



OÉ Gaillimh
NUI Galway

Lifecourse Institute

**Critical Perspectives Paper
No. 1**

**The Lifecourse Social Policy Agenda for
the Next Government**

**National University of Ireland
Galway**

15 February 2011

**The Lifecourse Institute is composed of the Child and
Family Research Centre, the Irish Centre for Social
Gerontology and the Centre for Disability Law & Policy
at NUI Galway.**

The Lifecourse Social Policy Agenda for the Next Government

The recently formed Lifecourse Institute at NUI Galway brings together three Research centres in the university with a focus on older people, families & children and persons with disabilities. Its primary function is to produce research that supports innovative policy reform across the lifecycle that enables citizens to achieve their potential and live fulfilling and productive lives.

This 'Critical Perspectives' paper is intended to provide a succinct statement of the major policy challenges facing the next Government across the lifecourse. It is intended as a public service at a critical moment in our history when major social policy choices will have to be made affecting future generations.

1. The Need for a New Approach

The incoming Government will be faced with a mountain of social policy challenges. Business as usual will not do. In the past even their advocates expressed these challenges, as coming from within highly specific silos (e.g., older people, families, children and persons with disabilities). However, unfettered interest group competition in the marketplace of politics has not produced positive results for all. It has meant that those with the most voice tended to get the most attention – and resources. Dealing with these social claims as disconnected islands only postponed the day when a coherent vision of our social model could emerge.

The next Government will have to stand back from the legacy of the past and develop a much more open and coherent conception of the Irish social model as it affects these groups. The most recent Social Partnership Agreement (Towards 2016) acknowledged the drawbacks of the past and offered the prospect of a lifecourse perspective on our social model. This is still valuable – but it must now be made to deliver in the next few years. For one thing, it ensures that policy advances in one field are not undercut by uneven policy development in other fields – thus creating more traps for the unwary. Secondly, a lifecourse approach helps embed a reflex of planning ahead and factoring in the potential impact of policy changes now for future generations. This was conspicuous by its absence in the past.

Indeed, the way in which policy – including social policy - is made in Ireland must be radically transformed. There are better models available. For example, the Government of British Columbia in Canada sees itself as a 'policy taker' not a 'policy maker'. It requires its senior civil servants to enter 'professional empathy programmes' to understand the constituencies they deal with. Why not such a programme here? It also sets up 'policy labs' with all parties affected to think through policy options together, openly and not behind closed doors. We need such radical and open approaches to the social policy process here.

What are the priorities of these fields and how do they connect in a coherent lifecourse approach?

2. The Disability Policy Challenges

Take disability. First of all, our antiquated legal capacity legislation needs a dramatic overhaul. The Heads of Bill published in 2008 by the outgoing Government needs a fresh airing and must include explicit provisions on supported decision making which Canada shows need not be resource intensive.

Secondly, we have to finally de-institutionalise those who continue to live in congregated settings or group homes. International experience overwhelmingly shows that this produces better outcomes and that the costs can be managed.

Thirdly, the way in which services are delivered must be utterly transformed. The current system owes everything to history and almost nothing to logic. Where is the public interest in a system that does not require an independent evaluation of the views of service users as an explicit precondition for renewing a contract? The move toward individualised budgets (direct payments) should be accelerated to ensure not just person-centred services but person-driven services. Choice and the option to direct their own services was strongly highlighted by respondents to the recent consultation exercise carried out by the Department of Health & Children in its *Value for Money Review of Disability Services* (December 2010). The next Government needs to act on this imperative for change.

Fourthly, the neglected field of enabling wealth accumulation for persons with disabilities must be fully explored here. Recent legislation such as the US ABLE legislation enables trust funds to be

built up using targeted and cost-effective tax breaks that then allows an adult to purchase the services they need – as distinct from those that others think they need.

Fifth, reductions in educational supports for children and students with disabilities must be reversed. This is a classic example of non-lifecourse planning which only postpones the inevitable costs and effectively consigns a generation to the dustbin. Who wins here! No one, not even the taxpayer. Sixth, and not least, the mental health policy set out in *A Vision for Change* requires renewed commitment if the policy goals are to be realised and the criticisms of the Independent Monitoring Group on its implementation addressed.

Finally, the new Government should rapidly ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The Convention already allows States to 'progressively achieve' rights that require resources – so the admitted scarcity of resources should not be an obstacle. You cannot even begin to 'progressively achieve' something that is not even ratified. We are now one of the last Member States of the European Union to ratify the convention.

