

How a Small Advocacy Organisation Advanced Big Reforms: The Irish Penal Reform Trust



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March 2016

The
ATLANTIC
Philanthropies

Introduction

Trying to shift policy and practice in order to address the rights of people who are marginalised from society is a daunting task for any organisation, especially a small one. But not only is such change possible but small organisations can bring singular strengths to pressing, if unpopular, issues. The Irish Penal Reform Trust (IPRT) is an example of a small organisation with limited staff and resources that successfully influenced policy on a largely invisible, minority issue.

IPRT has influenced penal reform in Ireland through targeted research, awareness raising and alliance building with those in the system, including prisoners. The organisation persuaded policymakers to take on unpopular issues of prisoners' rights by investing in research that showed practical, cost-effective alternatives to the high costs of prisons, such as early release to community service.

IPRT's advocacy led to several changes for prisoners' rights and penal policy. Government came to understand that human rights must be adhered to in prisons, that long incarceration and substandard prison conditions increased recidivism, and that building more prisons was not the solution to criminal justice problems. Among penal reforms IPRT has influenced since 2012: investigations of prisoner deaths have been made public; children in prison have been able to make complaints to the Ombudsman for Children; an adult prison was closed to 16-year-olds; and plans for a 'super prison' were abandoned.

This case study describes how an organisation with a small staff and the right strategy, research, communications and advocacy can have a significant impact on policy and practice. It describes IPRT's approach to generating useful research and training advocates, its influence on penal policy and practice, its challenges and lessons learned. The IPRT approach holds insights for any small organisation seeking to make a difference in the lives of those who are marginalised.

A small staff and the right strategy, research, communications and advocacy can have a significant impact on policy and practice.

Genesis of the Irish Penal Reform Trust

IPRT was established in 1994 by a group of lawyers, academics, social workers, people from religious orders and citizens who were concerned about the poor conditions and invisibility of prisoners in Ireland. These prisoners were largely forgotten and voiceless. IPRT was the first organisation in the history of Ireland solely dedicated to advocating for penal reform on behalf of people from all communities. Among the most appalling conditions were the lack of sanitary facilities in many of prison cells (resulting in 'slopping out') and the use of padded cells for prisoners with mental health issues. Serious over-crowding, inter-prisoner violence and lack of community service alternatives for nonviolent crimes were also key concerns. It was a time when the government had adopted a zero-tolerance attitude toward crime and promoted expansion of prisons.

The shooting deaths of a detective and a journalist within the space of two weeks in 1996 heightened awareness of crime in Ireland and accelerated a movement to build several new prisons. Ireland already had one of the highest prison committal rates in Europe despite the fact that it had a low crime rate compared to other countries. In addition, it had a high recidivism rate. In short, the policies were not working for anyone.

IPRT's goal was to serve as an independent body that could monitor prison conditions and advocate that the state account for the treatment of vulnerable prisoners. The organisation's concerns stretched beyond reform of the prison system and included the treatment of youth and juvenile offenders, rehabilitation initiatives and the problems experienced by offenders when re-integrating into the community.

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In its early years, IPRT could point to several successes including a 2002 announcement that the Irish Prison Service would stop using padded cells and instead use safety observation cells for prisoners with mental illness.

But for much of this time, IPRT relied mostly on a dedicated group of volunteers, including the board of directors, to carry out its work, which limited its impact. In 2007, it hired as executive director Liam Herrick who came from a broad human rights background including working for the Irish Human Rights Commission and Irish Council for Civil Liberties.

Then in January 2009, The Atlantic Philanthropies provided the first of a series of core grants to IPRT, which allowed the organisation to hire three more key staff members: a researcher, a communications manager and an office manager. The Atlantic grant enabled IPRT to recruit top professionals and pay them good salaries. While Atlantic had provided IPRT small grants in the late 1990s and early 2000s, this was the first significant funding it had made to the organisation.

‘With the Atlantic grant, everything changed’, Herrick said. ‘There is a critical mass to running an organisation. Suddenly with this funding we had capacity to be strategic and plan for the future. The output of the organisation went up very significantly’.

