

## **The Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland: Prospects and Challenges Approaching 200**

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**Abstract:** This paper is a vote of thanks to Professor Shane Whelan's (2024) concise, interesting and insightful history of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland (SSISI).<sup>2</sup> The paper also offers a prospective vision for SSISI as it approaches 200 years since its foundation.

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**JELs:** B15, B25, I23, Z18

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

I would like to begin by thanking Professor Shane Whelan for his concise, interesting and insightful history of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland (SSISI). In this paper I will undertake a prospective vision for SSISI as it approaches 200 years since its foundation – a bicentenary just 23 years away. Some of us in the room can well remember the year 2001, just 23 years into the past. The following papers delivered at the 154<sup>th</sup> Session of the Society then in 2000-2001 were indicative of the pressing statistical, economic, social and environmental issues of the time:

- 'Measuring the economy: problems and prospects' (William Keating)
- 'Irish direct investment in the US: evidence and further issues' (Holger Gorg)
- 'The generation game: all gain, no pain? Ageing, intergenerational equity and generational accounts', (Cathal O'Donoghue)
- 'Fish stock conservation measures and the Irish fishing industry' (John A. Curtis)
- 'Reconciling rapid economic growth with environmental sustainability in Ireland' (J. Peter Clinch)

### **2. COMPARATIVE CONTEXTS: RESPONDING TO CRISIS**

Going back further, SSISI was founded in 1847 during a time of acute societal crisis. The academic community responded by forming a stakeholder council to explore a whole-of-society approach to finding solutions that would aid public policy during the crisis. I would note a contemporary parallel to such a model in my current role in the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), in which I participate in the UN Major Group and other stakeholders' system, which supports inter-governmental agenda-setting, implementation strategies, and follow-up and review mechanisms - initiated to address the global challenges we face today, including climate change. Such motivations clearly replicate the founding resolution moved by Thomas Larcom when our Society was established on 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1847 that 'Our career is to collect and methodise the materials of improvement. Our Pole Star is Truth.' (Millin 1920, p.10).

Since the Earth Summit in 1992 (see United Nations 1992a) in particular, governments worldwide have become more aware of the implications of global warming and how to address it. However, these strategies were never implemented at scale by national capitals. The concept of Agenda 21 (United Nations 1992b) was to involve stakeholders in the global Commission on the Environment, with the hope that they would contribute to agenda-setting, implementation, and encouraging governments to implement strategies at the national level through whole-of-society partnerships.

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<sup>2</sup> Shane Whelan (2024), 'But what hope is there for a nation which lives on potatoes?': A Brief History of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland,' *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*, Volume LIII, pp.143-149.

In 2015, the UN 2030 Agenda (United Nations 2015) empowered this idea by setting up the Major group system. This gave rights to the UN Major Group and other stakeholders (made up of the academia, corporates, farmers, unions, women, youth groups, local government and other stakeholders) to attend meetings and shape the inter-governmental dialogues. Governments realised the only way to have a substantial reform was for everyone in all walks of life to buy into the policies. There are always going to be winners and losers of any public policy. The most politically acceptable and least costly pathway to reform can come from a whole of society responses to crisis – with a momentum driven by the understanding that we are all in it together and can all be part of the solution.

### **3. FUTURE CONTEXTS: SSISI AS A STAKEHOLDER COUNCIL RESPONDING TO MODERN CHALLENGES**

While we are no longer in 1847 crisis mode, we are not in a stable place either. Our nation faces a challenging high-risk environment in our own time. We have a concentrated land-use ownership that is skewed toward a relatively narrow range of internationally traded products and services that leaves us vulnerable to shocks in global financial markets and supply chains. Although digital and green transformations are already underway, the fallout of geopolitical conflicts could have even more serious consequences for our value chains. SSISI's response will be to continue maintaining its stakeholder membership to address and advise on modern-day and future challenges and to address the acute contemporary challenges Ireland is facing in accord with our continuing mission, with particular focus on themes such as:

