

Understanding Social Policy
The Evolution and Impact of Social Policy in Ireland

فهم السياسة الاجتماعية

تطور وتأثير السياسة الاجتماعية في أيرلندا.

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Abstract :

Social Policy refers to the study of welfare and social protection services adopted by governments. It aims to serve people in society (e.g., health policies, housing, income maintenance, education, and social work) and protect vulnerable populations (e.g., elderly, lone parents, individuals with disabilities, children, etc.) (Spicker, 2014). The main focus of Social Policy is on social welfare and its relationship to politics and society. It also addresses various issues (e.g., development of social, health, and economic conditions) that target social welfare and protection beyond governmental actions (CSDH, 2008). This paper explores the concept of Social Policy, its concerns, and its application within the Irish context. It delves into the historical emergence of social policy in Ireland, the social problems it addresses, and the role of social administration. The paper also examines why societies have social policies and how these policies impact individuals and communities. By analysing the evolution of social policy in Ireland, this study highlights the significance of social policies in promoting welfare, reducing poverty by appropriate interpretations, and enhancing social inclusion.

Keywords: Social Policy, Social Welfare, Vulnerable Populations, Social Administration, Social Problems, Social Policy in Ireland.

ملخص باللغة العربية:

تشير السياسة الاجتماعية إلى دراسة خدمات الرفاهية والحماية الاجتماعية التي تتبناها الحكومات. وتهدف إلى خدمة أفراد المجتمع (مثل السياسات الصحية، والسكن، وصيانة الدخل، والتعليم، والعمل الاجتماعي) وحماية الفئات الضعيفة (مثل كبار السن، والوالدين الوحيدين، وذوي الإعاقة، والأطفال، وغيرهم) (سبايكر، 2014). يتركز الاهتمام الأساسي للسياسة الاجتماعية على الرفاهية الاجتماعية وعلاقتها بالسياسة والمجتمع. كما تتناول عددًا من القضايا (مثل تطور الظروف الاجتماعية والصحية والاقتصادية) التي تستهدف الرفاهية والحماية الاجتماعية بما يتجاوز الإجراءات الحكومية (CSDH, 2008).

يستعرض هذا البحث مفهوم السياسة الاجتماعية، واهتماماتها، وتطبيقاتها ضمن السياق الأيرلندي. ويتناول النشأة التاريخية للسياسة الاجتماعية في أيرلندا، والمشكلات الاجتماعية التي تسعى لمعالجتها، ودور الإدارة الاجتماعية. كما يناقش أسباب وجود السياسات الاجتماعية في المجتمعات، وكيف تؤثر هذه السياسات في الأفراد والمجتمعات. وعبر تحليل تطور السياسة الاجتماعية في أيرلندا، يبرز هذا البحث أهمية هذه السياسات في تعزيز الرفاه الاجتماعي، وتقليص الفقر من خلال تفسيرات مناسبة، وتعزيز الإدماج الاجتماعي.

كلمات مفتاحية: السياسة الاجتماعية؛ الرفاه الاجتماعي؛ الفئات الهشة؛ الإدارة الاجتماعية؛ المشكلات الاجتماعية؛
والسياسة الاجتماعية في أيرلندا.

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Introduction

Social policy refers to the study of welfare and social protection services adopted by governments to address societal needs and improve the well-being of individuals and communities. It encompasses a broad spectrum of interventions, including healthcare, housing, income maintenance, education, and social work, particularly targeting vulnerable populations such as the elderly, lone parents, individuals with disabilities, and children. The primary focus of social policy is on social welfare and its relationship to politics, society, and economic development. In Ireland, social policy has evolved to address historical and contemporary social challenges, influencing key aspects of governance, public administration, and community welfare. This study explores the emergence and impact of social policy in Ireland, analysing its historical development, the social problems it seeks to address, and the role of social administration in shaping welfare programs. By examining the trajectory of Irish social policy, the study highlights its significance in promoting inclusion, reducing poverty, and ensuring social justice through government interventions and policy frameworks.