From 2009 through 2016, Atlantic provided IPRT with four core grants totalling \$2.4 million.

IPRT’s Approach to Generating Useful Research and Building Alliances

When IPRT began ramping up its staffing, it confronted a hostile environment with policymakers, Herrick said.

‘The government wasn’t very open to engage with outside bodies, especially perspectives from the IPRT’, he said. ‘Those relationships had to be developed over time both at a personal level and an institutional level’.

In order to make real headway on such an unpopular cause as prisoners’ rights, Herrick, his colleagues and the IPRT board developed a formal strategy. Their approach had three key components that built off of one another. They were:

- Generating useful research on sentencing, prison and prisoners’ rights issues
- Building alliances, particularly with government and prison officials
- Creating a communications approach that focused on gaining attention to penal reform issues, rather than IPRT

Generating useful research on prison and prisoners’ rights issues

The IPRT staff and board felt strongly that if they were going to achieve real change, they had to provide policymakers with research to back up their calls to improve conditions for prisoners. IPRT needed research to show why change was needed as well as provide practical solutions. In the first years of its increased staffing, a key priority was gathering evidence of effective penal reform that IPRT could use to effect policy change.

‘IPRT was able to say things that I couldn’t say’, said Michael Donnellan, director general of the Irish Prison Service, who was the director of the probation service when he started interacting with IPRT. ‘It gave you a notion that there were people in a wider system who, like me, believe in redemption and reform. I was trying to establish that probation had a voice and a presence. Having IPRT behind you gave you positive support.’

IPRT staff also recognised a critical gap they could fill. Ireland historically has not had a strong tradition of government-funded research. The government simply did not have the capacity to carry out research on many issues, including those affecting prisons.

IPRT believed that one of the best ways to develop and sustain healthy relationships with politicians in Parliament was to generate high-quality research papers that were useful in their decisions. Because it was a small organisation, IPRT either carried out or commissioned independent research to look at two or three topics a year and make recommendations with a sound basis in evidence and best practices. Research addressed topics such as solitary confinement, slopping out and youth in adult prisons.

‘They picked legitimate things that were crying out for attention and made sense to address in the minds of people’, said John Lonergan, former governor, Mountjoy Prison.

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director general, Irish
Prison Service*

Over time, IPRT established a reputation among policymakers of producing credible and useful publications.

‘We were authoritative and that authority came from the evidence and research base’, said Fiona Ní Chinnéide, IPRT deputy executive director. ‘It’s very easy to be critical. But we always identify the problem and say how the problem can be fixed.’

IPRT created two-page colour summaries of its position papers that included a brief synopsis of the context and problem, key facts and solutions. Those papers, which were designed to be visually appealing, were immensely popular with busy parliamentarians, Ní Chinnéide said. Longer 12-page position papers were often most useful as documents for policy advisers as well as for IPRT to refer to as reminders of its core positions, she said. Those reminders are important because over a period of time it can be easy for an organisation to ‘drift’ in its position, she noted.

The more meaty reports also helped IPRT establish credibility among academics, who are important as potential research partners in educating the next generation of thinkers, said Mary Rogan, former chair, Irish Penal Reform Trust and head of law at Dublin Institute of Technology.

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Building alliances, particularly with government and prison officials

In the past, IPRT’s approach had been highly confrontational. But new staff believed it would be more effective to build relationships with policy officials while also adhering to their long-standing calls for reform. One of their key slogans was respect for the rights of everyone in the penal system. That included the rights of prison staff.

IPRT also saw a 2011 change in government as a window of opportunity to move away from the previous administration’s hostility toward penal reform. IPRT began requesting meetings with senior officials including the Irish Prison Officers Association. Herrick noted that nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) don’t make policy changes, government does. Therefore, IPRT’s strategy was to find a few sympathetic officials who could champion reforms — such as the director general of the prison service and officials in the department of justice — and cultivate them.

Staff invited the same officials to attend and speak at their meetings — a first in IPRT’s history. In their public statements, IPRT also gave credit to prison officials when they made constructive change while continuing to point out opportunities for improvement.

