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Introduction

Interest in sustainable development (SD) from national policy-makers has increased worldwide, with all countries represented at the United Nations (UN) agreeing to frame their agendas and policies around the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) until 2030 (UN, 2015). Wales is no exception, leading to the UN referring to its legislation – the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act, 2015 (referred to as ‘the Act’ in this article) (Welsh Assembly Government (WAG), 2015) – as “a model for other countries”, with the hope that “what Wales is doing today the world will do tomorrow” (Nikhil Seth, Director of Division for Sustainable Development at the UN, 2015). However, as with other sustainable development policies addressing the current sustainability crisis, the Act is vague and open-ended. This paper therefore explores SD policy implementation by focussing on the case of Wales and its localities, to put forward much needed analysis and critique.

The Act, developed in parallel to the SDGs, is an expression of Wales’ commitment to sustainable development. As it requires all public bodies in Wales to safeguard the interests of future generations and act in accordance to the principle of sustainable development, the Act has been hailed as ground-breaking legislation (Davies, 2016; Wallace, 2019). In line with the rhetoric of Agenda 21 (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, 1992), the Act legislates for the formulation of place-specific well-being plans by Public Services Boards, the 22 local structures established by the Act to implement its content. The Act also legislates for a Future Generations Commissioner, who acts as the legal SD representative.

In answering how are sustainable development policies implemented and made sense of at the local level, the paper makes two contributions. Theoretically, it identifies a gap in SD studies regarding the role of politics in the definition and articulation of concepts such as well-being, local and community. By building on studies of SD, localism and street-level bureaucracy, we

propose a critical framework for analysing these meanings and practices. Empirically, the paper documents in-depth how one of the most talked-about policies is being implemented. We analyse four Public Services Boards as case studies, with 16 interviews and 89 documents, allowing us to examine the different meanings and practices surrounding the Act's implementation. In doing so, the paper also contributes to research and practice by providing a critical and in-depth study of the Act's implementation, the first academic one looking across policy areas. By focusing on how the Act is being implemented locally, we provide lessons for decision-makers in designing and implementing SD policies.

Firstly, we present the origins of the Act in Wales, comparing it to other countries and placing it in an international context of SD policies. Secondly, we review some of the literature available on sustainable development policy implementation and make the case for a critical theoretical framework to analyse how national policies are implemented at the local level. Thirdly, we outline our research methods. Fourthly, we present our case studies of four Public Services Boards to examine how they have implemented the Act, demonstrating the importance of politics and negotiation over the meaning of SD and linked concepts. To conclude, we reflect on our findings and suggest avenues for future research.

[The Origins and International Comparisons of the Welsh Act](#)

Sustainable development is generally understood as “the ability to make development sustainable to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), 1987:16). This section examines the origins of the Welsh Act in relation to the above-cited report and situates it with other similar international efforts.

Despite referring to well-being, the Act is the latest Welsh Government SD strategy (Wallace, 2019; Government of Wales, 1998). Whilst the move in terminology was a deliberate attempt to broaden the legislation from being seen as solely environmental (Wallace, 2019:78), it explicitly uses the above WCED definition of sustainable development, to form ‘The Sustainable Development Principle’ (WAG, 2015: Part 2, Section 5). Wales is the first legislature to enshrine in law the requirement of all public bodies to act in accordance with this definition, making the Act a ground-breaking piece of legislation internationally (Davies, 2016; Wallace, 2019).

Despite being considered ground-breaking, the Act is comparable to other countries’ legislation. As Table 1 below outlines, this includes the provision of an SD representative – the Future Generations Commissioner (FGC) in Wales – which is comparable to at least nine other bodies internationally (Network of Institutions for Future Generations, n.d.; Teschner, 2013). Following the Brundtland Report, there was an increase in legislation providing for bodies promoting SD; although most concentrate solely on the environment rather than SD.

