

PUBLIC MANAGEMENT POLICY INSIGHT BRIEF

NUMBER 3 MAY 2018

CAN PHILANTHROPIES' INVESTMENT IN EVIDENCE GENERATION INFLUENCE GOVERNMENT POLICY?

Lessons from Ireland

The Atlantic Philanthropies (Atlantic) has put substantial effort into enhancing the evidence base used to inform policy development in Ireland.

Atlantic has made significant investments in the monitoring and evaluation of programmes; the development of longitudinal studies and robust indicator sets; the building of academic capacity in research and evaluation; and the creation of mechanisms to connect evidence with practice. These initiatives have been undertaken with a view to developing an enhanced evidence base to inform government policy and practice. An important intention behind the investment in evidence is that policymakers make use of this evidence base to inform thinking about policy development and investment decisions.

there is no guarantee that just because evidence and its importance are cited in policy statements it will be used in practice. But it is an important first step.

A particular benefit noted from the evidence generation supported by Atlantic is the creation of thoroughly researched and documented Irish cases. While policymakers draw lessons using evidence from abroad, such studies can

also face challenges and resistance because of concerns about the applicability of these cases in an Irish context. Having 'home grown' cases of the evidence of policy impact is important in persuading policymakers as to what works and what doesn't.

On the less positive side, several policymakers interviewed mentioned that they felt the approach adopted by Atlantic to evidence generation and gathering could at times be

KEY POINTS

- Investing in evidence generation can make a difference and influence government policy
- Policy makers react positively to the creation of local cases they can relate to.
- There are often limited windows of opportunity to influence political thinking with regard to policy.
- There is a danger that once philanthropic investment in evidence ceases, it may become a lower-order priority in public organisations as the pressure to deal with the next crisis takes precedence.

MAY 2018

seen as burdensome and overly academic in nature (this despite the fact that the research approach was agreed between Atlantic and government at the outset of all programmes). Some interviewees said they needed shorter research or ongoing research briefs more attuned to the demands of the policy environment.

Another challenge is maintaining the evidence base. When the pressure is on in public organisations to deliver services and deal with the next crisis, it can be difficult to give the time or priority to gathering evidence. There is a danger that after Atlantic exit the scene, evidence will diminish as budgets tighten and the emphasis is on spending money to maximise services and keeping the business going.

Influencing policy development

There are clear examples of investment in evidence influencing government policy. Examples include:

- The Irish Government's *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures* policy framework for children and younger people illustrates how rigorous evidence promoted by Atlantic is being built in to policy statements. Much of the language in the policy framework is drawn directly from the work of Atlantic's grantees in prevention and early intervention and, specifically, the explicit focus on the importance of evidence.
- Atlantic's support for a major research study on dementia fed directly in to the development of the *Irish National Dementia Strategy*. The strategy itself explicitly notes that it drew on this research in its production.
- The Department of Health, together with The Atlantic Philanthropies, the HSE's Health and Wellbeing Division and Age Friendly Ireland have agreed on a joint programme to monitor and promote older people's health and wellbeing in Ireland. This programme (the Healthy and Positive Ageing Outcomes Initiative) is intended to measure the implementation of the *National Positive Ageing Strategy* (NPAS).

For more information, contact Dr. Richard Boyle (rboyle@ipa.ie)

Further details on this and other aspects of government, philanthropy and civil society organisations working together can be found in R. Boyle and L. Shannon (2018), *Better Together? Philanthropy and Government: Lessons from The Atlantic Philanthropies and Irish Government Partnership-based Co-Investments*, Dublin: Institute of Public Administration. Available to download from <https://www.atlanticphilanthropies.org/research-reports/better-together-philanthropy-and-government> or <https://www.ipa.ie/fileupload/ResearchPapers/Better Together Report.pdf>