven from civil society. She

suggests the 2008 economic crisis saw the domain of social policy analysis again dominated by economic bottom lines as an increasing reliance on private and external funding in higher education created a more precarious and competitive environment for the production of social policy research. To some degree this momentum reflects international trends, including a declining contribution from social policy academics to policy analysis in the UK (Donnison, 2015).

The austerity period also saw a 'cutting back on equality' in the 'bonfire of the quangos', with several social policy agencies experiencing significant budget cuts or closure. The non-inclusive list of state agencies in the social policy field that were disbanded includes National Crime Council, National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism, Education Disadvantage Committee, Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, National Council on Ageing and Older People, Women's Health Council, Combat Poverty Agency, Children Acts Advisory Board, Crisis Pregnancy Agency, Affordable Homes Partnership, Centre for Housing Research, Homeless Agency, National Economic and Social Forum, Office for Active Citizenship, Library Council and Comhar (Harvey, 2012). Alongside this was a dramatic fall in funding of up to 35 per cent and related loss of 11,150 jobs in the voluntary and community sector by the end of 2013, eroding its social documentation and policy capacity (Murphy & O'Connor, in press). Among the most substantial losses over that period were the Combat Poverty Agency and the Equality Authority, leading to a significant loss of policy capacity. While the latter was re-established within the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, there appears to many a dilution of distinct equality analysis and review. These overall developments, Dukelow (in press) argues, precipitated a more critical turn in social policy analysis and scholarship and a notable turn to valuing the lived experience and its relevance to policymaking.

The lived experience is most visible and relevant at a local level. Local government has experienced significant austerity-related depletion of policy analysis capacity. Long 'a poor cousin' of highly centralised national government, Ireland's local government ranks amongst the least autonomous in Europe (Callanan, 2018). Local government is characterised by enormous systemic weaknesses; a lack of constitutional protection; low autonomy; few functions; political, administrative and financial centralisation; and the rationalisation of councils. Quinlivan (in press) finds local governments have sought to compensate for central funding cutbacks of up to 25 per cent by

enhancing the often uncoordinated innovative roles local councils play in economic development. He argues that public participation networks offer potential for collaborative work, better decision-making and enhanced policy outcomes. However, he concludes that, such is the mass of contradictions, in parallel with such policy capacity innovation and incrementalism are entrenchment and persistent challenges regarding the form, functioning and financing of local government.

Post the 1980s, economic and social policy analysis increasingly focused on both national and local networked governance, with more economic and societal actors engaged in policy analysis (albeit not necessarily reflecting the diversity of society). Interest group dialogue took the shape of social partnership (1987–2008), which was channelled through, and supported by, the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) (Hogan & Timoney, 2017). Post 2008 the role of NESC, a ‘boundary organisation’ creatively managing the relationship between policy analysis and diverse actors, was diminished and its policy analysis capacity was arguably underutilised. While not a direct outcome of the bailout, this reflected an overall centralisation of policy, with newly established institutions such as the Economic Management Council taking precedence.

What was lost here, as O’Donnell (in press) reflects, was the animation of a network of civil society organisations (CSOs) to work in a problem-solving way in a method of policy analysis which related to both interest group dialogue and government policy. He reflects how NESC adapted its own capacity for continuous self-reflection and enhanced its capacity to provide a policy analysis capable of generating a fusion of horizons, interests, understanding and respect among diverse actors. However, their efforts were impacted by the lack of engagement of various government departments. McNerney’s (in press) analysis of other ‘think tanks’ suggests again an underutilisation of research outputs and relatively poor knowledge mobilisation, while Cullen (in press) makes similar observations about failure to use gendered knowledge. Quasi-governmental think tanks are likely to exert stronger influence on policymakers, and therefore the outputs of organisations such as the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), the Law Reform Commission, Eurofound and the Institute for Public Health Ireland, set up and heavily funded by the state or the EU, are likely to have greater influence. In contrast, influencing is a significant challenge for autonomous, or quasi-autonomous, think tanks such as the Think Tank for Action on Social

Change (TASC), established before the crisis, or the trade-union-financed Nevin Institute, established after the crisis.

The engagement of CSOs with public policy has not evolved in a linear fashion, but waxes and wanes as CSOs adapt to meet their immediate political environment. During social partnership (1987–2008) the CSOs' space for policy analysis was expansive, but this subsequently downsized. In the context of austerity, many service delivery CSOs are dominated by service level agreements with government departments and agencies which effectively deny them advocacy or policy influencing capacity. At the same time, post 2011, and particularly post 2016, a 'new politics' emerged that is characterised by new parliamentary and public forms of policymaking that require new forms of policy analytical capacity with different implications for CSOs, and more abundant opportunity to liaise with the political system, including parliamentary committees. CSOs have experienced austerity cuts of up to 40 per cent and significant loss of policy capacity. At the same time they have improvised and engaged with new forms of policy process and democratisation, including institutional budgetary processes and wholly new deliberative processes, including constitutional conventions and citizens' assemblies. In these they have had to develop the capacity to set agendas, frame narratives, collaborate and network with more diverse actors.