‘Their style of advocacy was important’, said Brian Kearney-Grieve, former programme executive at The Atlantic Philanthropies. ‘They engaged with officials in a respectful manner. IPRT couched their recommendations in ways that recognised the constraints that people like judges were operating under.’

One of the most striking examples of IPRT’s ability to forge relationships with top government officials came when Herrick was asked to chair a high-level Department of Justice and Equality Strategic Review of Penal Policy, which between 2012 and 2014 examined all aspects of penal policy. Herrick declined the chair, believing that that position might compromise the view of IPRT’s independence but he joined the panel. He, and later Mary Rogan, played a central role in influencing the panel’s final recommendations.

IPRT staff also worked with other NGOs, at times sitting on their boards and offering them assistance while also looking for opportunities to work together on issues of mutual importance. For a small organisation with limited resources, enlisting the help of other NGOs was vital.

‘We were always generous with our time and open with our knowledge’, Herrick said. ‘We are not in competition with other NGOs. That’s not always a given in our world.’

IPRT also played a lead role in coordinating the campaigning activity of a group of NGOs working to end the detention of children in St Patrick’s Institution, a Victorian adult prison. In addition, while not a service organisation, IPRT worked with prisoners who provided insights into the realities of prisoner life. The organisation receives about 60 letters a year from prisoners asking for advice and information, and is regularly contacted by families of prisoners. IPRT staff members visit prisons a number of times a year to discuss issues with prisoners; and a former prisoner sits on its board. Without that presence, IPRT staff note, their mandate would be questionable because they would be removed from the experience of human rights on the ground.

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Creating a communications approach focused on gaining attention for penal reform, not IPRT

Intricately tied to IPRT's work in generating useful research and cultivating relationships with key officials, individuals and organisations was its focus on strategic communications.

It was the issue of prison mistreatment and call for reform that needed to get into public awareness, not IPRT as an entity, staff believed. With that core goal in mind, the IPRT communications director devoted considerable time to providing background information to journalists and preparing reports on aspects of prison conditions.

Often, IPRT's name would not appear in reports but the news coverage would draw attention to important aspects of prison reform that IPRT wanted to bring into public consciousness. For example, a documentary called *Life on the Inside* followed the lives of prisoners and raised awareness of the realities of prison life to Irish audiences. It received a high level of public and media attention. IPRT provided detailed background information for the documentary but sought no mention.

IPRT also focused on bringing attention to compelling issues that had not been covered by news organisations. For instance, IPRT had identified a problem of a number of people being held on 'protection' or solitary confinement — held 22 hours a day in their cells. To create awareness about this damaging practice, IPRT put together a briefing, which featured an international expert, and found a former prisoner to be interviewed. RTÉ Morning Ireland, the most listened to radio programme in Ireland, created a 10-minute broadcast on the practice that aired in July 2013, which was picked up by national television and newspapers. Michael Donnellan, the director general of the Irish Prison Service, was also interviewed on the programme.

For IPRT, the value of the media work was not solely about communication with the public. It was that a high profile in the media gave it more standing with policymakers because they are influenced by the media.

IPRT staff also knew that they needed to address the fears of the general public about crime, rather than ignore them. Whenever executive directors Liam Herrick or Deirdre Malone had interviews with the media, they did not wait for the question of being 'soft on crime' to be brought up. They addressed it first, saying that the debate about soft versus hard on crime is not the right one. The right debate is whether Ireland's response to crime is effective.

It helped that IPRT's executive directors are gifted communicators who have the skills to genuinely address the pain of victims of crime. Once Herrick appeared on the state broadcaster's 'The Late, Late Show' with family survivors of homicide victims. On the programme, Herrick acknowledged the grief of the family members and talked about the ways that criminal rehabilitation services can serve the public. IPRT staff point to that appearance as a watershed in increasing the organisation's credibility and recognition.

'However brutal a media opportunity might be, we had to do it', Rogan said. 'Otherwise we might become an elitist organisation with no grounding in reality. It's so easy for a media appearance to turn into this thing about how you're these liberal do-gooders who are clueless about victims. Our approach was always to be very sensitive and as rational as humanly possible.'