Table 1 about here

Each of the ten bodies vary in affiliation and powers, with most being independent bodies, with an Ombudsman or Commissioner. Göpel (2012) identifies New Zealand, Israel and Hungary as having the most effective bodies, because they are/were the most independent, legitimate, transparent and authoritative of the bodies. These are the most relevant to Wales, as the Welsh FGC’s powers and abilities reflect a mix of these bodies. The Welsh FGC monitors and assesses ‘the extent to which well-being objectives set by public bodies are being met’ (WAG, 2015: Part 3, Section 18(a)), and has the powers to act as ‘the guardian of future generations’

(Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, 2019a, 2019b). However, the role of the FGC in the implementation of the Act was at times confusing for different players, as discussed in our case study section.

The Act is also similar to the rhetoric of other SD legislation in its emphasis on community engagement. Communities were engaged early, through a National Conversation, called ‘The Wale We Want’, taking place simultaneously to the legislative process. Emerging themes from these discussions, including health, a growing and ageing population, education, and inequality (Cynnal Cymru, 2015), were used to produce Seven Foundations for the Well-being of Future Generations, which were used to direct the Seven Well-being goals within the Act. The focus on community engagement has continued in the implementation of the Act, although our analysis shows that this is often limited.

The implementation of the Act has had far-reaching consequences, specifically for public services and local authorities, who work to ‘improve the economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being of its area’ (WAG, 2015: Part 4, Section 36), through new local structures: Public Service Boards (PSBs). Each PSB consists of four statutory members – the Local Authority, the Local Health Board, the local Fire and Rescue Authority, and Natural Resources Wales – and a range of invited partners; although membership differs across the 19 PSBs. The PSBs are designed to support strategic collaboration between public services, although, as we identify, hierarchies and trust are barriers to collaboration.

Having set out the Act’s context, we outline our conceptual framework in the next section in order to study the implementation of sustainable development policies.

Critically Examining Sustainable Development and Well-being Policies: The Question of Implementation and Local Politics

Since the WCED Report, much research has focused on SD policy implementation (e.g. Berke and Conroy 2000; Howes et al. 2017; Lafferty and Eckerberg 1998; Van Der Straaten 1998). Based on our empirical data and an iterative approach, we were interested in the implementation of SD policies at the local level and the role of politics. Too often, SD policy studies focus on processes, without acknowledging the importance of politics, understood as the negotiations, conflicts and alliances in the formulation and implementation of these policies. Following a search of abstracts across five databases of the keywords “sustainable development” AND “policy implementation” AND “politics” AND “local”, 54 sources were identified. We identified several issues with this body of research, the principle ones being outlined in Table 2 below.

Table 2 about here

Key texts consider some of these issues, including Pearce and Paterson (2017) and Baker et al. (1997). Both engage with the debate surrounding the operationalisation of SD and the commitment of different actors to enact SD policies. Local actors are argued to have weak visions of SD, due to little steers from national governments and a disconnect between short-term political and long-term climate change goals (Liberatore, 1997; Pearce & Paterson, 2017). Despite both implicitly acknowledging negotiations at and between different levels of governance, emphasis is often placed on the role of the economy and institutions, meaning that SD policy implementation is presented as a given once formulated. Furthermore, many

contributions in Baker et al. (1997) solely focus on European Union (EU) environmental policy formulation.

Other key texts expand on these ideas by exploring the politics of SD policy implementation. Studies recognise that negotiations between actors underpin SD goals, opportunities and constraints within specific contextual distributions of power, navigated across multiple scales (Owens & Cowell, 2010; Sneddon et al., 2006; Voß et al., 2007). The Local Agenda 21 literature focuses on the role of local actors in constructing sustainability programmes within their locality (e.g. Dooris, 1999; Freeman, 1996; Wild and Marshall, 1999). The findings that community strategies and planning matter in how national policies become operationalised locally resemble the experiences of the PSB with the Act (Owens & Cowell, 2010). However, SD accounts are often descriptive, monitoring the progress and performance of a local programme rather than analysing changes. Those that do analysis change find that, by characterising the implementation of SD policies as political processes, there are different fundamental implications for governance (e.g. Selman, 1998; Voß and Kemp, 2006).