Austerity was gendered in its impact, with particular consequences for gendered services, diluting the policy capacity of women's organisations which had to prioritise declining resources for service delivery. A disproportionate number of women-focused national agencies were closed (e.g. the Women's Health Council), merged or scaled back, with significant consequences for the strategic role gender expertise can play in policy analysis and change. Cullen (in press) identifies that gender policy analysis requires the expertise to apply gender as a variable in the range of processes that generate policy analysis. This is seen in gender audits, gender budgeting, research and analysis, gender consultation, gender training and gender assessments, capacity for which was diminished in the context of austerity, leaving gendered impacts of austerity less visible. A further consequence was the delayed development of gender disaggregated data, much needed for policy analysis, the absence of which continues to hinder policy analysis capacity in, for example, unemployment, homelessness, violence against women and gender budgeting. Resistance to adopting gendered analysis demonstrates how inhospitable some contexts

remain to gender expertise and the complex power relations involved in gender expert work.

At a time of declining trust in all institutions (Edelman, 2020), initiatives, including participatory budgeting and deliberative mini-publics like citizens' assemblies and citizens' juries, endeavour to engage citizens more directly in political processes by widening and/or deepening participation and placing the citizen at the heart of policy. Harris (in press) notes Irish innovations to facilitate public consultation, participation and deliberation in the form of citizens' assemblies – deliberative mini-publics examining constitutional change, political processes and policy options. While broadly accepted as a way of 'doing politics', or as a form of policy analysis, Harris (in press) argues deliberative democratic innovation can, as a process of co-design, engage citizens in the systematic analysis of policy problems in ways that are inclusive, evidence based, transparent and accountable. The 2020 Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality and proposed assemblies on issues as diverse as a Dublin mayoralty and the constitutional status of Northern Ireland demonstrate the shift from agencies to new forms of deliberative democracy as mechanisms for policy analysis. However, such processes need to pay careful attention to recruitment, duration, number of topics, tone, framing, format and procedures of deliberative processes to ensure inclusion and popular control are protected at all stages in the process.

Conclusion: Policy analysis and politicking in a context of uncertainty

A 'healthy policy-research community outside government can play a vital role in enriching public understanding and debate of policy issues' (Anderson, 1996, p. 486), 'and can serve as a natural complement to policy capacity within government' (Craft & Howlett, 2013, p. 190). Reflecting on the impact of the economic crisis, and the bailout, on policy analysis in Ireland, it is clear that government and civil service embedded policy analysis capacity has been enhanced, but it is less clear that there is a healthy policy research community in academia and civil society to complement policy capacity within government. Compared to the loss of social policy agencies and capacity described above over the same period, investment in IGEES and PBO is such that they now respectively employ 200 and 15 professional staff supported by the infrastructure of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, while the 5 members

of the IFAC are supported by a secretariat of 7 and the administrative capacity of the ESRI (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2020).

In the post-2015 recovery context, a focus on new social risks, including demographic factors and climate change, has turned attention to the need for policy innovation, while most recently Covid-19 brings the challenge of risk management to a new level. How can Ireland respond and enhance its policy analysis capacity to cope with the now permanent uncertainty that will be a dominant feature of our future? One direction is to invest in social policy capacity and to rebalance investment in social policy analysis with the type of post-crisis investment in agencies and modes of analysis focused on economic evaluation (as illustrated above in the IGEES, PBO and the IFAC).

Ruane (in press) reflected that significant progress has been made to generate new data, but identified significant remaining gaps in relation to health, energy and environment services, regional statistics, new social indicators for well-being and social progress, as well as gaps relating to globalisation, Brexit and new risks (including Covid-19). There is also the problem of data manipulation. Daly's (2019, p. 6) observation how 'at present there is statistical obfuscation if not "corruption" in Ireland's measurement of homelessness' bears out Ruane's (in press) assessment that even with the best data, policy analysis cannot stop political manipulation of statistics or fake news.

Ruane (in press) offers a range of ways to respond to new challenges (multi-country approaches; new data-collection and data-sharing methods across the OECD, Eurostat and the UN; and more strategic use of international macro-type indicators to identify policy needs). Central Statistics Office microdata files and longitudinal administrative data will be vital for subnational data disaggregation. There are also the challenges of General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the need to balance the potential of new 'big data' sources with ethical and data-continuity issues, and skills inequalities and deficits.

