

Lessons on Integrated Policy Approaches for Ireland's *A Better World* Policy

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A Better World – Ireland's ambitious new international development policy – emphasises that an integrated approach is required to meet the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This *IDS Policy Briefing* reviews evidence from existing IDS research on integrated policy approaches from around the globe. It brings together analysis from three such policies – related to water, nutrition and health – to examine what lessons Ireland can learn as it implements its new policy.

The Government of Ireland's 2019 policy, *A Better World*, sets out the country's international development priorities for the decade ahead. The paper provides the framework for Ireland's expanding development cooperation programme, in line with the government's commitment to reach the United Nations target of allocating 0.7 per cent of national income to official development assistance by 2030.

The new policy focuses on four main areas – gender equality, reducing humanitarian need, climate action and strengthening governance – and identifies five ways to 'do things differently' involving capacity, coordination, policy influence, research and learning, and public engagement (see Figure 1).

A Better World emphasises how a united, transformative, integrated international response is urgently required to deliver the ambitious global agenda set out in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) recognise that sustainable development is multidimensional, requiring balanced policy action across economic, social and environmental dimensions. This poses a key challenge for the Irish government: how to integrate and implement policies and practice across different dimensions and levels (local, national, regional and global).

Since the 1970s, integrated multisectoral programming has been a key objective of the international aid agenda. This has been based on the synergistic potential of achieving more through a 'big push' where many activities are delivered together. Yet such holistic approaches

What is integrated development?

Integrated development is narrowly defined here as the simultaneous implementation of activities across different sectors, in order to achieve – through interconnection and synergy – a greater overall impact than if executed separately.

are still difficult to achieve. Furthermore, the evidence for integrated approaches, and the monitoring and evaluation tools to appraise them, are still in their infancy.

Integration for whom?

Integrated policy approaches tend to idealise win-win scenarios, while whitewashing possible trade-offs and conflicts between equity, inclusivity, sustainability and security. However, recent IDS research shows that integration is a political process, which risks excluding potential stakeholders if different interests are not acknowledged explicitly. A three-year research project on the politics of Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) in eastern and southern Africa found that the political economy aspects of integration are often ignored. This is because integration implicitly assumes that different members seek to reach a common understanding and cooperative action by consensus, rather than through strategic action that strictly pursues their own goals.

Figure 1 Overview of the *A Better World* framework



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IWRM is defined by the Global Water Partnership as, ‘a process which promotes the coordinated development and management of water, land and related resources, in order to maximise the resultant economic and social welfare in an equitable manner without compromising the sustainability of vital ecosystems.’ For the past two decades, IWRM has been actively promoted by water experts and donors. However, IWRM’s emphasis on the ‘three Es’ – equity, efficiency and environmental sustainability – often assumes that these can be easily combined. This ignores potential trade-offs between these three goals, and the resulting conflicts that usually ensue between a range of water users, decision makers and local people. While a new cadre of water professionals and students has made IWRM their mission, poor women and men have not always benefitted. Overall, the research found that the process of integration has facilitated the rise of expert authority but at the expense of locally situated knowledge and management practices.

The IWRM experience provides critical lessons that are important for Irish Aid, particularly given *A Better World*’s overarching objective of reaching the furthest behind first. It suggests that integrated approaches require explicit attention to

be given to the perspectives and priorities of the most marginalised people and groups, ensuring these are not overlooked.

Building capacity and coordination to support integrated approaches

A Better World’s approach to building capacity involves facilitating exchanges across different organisations in Ireland, as well as developing multi-stakeholder partnerships. This requires going beyond vested interests, bureaucratic traditions and the battle for resources. The intrinsic multidimensionality of integrated policy approaches requires that analysis, perspectives and lessons learned are considered from a wide range of stakeholders with expertise in economic, social, environmental and cross-cutting fields.

Overcoming challenges linked to capacity requires considerable political will and commitment and effective governance structures, including the need for several sectors to coordinate horizontally (between sectors) at the same time as vertically (between different administrative levels).

Recent IDS research on multisectoral nutrition focuses on a success story in the Indian state of Maharashtra from 2006 to 2012. It outlines the

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policy processes that have been part of successful state-led strategies – particularly at a sub-national level. In February 2005, the Maharashtra Cabinet voted to establish a state-wide Nutrition Mission. Recognising the crucial urgency of reducing undernutrition across the state, the Nutrition Mission was a new state body that brought together a wide range of government agencies across different sectors, all working to tackle undernutrition in Maharashtra.

IDS research found that the Mission fostered accountability and counterweighed special interests, as the increased number of contributors provided broad but balanced perspectives and increased ownership. In addition, the Mission shifted the framing of undernutrition from technical or policy domains towards a recognition of undernutrition's inherent multidimensional challenges, through evidence-based knowledge at various scales – from high-bureaucratic levels through to community-based health and nutrition professionals.

The Mission's bureaucratic set up and governance structure were seen as essential for its influence. This included its financial independence from normal government departments and yet its ability to hold sway over departmental policy and operations. The Mission specifically avoided trying to create a parallel structure to the departments' organisational machinery (its structures and personnel), but instead to work through that machinery. Multisectoral committees operated at a Cabinet level and a senior bureaucratic level. However, the most important finding was the ability for public officials to display leadership even at lower administrative levels, and their ability to focus on nutrition in the widest possible sense.