In addition to its three main approaches, IPRT also employed two other tactics in achieving change. They were:

- **Making use of international bodies and instruments.** Because IPRT is a small group, it looked for ways to leverage existing processes that could influence policymakers. Much of this work was around international human rights processes. Their approach included making submissions to international bodies such as the UN Universal Periodic Review of the human rights records of its UN member states, and the UN Committee against Torture. IPRT made recommendations to the latter on prison issues including the need to address over-crowding and slopping out, and for an independent prisoner complaints mechanism. IPRT also met with the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights during his visit to Ireland in 2011. The commissioner included several issues that IPRT staff raised with him in his recommendations to the Irish government.
- **Effecting change through law.** In Ireland, there was no strategic or structured litigation on behalf of prisoners. IPRT determined that they lacked the capacity to take on such litigation themselves, particularly because of legal strictures that meant that NGOs faced potentially ruinous financial judgments if they lost a case. Instead, IPRT built alliances with legal professional bodies by holding seminars for barristers and solicitors and creating manuals for litigators and for prisoners about rights. One such publication, *Know Your Rights — Your Rights as a Prisoner*², was translated into three languages and distributed in prisons by the Irish Prison Service.

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¹ See <http://www.iprt.ie/contents/2306>

Through this work, which IPRT describes as a ‘slow burn’, lawyers have undertaken significantly more litigation on issues of penal reform in the last two years than in the past, according to the organisation. For example, lawyers have won cases arguing that 22-hour lock-up violates prisoners’ constitutional rights and scores of stopping-out cases have been settled.

Key Accomplishments and Influence

A 2013 independent evaluation², as well as participants and observers, noted the following key accomplishments by IPRT from the time of Atlantic funding.

A shift in focus from building more prisons to finding more effective approaches to criminal justice

IPRT helped change the political centre of gravity on penal reform, which had been for expansion, to one for moderation. While the changing economic circumstances were a factor in this shift, IPRT also influenced policymakers in all the political parties.

Prior to 2011, most parties favoured more prisons including a planned ‘super prison’ in Dublin as the only response to crime and over-crowding in prisons. Over a short time period, this mind-set shifted and political acceptance now exists that the prison population needs to be reduced and it can be done without risk to public safety.

‘There is good evidence that the principle of prison as a last resort is now informing Government policy...and of IPRT’s contribution to policy change’, the evaluation stated.

To get to this point, IPRT secured a number of commitments in the 2011 Programme for Government that reflected the organisation’s key objectives for penal reform, including moving from custodial sentences towards less costly and more effective options for nonviolent and less serious offences.

In addition, following the 2011 General Election, the Minister for Justice, Equality and Defence established a committee to review the proposals for the new prison. IPRT prepared a submission to the review group, including evidence-based solutions for alternatives to addressing overcrowding. The review group recommended a smaller prison be built and eventually even that plan was shelved.

‘When I talked about overcrowding, lack of medical services and other issues affecting prisons, I always found it very useful to have IPRT highlighting the shortcomings and demanding better conditions’, said Lonergan, former governor, Mountjoy Prison. ‘If anything motivates politicians to do something, it’s having a third party highlighting issues that must be addressed. For me, it was an invaluable support’.

The review group also recommended that a strategic review of all penal policy should be carried out. This was the Strategic Review of Penal Policy that the executive director of IPRT was invited to chair but instead served on. Its 2014 report had more than 40 recommendations for changes in prison service, most of which IPRT championed. The *Strategic Review of Penal Policy: Final Report*⁴ contains an entire chapter on strengthening the policymaking process, an area of major emphasis for IPRT.

Ireland’s approach to criminal justice has changed, as reflected in the number of people incarcerated. After a 20-year period during which the number of prisoners more than doubled, the prison population has recently contracted. For example, in the three years from 2011 to 2014, the number of people in prisons decreased from 4,587 to 3,792.

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² Montgomery P. Evaluation of IPRT 2011-2013, 2013.