Keynes reminds us that models always absorb ideology and have an implicit mental frame. O'Rourke (in press) argues that explicitly recognising that policy analysts and experts have vested interests and that policy analysis tends to be embedded in neoliberal, or Keynesian, or increasingly neo-nationalist, discourses is useful in locating and evaluating arguments. Non-economists point out the disciplinary imperialism of economics and call for variety in the type of expertise

used in policy analysis. The level of uncertainty associated with social risks, and particularly climate change, means policy analysis processes are increasingly challenged to innovate new approaches, new forms of analysis, data and evidence. The role of ideas, and underlying norms and values, can easily be obscured by a focus on experts, evidence and expertise. However, as Dukelow (in press) reminds us, through her explanation of how a theocratic or economic perspective can impact on policy analysis, it is important to appreciate underlying assumptions.

This challenge is in the context of a more demanding political environment with more temporary political coalitions requiring often immediate 'solutions' to contemporary policy problems. O'Donnell (in press) argues that at times processes are needed to enable a conscious and transparent reframing of assumptions and knowledge that underpin policy analysis. As Cullen (in press) observes, who frames policy knowledge is important, as is making gender a variable of knowledge production. O'Rourke (in press) insists that even where the goal is to democratise knowledge and create deliberative democratic policy processes, the role of the expert is key. Even in attempts to overcome problems of representation in policy deliberations through mini-publics (constitutional conventions and citizens' assemblies), there can be dependency on experts and expert analyses informing design choices in democratising policy discourse.

While all of this widens and deepens democracy it does not replace the centrality of representative politics in our policymaking system, which brings into question the often uneven relationship between political parties and policy analysis. There are clear policy analysis lessons to draw from an analysis of policy prescriptions imposed through the bailout and the approach political parties might have adopted to the same analysis. Adshead & Scully (in press) observe the careful consensus-oriented policy development of political parties, with emphasis on stability and capability rather than ideology, with willingness to adopt the policy positions of opponents – once they proved popular with the public. The troika's controversial measures, such as the Local Property Tax and water charges, imposed without first seeking broad public consensus, broke with the Irish approach to policy analysis and implementation, leading to an unusual degree of politicking and policy conflict.

Post crisis we see increased political fragmentation and political volatility, with complex coalition formation and/or minority governments providing a new context of policymaking and policy

analysis. Adshead & Scully (in press) argue that ‘new politics’ is not new – multi-party coalitions and minority governments have been in power for more than seventy-one of the ninety-eight years since the foundation of the state, with programmatic government the *modus operandi* for parties. Levels of trust in political parties remain low, and while Ireland has avoided a sharp turn to populism, we are not immune to the experience in other European states.

Looking to the future, wicked problems and grand societal challenges mean that policymakers and policy analysts must find ways to inform decision-making in contexts where there are no answers. Sabel (2020) argues that increased uncertainty requires a shift from a ‘look before you leap’ style of analysis and decision-making to a ‘look as you leap’ approach. Heffernan (2020) argues against the futility of being persuaded by predictions and then nudging in that direction, and always trying to change human behaviour. She argues for a shift to ‘Just In Case’ leadership and leaving room for uncertainty, and focusing not on planning but on being prepared, an approach underlying Finland’s successful approach to Covid-19. At the time of writing, in autumn 2020, the trajectory and long-term impact of Covid-19 are unknown, but it is expected to change many aspects of politics, society and economics, and to present ongoing challenges for policy analysis. This necessarily requires more collaboration, consultation and co-design, which in turn requires a more complex set of skills (Torfing et al., 2019; Voorberg et al., 2015). This necessitates greater reflexivity and innovative institutional processes from policy analysts and from citizens, residents, workers and service users participating in trying to identify responses to today’s ‘wicked’ problems. From this perspective, all policy actors need to ensure policy analysis incorporates interdisciplinary perspectives and is open to the degree to which discrimination can result from the overlap of an individual’s various social identities. Gender and equality proofing are particularly important in this regard, as are creative co-productive policy processes that enable the full range of voices to inform potential analysis and solutions.

A core question is whether Ireland can build on its cultural orientation to subsidiarity with more innovation in local and national networked governance to enable non-state actors to actively shape public policy. Think tanks, CSOs and others need support to develop more complex and different skills to populate this policy analysis space. McCarthy (in press, p. x) ‘highlights the importance of officials, analysts and activists who have direct experience of the lived

experience of those who are the focus of policy, but who are also fluent in the language of formal policy development, a rarer combination than might be supposed'. While institutions like NESC have capacity to puzzle through the increasing complexity of the policy challenges and to enable reflexivity amongst economic, social and environmental actors and organisations in society, such institutions are not necessarily inclusive, and economic and educational inequality remain a barrier to inclusive policy analysis. O'Donnell (in press) argues for 'co-production' and greater focus on 'boundary work' and maintaining a flexible, but coherent, engagement between knowledge (both co-produced and deriving from 'expert' sources), deliberation and wider interest group dialogue, including public agencies and key government departments. While the 2008 crisis prompted a dramatic centralisation of public policy, as the state reengages with civil society more analysis is needed of the diverse ways knowledge is generated and used and the diverse range of national and local societal actors that need to be included.

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