Method

To examine the evolution of Irish social policy, this study employs a qualitative approach, analysing historical developments, legislative frameworks, and social welfare initiatives. The research draws from academic literature, government reports, and key policy documents to provide a comprehensive overview of Ireland's social policy landscape. The study also integrates theoretical perspectives, including welfare state models, socio-economic analyses, and social administration theories, to contextualise the policy decisions that influenced Ireland's welfare approach. Additionally, a comparative analysis is employed to evaluate Ireland's social policy in relation to EU directives and international social welfare trends. By synthesising empirical findings and policy discussions, this study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how social policy has evolved in response to economic, political, and demographic shifts.

Results

Findings indicate that Irish social policy has undergone significant transformations, evolving from early charitable interventions to a structured welfare state model. Historically, social policy in Ireland emerged through care provisions and social control measures targeting the "problem of the poor," with a particular focus on assisting children and individuals facing economic hardship. Over time, social policy expanded to address broader social challenges, incorporating provisions for employment, healthcare, housing, education, and social inclusion. The development of social administration played a critical role in managing welfare programs, ensuring that policies remained responsive to societal

needs. A major shift occurred in Ireland's approach to social policy with the introduction of corporatist models between 1921 and 1980, followed by the establishment of social partnership agreements from 1981 to 2016. These policy frameworks fostered greater collaboration among government entities, employers, trade unions, and civil society organisations, ensuring a more inclusive approach to welfare governance. Additionally, Ireland's integration into the EU significantly influenced national social policies, aligning them with broader European directives. Economic indicators, including GDP growth and employment rates, demonstrate the impact of social policy on economic stability and public welfare.

Discussion

The evolution of Irish social policy reflects a balance between economic pragmatism and welfare commitments. Social administration has played a vital role in structuring welfare provisions, ensuring efficient policy implementation. Despite progress in poverty reduction, debates persist regarding whether Irish social policy adequately promotes equality alongside economic security. EU directives have significantly influenced Ireland's approach, shaped welfare models and contributing to financial support mechanisms. However, challenges remain in ensuring inclusive social policies that address emerging socio-economic issues, including housing affordability, healthcare accessibility, and employment integration for marginalised groups. Moving forward, social policy in Ireland must continue to adapt to demographic changes, technological advancements, and evolving community needs. Strengthening interdisciplinary connections between sociology, economics, and public health will enhance the effectiveness of welfare programs, fostering a more equitable and sustainable social policy framework.

What is Social Policy?

Social Policy encompasses a range of processes and actions designed to develop and deliver services that meet people's welfare and wellbeing needs. Social Policy is defined as an assortment of processes and "actions taken within society to develop and deliver services for people to meet their needs for welfare and wellbeing" (Alcock, 2008, p. 2). Erskine (cited in Alcock et al., 2003, p. 15) states that social policy "explores the social, political, ideological, and institutional context within which welfare is produced, distributed, and consumed." According to Alcock (2014), in a welfare state, Social Policy plays a key role in developing social services by the government, representing a central characteristic of this state. Moreover, Social Policy is a policy that is "a set of ideas and proposals for action culminating in a government decision" (Jones et al., 2004, p. 596). Social Policy aims to provide an account of welfare processes within a normative framework that entails discussing moral and political issues (Alcock et al., 2003). Therefore, Social Policy provides a framework for understanding and addressing welfare processes within a normative context, involving moral and political considerations.

Social Problems

Social Policy examines various aspects of people's lives that impact their welfare, social security, and wellbeing (Hothersall, 2010). These crucial aspects, according to Alcock et al. (2003, p. 15), are referred to as "public policies, market operations, personal consumption, and interpersonal relationships," whereas Rittel & Webber (1973, p. 160) called these aspects "wicked problems," including health care, human services, criminal justice, inequality, education, and labour issues. Additionally, Social Policies, as recognized by Spicker (2014), are collective responses to social problems. Understanding these aspects is essential for addressing the complex challenges faced by society.

Historically, key social problems have been identified and addressed through social policy initiatives. In his "vision for peace in time of war: the plan for British post-war reconstruction," Beveridge (1942) identified key social problems as the "Five Giant Evils": disease, idleness (or unemployment), want (poverty), squalor (or slum housing), and ignorance (Beveridge, 1942, cited in Piachaud, 2015). Piachaud's (2015) perception of Beveridge's plan is that its essential focus was on four major social services: 1) social insurance, 2) health services, 3) the school system, and 4) public housing. However, Hothersall (2010) understands "the big five" as "five areas: health, education, personal social services, social security, and housing," prioritized for governmental interventions due to their significant influence on society at that time. These historical perspectives provide a foundation for understanding the evolution of social policy.