³ See [http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Strategic Review of Penal Policy.pdf/Files/Strategic Review of Penal Policy.pdf](http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Strategic%20Review%20of%20Penal%20Policy.pdf/Files/Strategic%20Review%20of%20Penal%20Policy.pdf)

Significant progress in addressing the most serious human rights issues in prisons

Advocacy by IPRT has led to improvements in prison conditions. Among its achievements are a planned ending of the practice of slopping out. At the start of IPRT's work in this area, 30 per cent of prisoners had no access to toilets at night. In 2014, it was down to less than 10 per cent, with a commitment by the prison service in 2012 to end the practice entirely by 2016. In addition, the numbers of prisoners on 22-hour lock-up went down significantly — from 211 in July 2013 when IPRT first publicised the issue to 78 in October 2015.

IPRT's consistent and effective advocacy gave sympathetic officials the backing they needed to make reforms, several people interviewed for this report said.

'IPRT's work has been instrumental in shaping government policy. The elimination of slopping out is one example,' said Michael Donnellan, director general, Irish Prison Service. 'They have steadfastly embarrassed Ireland and the government and helped influence capital investment in our prisons. They have helped convince people that we can't call ourselves a first-world country with third-world conditions.'

IPRT could also point to significant progress in accountability mechanisms on prisoners' complaints and deaths in custody, which had been a cornerstone of its campaigning for many years. Addressing an issue that IPRT long-championed, the Minister for Justice, Equality and Defence announced in April 2012 a new system for investigating and making public the investigations into all deaths of prisoners overseen by the Inspector of Prisons.

The government followed up this announcement with the establishment of an independent prisoner complaints process for serious complaints in 2012. Some 22 external investigators have been recruited and trained. Prior to 2012, all prisoner complaints were investigated by the prison itself. In addition, in 2012, following advocacy by IPRT, for the first time children in prison could make complaints to the Ombudsman for Children.

Ireland also has seen progress around the establishment of human rights indicators. In 2009, the Inspector of Prisons published a set of standards based on international best practices to measure progress on human rights measures. The inspector later stated he expected all prisons to comply with best practices by July 2011. Since then, standards have improved but not in every prison or every area.

'They have had a huge impact in changing the debate around penal reform and prisons,' said Ivana Bacik, a member of the Seanad and of the Labour Party. 'IPRT has been very influential in moving us toward a more progressive penal policy.'

End of detention of children in St Patrick's adult prison and other changes affecting youth

For years, juveniles had been housed in an adult prison often alongside violent inmates. The old, decaying prison not only had horrific conditions but essentially served as a 'crime school' for younger inmates. While many had criticised the detention of juveniles in St Patrick's since the 1980s, nothing changed until IPRT led a campaign around it with other advocates, including the Ombudsman for Children. The campaign resulted in a government commitment in 2012 to move all juveniles to a children's detention school, which is focused on welfare, education and rehabilitation.

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New emphasis on research in making policy

IPRT's focus on using evidence and research as the basis for constructive policy change has influenced the government's approach to penal policy. The evaluation reported that at a time when the new government was 'scrabbling for new ideas', IPRT was able to present 'ready-made proposals'.

'A key achievement by IPRT is a change in how penal policy is made', Rogan said. 'Before there was a lack of engagement with research and international experience and a fundamental weakness in the policymaking process'.

Legislators said that IPRT's emphasis on research has had an impact on the way they make penal policy.

'The research IPRT has published has been authoritative and useful', Bacik said. 'It's been hugely visible and gives them credibility'.

Challenges

IPRT also faced challenges in its work. Among them:

- **Securing some legislation and policy change.** Some of the critical issues that IPRT sought to address have languished in Ireland's slow legislative process. For example, IPRT campaigned on the issue of 'spent convictions' for 10 years and not until February 2016 was limited legislation enacted. The spent conviction legislation helps address hardships that some former prisoners face in starting a new life allowing for certain criminal convictions to be expunged after a period of time, reducing barriers for some former prisoners to integrate back into society.