Such critical lessons may be important given Irish Aid's focus on capacity and coordination in *A Better World*. The current global policy focus on bringing together as many actors as possible in coordinating bodies may be missing some of the lower-hanging fruit of a smaller number of sectors or departments cooperating on a simpler and shared inter-sectoral agenda. Further diagnostic work would be necessary in each specific context to work out where the collaborations might be most effective. However, any new multisectoral partnerships developed as part of *A Better World* should avoid overly elaborate plans that aim to ensure that absolutely every sector is represented, as these may well be a diversion of scarce administrative resources in many contexts.

Integration in research and uptake

A further aspect of integration involves the interface between science and policy processes. Integrated approaches to policy, if they are to be informed by evidence, need that research and evidence itself to be integrated. Growing experience and analysis highlights the value of research approaches that are:

- Inter-issue – combining different topics and sectors
- Interdisciplinary – combining perspectives from different natural and social sciences, as well as people's own local knowledge
- Transdisciplinary – involving policymakers and practitioners in the research process, assisting its relevance and uptake.

Yet, integration in research and research–policy linkages require acknowledging the hierarchies and politics of knowledge between different actors, as well as developing a basis of trust and understanding for collaborative work. They also require using language that allows interaction as well as challenge.

The results of a four-year multidisciplinary project on zoonotic diseases reflects this dilemma around research and uptake through the One Health concept. This concept, which aims to drive improvements in human, animal and ecological health through a holistic approach, has been gaining increasing support and attention in recent years.

Drawing on a longer tradition of linking understandings of ecosystems to health impacts, under the banner of ecohealth, a One Health research and policy agenda was advocated by the *Veterinary Record* and *British Medical Journal* in the wake of the avian flu crisis in the mid-2000s. It proposed breaking down silos, and creating a more integrated approach for research, surveillance and response to emerging and endemic infections, involving medical science, public health, veterinary science, ecology, conservation biology, social science and other disciplines. It is believed that applying One Health interventions should help to build trust, community engagement and cross-sectoral collaboration, which will in turn strengthen the capacity of fragile health systems to respond to the threat of emerging zoonoses and other future health challenges.

However, the project highlights that creating this science–policy interface is complex due to the range of methodologies applied – from the very focused, mathematical models to narrative and participatory approaches. The real challenge for One Health is to create the platforms to convene such conversations so that all styles of knowledge production can contribute on equal terms, resulting in a solution focus that generates action on the ground.

The study shows us that open platforms are important for integrated research and uptake. Applying this to *A Better World*, Irish Aid should make sure that integration and research collaboration and uptake should not homogenise and restrict. Instrumental approaches, based on forced disciplinary, sectoral or institutional partnerships or limited, constraining methodologies, always fall short.

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Policy recommendations

Integrated policy approaches are urgently required to meet the complex, multidimensional challenges of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. However, the analysis of previous integrated policy approaches conducted here shows they may be limited in impact and effectiveness. In implementing *A Better World* – and ensuring its approaches to capacity, coordination, policy influence, research and learning, and public engagement are integrated – Irish Aid can draw on the experience of these previous approaches. The starting point should be to employ simpler, less ambitious structures, which are inclusive and participatory.

By applying the four guiding principles below to the implementation of *A Better World*, Irish Aid will ensure its new framework to 2030 is integrated, and also able to meet the challenges ahead. Although these recommendations are specifically tailored towards Irish Aid, they also apply to other development cooperation agencies

that are seeking to strategically reposition, given the changing global context and in response to the SDGs.

Four guiding principles for integrated policy approaches

1. Articulate a clear theory of change around the anticipated benefits of integrated approaches, and establish the monitoring and evaluation tools to measure this.
2. Pay careful attention to the policy process to avoid the rise of expert authority at the expense of locally situated knowledge and management practices.
3. Keep multisectoral institutions and partnerships as simple as possible, even when the challenges they are addressing are complex. This will promote involvement and leadership from stakeholders at lower administrative levels.
4. Create platforms that promote all styles of knowledge production, so that integration does not homogenise and restrict transdisciplinary exchanges and methods for collecting and sharing evidence.

Further reading

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This policy briefing was written by **Jeremy Allouche** and edited by **Sarah Nelson**. It was produced as part of the Programme Partnership between Irish Aid and IDS on Social Protection and Food Security and Nutrition.

The strategic partnership between Irish Aid and Institute of Development Studies focuses on social protection, food security and nutrition. The collaboration brings together research and capacity development with policy, programmatic and influencing know-how to support action that more effectively reduces poverty and injustice. The aim of the partnership is to combine cutting edge evidence and learning to support implementation of Ireland's policy for international development, *A Better World*.

This paper has been produced thanks to funding by Irish Aid from the Government of Ireland. The opinions expressed here belong to the authors, and do not necessarily reflect those of Irish Aid or IDS.

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ISBN: 978-1-78118-635-0

IDS is a charitable company limited by guarantee and registered in England (No 877338).

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