In contemporary times, researchers have highlighted new classifications of social needs that affect people's lives. Contemporary researchers such as Piachaud (2015, p. 3) in his "The Future of Social Policy: Changing the Paradigm" highlight another classification of social needs that affect people's lives, called social goals: 1) compact poverty, 2) good health, 3) education equity, 4) decent housing, 5) non-discrimination (disability, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or religion), and 6) social inclusion and good citizenship in the community. Some of these social goals can be achieved by social services alone, whereas others may require additional efforts to raise social awareness (CSDH, 2008). Furthermore, Hujo and Gai (2011) emphasize that social justice and human rights standards serve social protection policies, providing a good interpretation and proper answer to why societies have Social Policy. These contemporary goals reflect the ongoing need for comprehensive social policies to address diverse societal challenges.

Social Administration

Social administration plays a crucial role in the management and study of social welfare and social work. Managing social welfare and social work, as well as studying public/social policy (Hothersall, 2010), are all referred to as social administration. Spicker (2014) specifies social administration as the processes of service organisation and delivery. By studying social arrangements and policies, social

administration aims to achieve social needs in the welfare state. This approach is essential for understanding how social services are structured and delivered.

The theoretical approach of academic social administration has encountered various criticisms. Despite being labelled as empiricist, prescriptive, and narrow, this approach remains informative to welfare by employing a practical, improvement-oriented methodology and implementing problem-solving techniques (A Dictionary of Sociology, 1998). To better expand people's well-being, social policy has incorporated ideas from diverse subjects such as geography, sociology, politics, law, psychology, demography, economics, management, environmental science, philosophy, and public health (Spicker, 2014). These interdisciplinary connections significantly enhance the effectiveness of social policies.

Social policy is an interdisciplinary field that addresses the welfare of vulnerable populations. It is a discipline that depends on the connection of other fields and disciplines to welfare vulnerable population. It seeks to find proper solutions to social problems through cooperation between government, charities, businesses, communities, and families. For example, improving a population's health requires providing good income, housing, healthcare, and reliable sanitation (Spicker, 2014, p. 222). This collaborative approach is crucial for addressing complex social issues effectively. By leveraging the strengths of various sectors, social policy can create comprehensive and sustainable solutions.

Social Policy in Ireland

The historical development of social policy in Ireland has deep roots in early state and charitable activities. The concept of social policy in Ireland historically emerged in the early state and charitable activities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Prior to Ireland's independence in 1921, social policy measures and provisions were introduced in the themes of care and social control. Primarily, the "problem of the poor" was the initial issue that deserved care provision. The basic priority was to address the "deserving poor" issues such as children and the sick poor (Murphy, 2014). These early efforts laid the foundation for the development of social policy in Ireland.

The evolution of social policy in Ireland during the 21st century has been marked by significant changes and developments. In the first decades of the 21st century, national social policy in Ireland was characterized as a welfare state for vulnerable populations (e.g., security payments for lone parents, children, job seekers, people with disabilities, elderly, etc.) in addition to labour market policies and delivery of services in health and education fields. Murphy (2014) argues that social policy in Ireland is directed to be liberal with a special concentration on poverty reduction rather than equality. The role of the market is also considered in Irish social policy to deliver social outcomes. Irish policy and social policy have developed from Corporatism (1921-1980), where corporatist

arrangements addressed the state's desire to attain certain goals in relation to policies (e.g., health, agricultural, or economic), to Social Partnership (1981-2016), which widened participation and increased the flexibility of the partnership process to be more adaptable than existing forms of corporatism. This evolution reflects the dynamic nature of social policy in Ireland.

The influence of EU social policy on Irish social policy has been profound and multifaceted. The social partnership policy is based on several agreements, each with specific goals and achievements.