IPRT also noted that there is no requirement that prisons provide access to certain information about prisoners such as the amount of time people are spending in restricted lock-up or solitary confinement. Such a requirement needs to be embedded in legislation and policy, IPRT staff said. In addition, while there has been an independent element to the investigation of the most serious complaints since November 2012, IPRT continues to call for a fully independent complaints mechanism such as a prisoner ombudsman.

- **Stretching themselves too thin.** IPRT staff and board members say that they were overly ambitious and worked on too many issues. In retrospect, they say it would have been better to focus on a smaller number of concerns. Staff also said they put more resources into legislative change than they should have because the process is laborious and not always effective in securing change.
- **Getting engagement from prisoners.** IPRT made the decision from its inception that it would be an advocacy organisation not a service organisation. But that decision meant that unlike other NGOs that provide both services and advocate for their clients, IPRT did not have ongoing and direct access to the issues and needs of prisoners. IPRT's strategic decision against working directly with prisoners also meant that it might not have the same credibility as an organisation that provides services to its constituents.
- **Changing the culture of prisons.** The reality is that it may take decades to shift the way prisoners are treated and the approach to criminal justice in Ireland. Prisoner rights and reform will likely always be an unpopular issue and IPRT will have to continually keep penal reform on the political front burner and show that changes are not only possible but necessary — both from a human rights and recidivism standpoint.
- **Focusing on sustainability.** Like many small organisations, IPRT's staff and board struggled to find the right balance between carrying out its core work and focusing on internal issues such as sustainability. With core funding from Atlantic ending in 2016, IPRT has determined that finding enough resources to continue its work is now its top priority — and a major challenge due to limited sources of core funding.

IPRT will have to continually keep penal reform on the political front burner and show that changes are not only possible but necessary — both from a human rights and recidivism standpoint.

Lessons Learned

Lessons learned from the work of the Irish Penal Reform Trust can be helpful to other small organisations advocating for the rights of people who are marginalised from society.

Organisational

- **Make the most impact with a small staff by understanding the unique value that an organisation adds.** Determine the gaps that policymakers and others need to be filled that the organisation can provide and then consistently, over time, fill those gaps. For example, IPRT recognised a gap in research on prisoners and prison issues and filled it by commissioning credible, outside research. They also saw an opening for working with sympathetic officials within the prison service and endeavoured to foster those relationships. When small organisations understand the unique value that they can bring to an issue, they can have an influence that is disproportionate to their size.
- **Recruit people who are not only passionate but highly skilled and pay them well.** When organisations have multi-annual core funding, they can recruit staff who are experts in their field and pay them competitive salaries. There can be a tendency in the NGO world to look primarily for passion in their staff and expect people to work for small salaries. But competence and skills in practical matters such as research and communications are crucial when trying to make changes on contentious issues. Skilled, efficient professionals require less oversight, which allows the organisation to spend more time advocating for their issues.
- **Put time into organisational procedures.** It can be tempting to focus staff on advocating for a core issue but if the organisation does not have clear policies and procedures it will not be effective. Having an employment management system, staff handbooks and robust financial controls are just as important to the organisation as having staff with strong content knowledge.

In addition, a strategic plan with well-defined priorities is vital to set and guide an organisation's mission and ensure that it does not stray from it. IPRT was clear that they were focused on advocacy and policy change and not on service provision and case management. A strategic plan helped them adhere to their vision. Another way to help create a strong organisation is to have a 'lessons learned' part of every board meeting to discuss issues that have arisen.

- **Pay attention to the skills of board members as well as staff.** The board of an NGO provides a critical role in oversight and direction. It is crucial that these board members bring an array of skills beyond subject matter expertise. Those skills include organisational knowledge, human resources expertise, financial competencies, research knowledge and understanding of government and policy work.