The acknowledgement that place, scale and coordination are vital in analysing SD policy implementation, requires case studies that can identify complex sets of interlinked structural causes, knowledge/scoping issues and implementation traps (Meadowcroft, 2007; Voß et al., 2007). For example, in recognising the negotiations between different “socially constructed and politically contested” scales, Parto (2004:77) and Berger (2003) identify mistrust and conflicts between institutions and actors within regions, as determining the trajectory of SD policy implementation. This echoes much of the Local Agenda 21 literature which argues that trust is a prerequisite for public involvement in SD policy implementation (e.g. Owen and Videras, 2008; Selman, 1998; Selman and Parker, 2007; Wild and Marshall, 1999).

Based on this existing scholarship, two bodies of research from policy and politics – i.e. localism and street-level bureaucracy – can continue this endeavour to better grasp the political and local dimensions involved in implementation.

First, as underlined by some of the studies reviewed above, localism research, and the associated critical geography tradition, emphasises the importance of the local space in any matter of policy implementation (Allen & Cochrane, 2007; Cochrane, 2004; Massey, 1991). Both scholarships think critically on what “local” means, combining studies of decentralisation and other political and policy moves to empower/devolve to a more local level. Research investigates how localism might look in different contexts, how it will be defined in line with notions such as space and territory, and whether it provides room for empowerment, participation and community (Clarke & Cochrane, 2013). What will constitute that ‘space’ varies according to the context and the negotiations taking place, meaning that no national policy will be implemented in the same way in different local spaces. Equally important are the history, myths and past conflicts, which influence how and why a given policy becomes implemented. Indeed, in our case studies across Wales, no two spaces understood and made sense of the Act in the same way, with history, alliances and conflicts playing key roles in this process. Borrowing from critical traditions, such as narrative and discourse, this scholarship emphasises “meaning-making”, or how stories or narratives become mobilised and compete to explain how a policy should be understood and with which consequences. These narratives, supported by this or that alliance of actors and/or organisations, will for instance reject a national policy as centralisation if well-being plans are ‘marked’ at the national level; cut and paste national directives into local plans; or champion it within local stories.

Second, as defined by Lipsky (1980), the Act’s emphasis of street-level bureaucracy on discretion and relative autonomy from organisational authority again points to the importance of the local, through the role of actors in the interpretation of national policies. Despite various

critiques, including that the accountability of street-level bureaucrats are multiple, rather than simply vertical (Hupe & Hill, 2007), Lipsky's (1980) theory has been developed by local government scholars into civic entrepreneurship (e.g. Arnold 2015; Durose 2009, 2011). This body recognises that local governance is a contested site for policy action, with entrepreneurs reinterpreting rules to “bring together the objectives of government policies with [...] the priorities and concerns articulated by the community” (Durose 2011: 989). In our case study, this implies that members of PSBs that creatively re-interpret national legislation to align with the “different issues [...] and to deliver those priorities within that locality” (D1) are civic entrepreneurs.

Based on this, we develop the following questions about the implementation of the Act and how SD policies are implemented at the local level, more broadly.

1. How can the implementation of the Act, and other SD policies be framed as not simply an administrative but a political one, whereby actors draw upon discourses to redefine levels of government, power, and relationships?
2. How can interpretations of the Act, and other SD policies, be framed as political processes, subject to negotiations, resistance, alliances and conflict across spaces, from street-level bureaucrats, policy-makers and national bodies in the policy community?

In this section, we blend conceptual frameworks to understand how SD policies are implemented, and can be analysed, at the local level. The questions about what SD means, how it looks, whether it ‘works’, and who should be involved in negotiating implementation are political questions requiring a conceptual framework able to account for them. Based on these, we build on critical discussions developed across literatures to better understand these phenomena. The following section outlines how we operationalise these concepts.

Research Methods

In order to operationalise our theoretical framework in line with our research questions, we build a qualitative approach to understanding how the Act is being implemented and understood. In this section, we discuss case studies, data collection and analysis.