The **Programme for National Recovery (PNR) 1987-1990** focused on stabilizing the economy and reducing unemployment through wage restraint and fiscal discipline. This agreement marked the beginning of social partnership in Ireland, bringing together the government, employers, and trade unions to address economic challenges collaboratively (Millar and Coen, 2007).

The **Programme for Economic and Social Progress (PESP) 1991-1993** built on the foundations of the PNR, emphasizing economic growth, social equity, and improved public services. This agreement introduced measures to enhance social welfare, education, and healthcare, reflecting a more comprehensive approach to social policy (Millar and Coen, 2007).

The **Programme for Competitiveness and Work (PCW) 1994-1996** aimed to enhance Ireland's competitiveness in the global market while ensuring social progress. Key initiatives included investment in education and training, support for small and medium-sized enterprises, and measures to promote social inclusion (Millar and Coen, 2007).

The **Partnership 2000 for Inclusion, Employment and Competitiveness (P2K) 1997-2000** focused on promoting social inclusion and employment opportunities. This agreement introduced policies to support disadvantaged groups, improve access to education and training, and foster economic growth through innovation and competitiveness (Millar and Coen, 2007).

The **Programme for Prosperity and Fairness (PPF) 2000-2003** aimed to balance economic growth with social equity. Key initiatives included measures to reduce poverty, improve healthcare and education services, and promote sustainable development (Millar and Coen, 2007).

The **Sustaining Progress (SP) 2003-2005** agreement focused on maintaining economic stability while addressing social challenges. This agreement introduced policies to support vulnerable populations, enhance public services, and promote social cohesion (Millar and Coen, 2007).

The **Towards 2016 (T16) 2006-2016** agreement marked a significant milestone in Irish social partnership, emphasizing long-term strategic planning and social inclusion. This agreement introduced comprehensive measures to address poverty, improve healthcare and education, and promote sustainable development (Millar and Coen, 2007).

From 2016 to 2020, the **National Social Partnership Agreement 2016-2020** focused on addressing economic and social challenges, promoting inclusive growth, and enhancing social cohesion. This agreement emphasized the importance of collaboration between the government,

employers, trade unions, and civil society organizations to achieve shared goals (Social Justice Ireland, 2020).

In 2021, the **Social Partnership for Sustainable Development** agreement was introduced, aiming to address climate change, promote sustainable development, and ensure social justice. This agreement highlighted the need for a just transition to a low-carbon economy, protecting vulnerable populations, and creating green jobs (European Commission, 2022).

These agreements reflect the ongoing commitment of Irish social partnerships to adapt to changing economic, social, and environmental contexts, ensuring that social policies remain relevant and effective in addressing contemporary challenges.

Irish Social Policy, accordingly, is characterized by protecting many populations within the Irish community. The main focus of national social policy in Ireland is to secure payments for lone parents, children, job seekers, people with disabilities, elderly, as well as covering labour market policies and delivery of services in health, agricultural, economic, and education fields. Irish Social Policy has been influenced by EU social policy, which is significant and multi-vectored but complex, ambiguous, and even contradictory. Prior to 1973, unlike European developments in social policy, Ireland was patriarchal, familial, and underperforming in providing social advancement. After forty-five years, Irish social policy is less patriarchal and less familial, and EU social policy has had a definite influence in this regard. Statistics indicate that Irish GDP was 64.2% of the EU average GDP, whereas in 2005, Irish GDP peaked at 145% and was still 129% of the EU 28 average in November 2013 (Murphy, 2014). As of 2025, Ireland's GDP is expected to grow by 4.0%, reflecting a strong rebound from previous years, and by 3.6% in 2026 supported by a strong labour market, low headline inflation and favourable external environment (European Commission, 2024). This influence underscores the interconnectedness of Irish and EU social policies.

Why Do Societies Have Social Policy?

Social policies are essential for creating a just and equitable society. Social policies play a crucial role in addressing public policy issues and responding to debates that affect people's daily lives. The Social Policy Society actively engages in these discussions, highlighting the importance of social policies in shaping societal outcomes. Spicker (2014) argues that sociology is the core of social policy through which stakeholders obtain explanations for the social context of welfare provision. This perspective underscores the significance of social policies in alleviating poverty and other socio-economic risks that impact vulnerable people from disadvantaged communities (Baker & Ryan, 2015). Therefore, the implementation of effective social policies is vital for the well-being of all members of society.