3. The Ageing Policy Challenges

Take older people. The next Government has a unique opportunity to transform the lives of current and future generations of older people. Its task will be much easier if it takes heed of the excellent groundwork undertaken by age sector organisations and the thousands of older people who support them. In particular, a draft National Positive Ageing Strategy has been gathering dust on government shelves. The Strategy identifies the priorities that would make Ireland a much better country to age in – now and in the future. Rather than viewing older people as a costly burden on society's resources, the Strategy adopts a more balanced perspective – one which views older people as a highly diverse population group that makes a substantial contribution to society, and also has legitimate rights to be supported at times of need.

Setting in motion a policy approach, which challenges negative stereotypes of later life and new opportunities for people as they age, is crucial in the face of demographic change. Currently, around half a million people in Ireland are aged 65 and over. In just ten years, this figure will have increased by a quarter of a million. Pending implementation of the National Positive Ageing Strategy, the incoming

Government can be getting on with other pressing tasks. Poverty prevention is as important as ever. Securing the value of the State Pension is crucial. So is safeguarding of the other financial supports, including the household benefits package, that make it possible for many older people to manage on a limited fixed income.

Providing adequate services for people with health and social care needs is equally vital. Compared to other European countries, Ireland still has a long way to go in providing people with the quality of support that allows them to remain in their own homes as their health declines. This is especially true for people with mental health conditions, such as dementia. The new Government's task will become much easier later in 2011 when it can implement a new National Dementia Strategy that is currently being developed by researchers at Trinity College and NUI Galway.

4. Family & Children Policy Challenges

Take families and children. From the perspective of supporting vulnerable children and families a set of key targets have to be prioritised and more importantly, guaranteed by the new incoming government. Firstly, our children's right to protection and prioritization for effective services has to be addressed within both the context of a referendum to the Constitution and an accompanying set of service delivery guarantees.

If we have learned anything from the array of failures to protect our children, than it is the necessity for government to rethink revamp and renew children services, and this urgent. Despite the downturn in our economy, this reorganization has to include longer-term investment in prevention and early intervention services. Crucially, the participation of children and youth in the future of Irish society needs to become more tangibly evident, if only for the simple reason that as civic actors they have much to offer in relation to solutions to our future.

5. Connecting These Challenges in a Lifecourse Perspective

How do the social policy challenges in these three fields mesh into a lifecourse perspective?

First of all, we have to move away from the old binary opposition between the economy and the social sphere. It was this false opposition that made us think in the past of older people, people with disabilities and vulnerable families as 'drains' on the economy. Hence the positive potential of our citizens – even positive economic potential – was systematically discounted.

Secondly, in order to maximize this positive potential one has to adopt a much longer timeframe in policy development. A longer timeline will enable social policy makers to be more attentive to social gains that ultimately translate into economic gains. For example, educational cutbacks not only destroy souls – they also sap the productive capacity of the economy into the future. And a lack of future planning robs vulnerable families of the support they need – thus storing up predictable social problems.

Thirdly, the availability of services and radical service reform is necessary across the lifecourse. Services exist for people and not the other way around. Fourthly, a lifecourse approach also means tackling poverty. There are innovative ways of doing this as the draft ABLE legislation in the US shows. It is clear that reforms in one field have repercussions/benefits for other fields. For example, giving voice back to people with intellectual disabilities through modern legal capacity legislation will have positive effects for older people and should also force a rethink on legal capacity for children. Innovative poverty reduction methods in the field of disability should be tried across the board. Service delivery – to enhance independent living – affects all and not just those with disabilities. The mental health challenges are not confined to a particular cohort of society but run the full gamut of the Lifecourse.

What is needed now more than ever is a renewed vision of our social model. It is questionable whether we ever really had one in the past. The Social Partnership Agreement – Towards 2016 – is aptly named given 2016 will be the 100th anniversary of the 1916 revolution. If it doesn't deliver then many will be asking if the promise of the 1916 Revolution – true social justice and equal citizenship – was worth it.

Professor Pat Dolan
Academic Director Lifecourse Institute
Director Child & Family Research Centre
NUI Galway

<http://www.childandfamilyresearch.ie/>

Professor Tom Scharf
Director Irish Centre for Social Gerontology
NUI Galway

<http://www.icsg.ie/>

Professor Gerard Quinn
Director Centre for Disability Law & Policy
NUI Galway

<http://www.nuigalway.ie/cdlp/>