The case study fieldwork was conducted between December 2018 and October 2019. We examined how the Act was implemented and made sense of at the level of four Welsh Public Service Boards (PSBs). These four cases were selected based on three criteria:

1. Different geographical and socio-economic contexts reflecting Wales, thus two rural and two urban PSBs.
2. How different localities understand and implement the Act, based on specific factors such as history, political control, funding and economic context, relationships within the PSB and with other regional and national structures.
3. How contrasting the well-being plans, based on, for instance, the Future Generation Commissioner's (FGC) feedback on individual plans and whether they were seen as successful or not.

Within these case studies, we collected six types of data. First, we conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with 18 interviewees. Interviewees were selected based on their role in the implementation of the Act and included both invited and statutory PSB members, employees of the Future Generations Office (FGO), PSB policy support officers in Local Authorities, and former and current Welsh Government officials and Ministers. The average duration of interviews was one hour. The questions, inspired by our research questions, focused, for instance, on what the PSBs' and other organisations' roles were in its implementation, and the difficulties and successes encountered. The interviews were recorded, fully transcribed and anonymised. Codes were randomly allocated to participants.

Second, we collected 89 publicly available documents pertaining to the formulation and implementation of the Act at national and local levels. These included well-being assessments, draft and final plans in the four PSBs, FGC and Welsh Government feedback, Welsh Government documents surrounding the development and implementation of the Act, and minutes of PSB meetings. These documents were read and cross-checked for contrasting narratives and discourses articulated in interviews to understand how the Act was being mobilised and implemented in different areas and at different levels. Table 3 below lists the documents collected.

Table 3 about here

Third, over the project, we held conversations with academic and policy colleagues and attended events where the Act was discussed. These were useful in immersing ourselves in the Act's implementation. These occurrences were collected in a diary by Author A, alongside personal reflections and notes following interviews. These were supplemented with, fourth, team discussions, fifth, the collection of secondary data, and sixth, presentations to Welsh Government to assist with their evaluation of the Act.

These data were coded with a qualitative data analysis software, NVivo 12. The sources were read and coded according to general themes such as definitions of SD, understandings of the Act, and tensions surrounding implementation. Certain sources were coded by both authors separately and then discussed to agree codes and ensure consistency. Every source was then re-read to develop more elaborate codes and modify/merge different codes. Inspired by a retroductive approach, we continued to refine these codes, going back and forth between data and theory to develop the best possible explanation, which we present in the following section.

The Implementation of Sustainable Development Policies: Four Case Studies in Wales

This section critically compares the four case studies to discuss how the Act is being implemented. We focus on five themes emerging from the data: (1) interpretations; (2) collaboration; (3) localness; (4) communities; (5) wicked issues and cross-cutting work. As the themes echo the aims of other SD policies (e.g. engagement, integration, complex issues), this case study provides lessons for implementing SD policies generally.

Interpretations

First, the Act was seen as an opportunity to do things differently, as it “helps policy-makers like me think about good decision-making” (D2). However, most interviewees considered this opportunity to also involve challenges, notably in what was meant or intended by various of its central concepts such as SD or well-being. This highlights that the process of meaning-making is a critical aspect in SD implementation.

For some, the Act was “a sustainable development bill not an environment bill” (NI5), which allowed efforts to focus not only on environmental sustainability, but many other aspects of SD such as “economic, social and cultural sustainability [...] put[ting] sustainability in its broadest context” (D3). The addition of the cultural pillar was praised as “cultural identity and language was an incredibly important part of well-being within Wales [...] it’s been really welcomed internationally” (NI2). At the local level, this new focus allowed organisations, traditionally too focused on economic development, to have “a more rounded view of the world [...] with [...] social and environmental and now cultural as well” (B1). Another interviewee added that the move to the term ‘well-being’ rather than SD was “to get consistent buy-in from all the public sector” (C2). However, it was also felt that ‘well-being’ was not “widely understood or held, or even referred to by the members of the board” (C2).

Beyond discussions over the meaning of SD and well-being, interviewees also welcomed the opportunities offered by the Five Ways of Working within the Act (Long term, Prevention, Integration, Collaboration, Involvement). One organisation uses them to adopt “a well-being lens ... [to ask] six simple questions... that makes it real for people” (A1). Prevention and integration were often used as examples, as despite the “(other) ways of working[...] being embedded[...] they’re probably harder to do and identify at a very frontline level” (A1). However, some believed that the ways of working were already happening to some extent before, stating that the Act had not changed things dramatically (D1). Instead the Act gave a new impetus to partnership working, not “so much what partners do but how they do it and the way they work together” (D1).