- Partnerships with Public Policy Actors: Maintaining a partnership of public policy actors within our Council.
- Emphasizing the importance of approved CSO statistics for policy analysis.
- Science-Policy Interface: Using new digital tools to promote effective science policy interface with more complex government institutions.
- The All-Island Approach: Underlining its ever-growing significance.
- Empowering young civil and public servants in key areas of economic, social, and environmental policy

As previously alluded to, digital and green innovations will inevitably transform all aspects of economic and household life, both at home and abroad. These transformations present opportunities for SSISI to evolve its governance and to facilitate public policy dialogues in our Journal as well as to analyse data in effective and innovative ways to further its traditional missions and activities. Just as in 1847, the future SSISI must continue to respond to forthcoming challenges by maintaining stakeholder membership in its Council by including Government Departments, the CSO, Central Bank, ESRI, academia, and the Social Partnership of Business and Unions, among others.

### **4. ADDRESSING MAJOR POLICY CHALLENGES: SUSTAINABILITY AND DIGITAL TRANSFORMATIONS**

#### *Sustainability*

In terms of sustainability, we should continue to address all dimensions of sustainability of livelihoods, societies, governance, and the environment. Looking ahead, we can anticipate more sessions and papers that explore issues related to these digital and green transformations in our jobs and societies.

#### *Official Data*

Public dialogues founded on official data provided by the CSO (and its predecessors) have always been key to our Society. However, the administrative data in Ireland does not blend governance locations as effectively as in some other countries, such as Norway. A challenge for the CSO and the Society will be to push for data on land-use across all four Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) dimensions. There are significant gaps in data, particularly regarding environmental goals and biodiversity. Integrating economic, social, and environmental policy will require interoperable data for effective policy dialogues, modelling, and planning. This might seem challenging, but new digital tools are emerging to address this gap.

#### *Digital Transformations*

Since 2007, the Society has adopted a digital archiving and publication approach known as 'diamond publishing and engagements.' To maintain freedom in both the creation and access to content, the Society must remain a volunteer community as conducted in the work of the Council, its officers, and submitting authors. We may not have known it at the time, but we were ahead of our time when we digitized the journal, archived in a library repository, and developed an overlay journal with good discoverable metadata, free access, and transparency in use. Science Europe and many UN bodies are only now pushing for diamond open access publishing and community engagements that are catching up with SSISI's earlier adoption.

Globally, scholars can be asked to pay up to \$11,000 to publish their papers. However, all contributions to SSISI are published for free, encouraging members to share ideas and discussions using our template, which we referee and archive ourselves. Its contribution to the global knowledge commons is underwritten by its free and easily accessible platform as well as by following best practice whereas many journals have paywalls through charges to contributors, libraries, and readers. While the Journal is part of a global movement on diamond publishing, diamond engagements apply across the journal's operations with the Council and many allies willing to write and referee the papers. We presently have an editorial team that can format and archive the publication in the TARA digital archive of TCD. In addition, we can track use across universities and government departments worldwide. Looking forward, our diamond engagement will be further enhanced with innovations from AI, which will help optimise journal metadata, access, and distribution.

## **5. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES: THE SCIENCE-POLICY INTERFACE**

One particular challenge for the Society in undertaking the science-policy interface is the radical change in the mapping of the Irish State since the 1950s. A few years ago, the UCD Geary Institute hosted a SDG stakeholder forum on child poverty and mapped out the government departments, government agencies, research institutes, and NGOs dealing with children in Ireland. (See Murphy and Walsh et al. 2019). There were over seventy entities involved. In some ways, the role of departments is being hollowed out or subcontracted to agencies and consultancy companies. If SSISI dialogues are to continue to effectively influence policy, it must negotiate the more intricate structures beneath and between departments. However, digital transformation can help us disseminate recommendations into complex institutions and address the need to integrate society, environment, and economic thinking into policy agendas. Digital governance frameworks will allow us to manage the complexity of government institutions that are outdated in design as they stand. The Society will be able to use innovations in digital governance to engage more effectively in the science-policy interface.