Approach

- **Understand the needs of policymakers and respond to those needs in ways that are useful.** For example, providing solutions rather than simply critiquing policy is important in order for NGOs to be taken seriously by most policymakers. Holding forums that focus on solutions can be a way to gain credibility among policymakers. Creating short summaries with easy-to-read bullet points is another way to be useful to busy policymakers.
- **Engage with people, including potential adversaries, in a respectful and understanding manner.** When NGOs seek to influence a contentious issue it is important that their tone demonstrate respect. Officials should be treated as fair-minded people who are inclined to do the right thing, especially if given help to do so. Understand the constraints that the officials operate under and provide solutions that are practical and feasible.
- **Use international human rights instruments and perspectives to move an issue.** IPRT made use of international monitoring bodies such as United Nations Human Rights Committee as leverage to persuade policymakers to make changes in prison conditions, including ending slopping out and imprisonment of children in adult prisons. For example, IPRT went to Geneva and made oral submissions on the prison situation in Ireland. As a country, Ireland is proud of its reputation in human rights and does not want to be embarrassed in front of such prestigious international bodies.
- **IPRT also looked for examples from abroad of effective approaches.** The Finland model, which saw a reduction in prison numbers and crime, provided a good model to share with Ireland's policymakers, especially since Finland is a European Union country with similarities to Ireland.

Providing solutions rather than simply critiquing policy is important in order for NGOs to be taken seriously by most policymakers.

- **Combine strong research, advocacy and relationship building to influence policy.** Neither research nor advocacy alone will likely move an issue but the nexus between sound policy work, good communications and good relationships with policymakers can work well. Much of IPRT’s success is due to effectively making use of all three approaches with each complementing the other.

Funders

- **Move an issue through core funding.** Understand the critical gaps and opportunities that exist in an area and make resources available so that an organisation can take a three- to five-year view, knowing that they will have secure resources to accomplish the work. It took time for IPRT to build their relationships with key people in the government, prison system and the media. They could only do that through core, multi-annual funding that gave them the ability to hire the right people and plan a multi-year strategy to make an impact on a difficult issue.

When organisations only have short-term funding, they spend an enormous amount of time recruiting people for short-term contracts who are then not around to provide continuity. It is also difficult for organisations to plan strategically or respond to new opportunities for reform when they are continually focusing on attracting new funding.

‘The Atlantic money, from the point of view of achieving penal reform in Ireland, was absolutely critical’, said Ian O’Donnell, professor of criminology at University College Dublin and former IPRT executive director. ‘They really allowed the facilitation of a critical voice. If they hadn’t come up with the money I don’t think there would have been the same opposition to the thoughtless expansion of prisons.’

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Conclusion

The Irish Penal Reform Trust demonstrates how a small organisation can effectively shift policy and practice for people who are marginalised from society. With the right strategy, research and advocacy, organisations like IPRT can have influence that is disproportionate to their size.

While IPRT’s accomplishments are noteworthy and significant, what may be most useful for other groups taking on unpopular issues is to consider how this organisation achieved such success. IPRT’s thoughtful and practical approaches to gaining the trust of potential adversaries and providing useful, timely information, among other tactics, can be studied by other organisations seeking to influence similarly thorny issues. If IPRT’s approach could be summed up in one word it would be generous. Its generosity in sharing information, giving others credit and in assuming good intentions among those whose policies the organisation opposed, perhaps more than anything, helped it achieve its outsized impact.

The Irish Penal Reform Trust demonstrates how a small organisation can effectively shift policy and practice for people who are marginalised from society.

Acknowledgments

The research for this case study was made possible through generous support from The Atlantic Philanthropies. The author would like to thank the following individuals for their thoughtful comments and assistance during the case study's development:

Ivana Bacik, member of the Seanad and Labour Party

Gail Birkbeck, strategic learning and evaluation executive, The Atlantic Philanthropies

Michael Donnellan, director general, Irish Prison Service

Liam Herrick, former executive director, Irish Penal Reform Trust

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Deirdre Malone, executive director, Irish Penal Reform Trust

Fiona Ní Chinnéide, deputy executive director, Irish Penal Reform Trust

Ian O'Donnell, professor of criminology, University College Dublin

Mary Rogan, former chair, Irish Penal Reform Trust

Tanya Ward, chief executive, Children's Rights Alliance

The author would also like to acknowledge Pamela Montgomery, an independent evaluator, whose evaluations of the Irish Penal Reform Trust were used in writing this case study.