This section illustrates that the implementation of SD policies is political and local in nature, highlighting the interpretations of key concepts and how they differ across local areas in Wales. SD policies will continue to evolve in meanings according to different local contexts.

Collaboration

Second, as the most spoken about way of working, participants felt that the focus on collaboration in the Act’s implementation and long-term effect, was “a real catalyst to take strategic partnerships in the public services up to a different level” (D2). However, confusion over relationships and hierarchies between other legislation and structures, and different PSB member organisations, was considered a barrier to true collaboration.

For many, the Act and its implementation were all about “cross-sector collaboration in Wales” (C2), although for NI2 this required a “culture shift” and “a bedrock of trust”, which itself “takes time and collaboration”, reflecting Parto (2004). It was recognised that collaboration and its governance couldn’t be “legislate[d]” because of “multi-level governance here, with

different voices and different powers involved” (NI4). Instead, it was the local context, history and actors, which determined the time and effort spent to organise and build trust and successfully collaborate.

Referring to the number of different networks and funding streams, some public services acknowledged that they were not at the stage of making decisions together and “hold[ing] each other to account” (D1). This was illustrated with a practical example of two separate funds being awarded to two different PSB partners for the same issue. For A2, this was evidenced of a lack of trust in the PSB, meaning that the healthy challenge and conflict needed to collaboratively implement the Act was missing from PSBs:

“[T]here should be some kind of conflict there. Challenge and conflict that can be approached in a professional manner [...]. While you’re around the table, that healthy challenge, healthy conflict, is missing. That’s probably missing from all the PSBs. [...] It’s never been done. [...] When I ask for [an issue] to be raised at the main PSB, there is a certain, “Oh, do you want to try to just discuss it outside?””

Interviewees questioned whether the Act “challenge[d] a siloed way of policy-making” (NI4), which posed challenges for negotiating and collaborating. For instance, various organisations involved in implementing the Act were “given their instructions separately, by different departments, as to what they ought to do”, leaving these organisations with “very limited capacity for [...] thinking together” (NI4). This was echoed by B1, who explained that PSBs were still a “traditional hierarchical top-down approach” to policy-making and service delivery. C2 believed that this was due to “the guidance for PSBs... replicat[ing] the guidance for single organisational structures”, which “are not suitable for collaborative organisations”. This had led to a “myriad of complex governance arrangements” (NI3), exacerbated by the lack of

clarification on the relationships and hierarchies between PSB partners and other national structures, especially those between the PSBs and Regional Partnership Boards (RPB), set up under the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act (2014). For example, B2 recalled “presenting the well-being plan” to the RPB and feeling as though they were “going to seek approval from them”, which they didn’t think was “true [...] [or] right”. This conflict over (policy) space, was further exacerbated by A2 explaining that RPBs had “access to millions of pounds of money” and PSBs had “access to nothing”.

This section explores the importance of trust for effective collaboration in SD policy implementation. The conflict over spaces and relationships between them is a process requiring time, trust and negotiation (Guarneros-Meza et al., 2018), highlighting the importance of negotiation, local relationships and structures, and unique enterprises that cannot be shoehorned onto different areas.

Localness

Third, local-level interviewees welcomed the opportunity to be civic entrepreneurs, to implement and interpret at a local level, as it was felt there was space in the Act to do so (Durose, 2009, 2011). However, this space was seen to be threatened by the presence of big national organisations such as Natural Resources Wales and the Health Boards.