To address policy across social, economic, and environmental dimensions, both the data we use and the modelling we apply will need to change. Advances in AI will make such analyses easier and will also enhance our ability to engage in the science-policy interface in complex systems. Our papers should be sent to the set of people working directly or indirectly on the issue of the day. SSISI will need to do more than simply placing the paper in the journal archive and expecting policymakers to find it. AI can help take the paper to those who would benefit from it. It is well time to hone a new dissemination strategy to better integrate science with policy.

## **6. STRENGTHENING THE BUREAUCRATIC SIDE OF GOVERNMENT**

The bureaucratic side of government in Ireland needs to strengthen its impact on legislation. Since the recognised impact of Whittaker, the influence of policy advisors, lobby groups, and consultants has diluted the effectiveness of government departments on policy uptake by the Dáil committees. During COVID, we saw academia and government reconnecting to address the challenges of testing and vaccination programmes. Going forward, the Society can reconnect members more directly with the bureaucratic side of government and endow it with the capacity to impact the legislator more directly. This is not only important for good policy but also for policymaking that takes account of the welfare of people and nature more broadly. Interest groups controlling the legislators also undermine democracy. A strong public sector is more likely to impose a strong public interest in policy agendas.

## **7. THE ROLE OF DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN INFORMATION INTEGRITY**

A related point for the protection of the public interest is the role that the digital revolution can play in the sphere of information integrity. Using official data and peer-reviewed scholarship should create trust in the work of communities like this. More people will be turning to libraries, academic research, and CSO data in the analysis of policy issues. Information integrity and validation will become more important as the scope for disinformation grows on social media and in the news.

## **8. THE IMPORTANCE OF ALL-IRELAND PARTICIPATION**

One significant outcome of COVID was the increased attendance at Society meetings online. SSISI is an All-Ireland institution, and members from both the North and South were able to attend all meetings and contribute. Recently, we have seen more attendance and papers from the North than in previous years. Going forward, it is important to appoint more people based in the North to our Council. The All-Ireland traditions in this society will grow in importance as we tackle global challenges. Whether or not we move toward a united Ireland, having academics and the civil service working closer together—North and South—is always beneficial for people, business, and nature. Indeed, continuing what we have done for years, but with the advantage of digital platforms, we can increase participation and impact north and south of the border and we should remain a hybrid society with good representation on our Council.

## 9. DEVELOPING PUBLIC SECTOR CAPACITY

One final point as addressed in the UN Global Digital Compact (see <https://www.un.org/techenvoy/global-digital-compact>) is the need for the public sector to develop the capacity to own digital assets, run digital infrastructure, and manage applications. We cannot allow private companies to have exclusive control over these, with the state merely serving as a regulator. While having rules and principles is important, the state must also have in-house capacity. We note that SSISI runs its journal and digital archive in-house under public ownership.

Related to this is the importance of developing public sector human capital. The sector needs to attract the best people and be capable of using digital resources effectively, innovating with them for the global public good. The Society is committed to investing in public sector human capital. We demonstrate a great deal of respect for young public servants through the Barrington Prize. Looking forward and mindful of the Society's original motto inspired by Larcom 'Our Pole Star is Truth', we should encourage younger public servants to work together, innovate, think about the future, and have the confidence to drive important policy agendas forward for the benefit of all in Ireland, Europe, and globally. In this, as has been observed of previous times, we should ensure as then that our Society's Journal continues to serve 'as a substantial repository of scholarly productions that shed significant light on the evolving synergy of publishing and social science and their contribution to the flow of knowledge during critical phases of Ireland's social and economic history.' (Rankin 2011, p.574)

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