Socio-economic factors play a significant role in shaping the well-being of families. Socio-economic variations such as financial security, health insurance, other life events, and family incomes have a

direct impact on family wellbeing. In their research "Unhappy Marriages: Does Counselling Help?", McKeown et al. (2002) reveal that marital adjustment of partners has been negatively affected by socio-economic variables. They found that partners' well-being is difficult to manage and highly affected by financial instability influences. These findings illustrate the profound impact of socio-economic factors on individual and family well-being. Moreover, Conger et al. (2010) conclude that the socioeconomic situation of a family affects the development of their life course and interrelationships of family members. Therefore, understanding and implementing effective social policies is essential for improving the overall well-being of individuals and communities. By addressing these socio-economic challenges, social policies can create a more equitable and supportive environment for all members of society. Consequently, the development and enforcement of robust social policies are crucial for fostering social cohesion and stability.

Social policy is essential for creating a supportive and inclusive society. It plays a crucial role in supporting individuals by fostering a caring community, encouraging participation in creating financial security, and granting dignity to all citizens (Baker & Ryan, 2015). To achieve the aims and objectives of social justice, it is necessary to integrate micro social policy and macro-economic policy. Ecological systems theory suggests that the quality and context of individuals' daily environment and social challenges are the main reasons for multiple changes in modern life (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). By improving people's welfare, social policies function to address real-life issues and understand the relationship between welfare policies and individuals' situations (Spicker, 2014). Furthermore, bonding individuals' environments comes through adopting policies and legislation that provide socio-economic support, financial security, and health insurance (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). This holistic approach ensures that individuals receive the necessary support to thrive in their communities. Putnam (2000) states that both economic and human capital can bring happiness to family life and a sense of individual well-being. Thus, strong social capital is a unique feature of strong and developed communities (Dolan & Brady, 2007). A well-structured social policy enhances individual and community well-being while fostering long-term societal resilience by addressing inequalities and promoting sustainable development

Social policy is crucial for societies as it enhances community well-being and resilience in coping with stressful issues. Jack and Jordan (1999) state that the population's best quality of life comes from promoting their social ecology. Therefore, according to Swords et al. (2013), socio-economic stress (e.g., limited financial income) negatively impacts family well-being and requires protective factors and reforms, which are significant steps to provide better Family Support services (Baker & Ryan, 2015). The implementation of effective social policies, therefore, is crucial for fostering a thriving and resilient community. By addressing the socio-economic challenges faced by individuals, social policies can create a more equitable and supportive environment for all members of society. This

comprehensive approach to social policy ensures that everyone has the opportunity to lead a fulfilling and dignified life.

Conclusion

Social Policy is a collection of processes and actions presented within society to develop and deliver services for people to meet their needs for welfare and well-being. By improving people's welfare, social policies enable vulnerable populations to thrive in their real lives. It is crucial for people to have strong social capital because a strong and developed community is one that has strong social capital. Social Administration, which involves managing social welfare and social work, as well as studying public/social policy, plays a vital role in this process. Studying Social Policy helps societies understand the relationship between welfare policies and people's situations and the impact of social problems on their lives.

Addressing the five "giant" problems such as disease, unemployment, poverty, squalor (or slum housing), and ignorance in the 20th century has expanded in the early 21st century to include ensuring social goals such as combating poverty, ensuring good health, education equity, decent housing, non-discrimination (disability, age, ethnicity, gender, or religion), and social inclusion and good citizenship in the community. These expanded goals reflect the evolving nature of social policy and its increasing importance in addressing contemporary challenges.

In Ireland, social policy is directed to be liberal with a special concentration on poverty reduction rather than equality. The role of the market is also considered in Irish social policy to deliver social outcomes. Nevertheless, national social policy in Ireland focuses on security payments for lone parents, children, job seekers, people with disabilities, elderly, as well as covering labour market policies and delivery of services in health, agricultural, economic, and education fields. The socioeconomic status of families plays a pivotal role in shaping their life trajectories and relationships. Therefore, effective social policies are essential for fostering a supportive and inclusive society that promotes the well-being of all its members.

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