In a historical context, where Welsh Government was felt to be, at times, “dictatorial” (D2), local actors believed that they had been given “flexibility to do what you want” (D2). However, this was due to Welsh Government not “hav[ing] a clue on what they were after” (D2) rather than a support for subsidiarity. Others believed that the Act had provided “a framework, an umbrella [which] [...] allowed [for] local difference and local flavour, local culture, the way people feel about their communities”. For a national actor interviewed, the Act’s

implementation “absolutely allow[ed] that local translation [...] influenced by the local community, local need, local circumstances” (NI2); they listed “well-being assessments for public service boards, and the well-being objectives for public service boards, and for individual local authorities” as proof of the Act’s localness. This was argued to be part of a process whereby the government was recognising that “each area is different [and that] not every public service board is the same [...] with different issues” (D1).

However, this localism was threatened by individuals being members of multiple PSBs, especially by big partners who often sit on several. This meant that there is:

“exactly the same representatives on both public services boards. The same fire representative, the same police representative, the same public health, Natural Resources Wales... Virtually every partner, apart from the local authority” (C2).

This left members supporting the idea for a more regional implementation of the Act, questioning the “need for a PSB for every country” (A2). B3 illustrated this with the case of North Wales:

“I think there are big issues with having that bigger conversation that's far more regional. If you look in North Wales, we've got four public service boards. I sit on two of them. The other two are actually collaborating in two county areas. [...] I would say it's still very parochial and protective of their organisational objectives” (B3).

Although regional integration was supported by others, pre-existing politics and history – particularly between Local Authorities – were seen as challenges to collaboration. For example, there was “a lot of duplication of effort, meeting time and resource” because two Local Authorities, geographically close to one another but with opposed political control (Left-

Right), are “not connecting because (they’re) not looking at it in its widest context” (B3). This led this interviewee to “question the value of that localness”, which B2 summarises as a conundrum between localness versus efficient use of resources:

“It’s a battle between how much you focus locally and how much you need to bring it up just to be effective with the limited resource we’ve got.”

There appeared to be a rift between the new possibilities for localness within the Act and the desire for greater regional integration. PSB members who acted as civic entrepreneurs, by implementing national policy at the local level, could be prevented from doing so due to the the politics of SD policy implementation, demonstrating that local negotiations contest the different understanding of scales that different actors have.

Communities

Fourth, although community engagement, and its participation in the formulation and implementation of the Act was central, participants felt that it was often rhetorical and limited.

A number of national and local actors reflected on the scale of local consultations, with Local Authority PSB support officers being identified as those translating the Act’s focus on community engagement to the local level. D1 was “quite impressed by the amount of engagement activity that went on with the public”, explaining that “[t]here was a lot of interaction with communities mainly through the council itself and the survey work”. All the case studies recognised that community engagement was “about getting [communities] to comment on the evidence that we collected in the assessment [...to feed...] into the development of the well-being plan” (A1). PSBs used pre-existing, locally available resources to hear from particular excluded groups, support or supplement their work.

However, for a number of interviewees, community engagement in the Act's design and implementation was limited and rhetorical. For instance, B3 "question[ed] the demographics" of the consultation for formulating the well-being plans, which may have led to biases in priorities. D2 was even more blunt, saying:

"If you ask me what the people of [place] thought about it, they wouldn't have a bloody clue, would they? They'd shrug their shoulders and say 'what is that?'"

D2 continued, arguing that politicians and officers knew enough about communities to not need to consult, adding that "three months' consultation on the well-being plan, my view: waste of time". A1 agreed, thinking that the problem went back to the Act, with its language and concepts being "quite intellectual":

"Engaging with the public on, 'What do you think of the Well-being of Future Generations Act and what do you think about a Wales of cohesive communities?' It's all good stuff and nice language, but I think [that] for a lot of people who are dealing with the day-to-day struggles of life, it's not the easiest language to engage with."

For others who praised the amount of community engagement, their illustrations seemed to contradict that. For instance, C2 argued that "a huge number of people" had been involved, adding that "something like 250 to 300 different people [had been] involved in these seventeen workshops"; the majority of which were professionals and activists, thus not representing the population. B3 summarised this, by arguing that "the consultation was probably not done as comprehensively and extensively as it needed to be done", leading to "the context of the plans [being] probably skewed".

This section has highlighted how the formulation of SD policies affects how they are implemented and who by. Community engagement was often limited to communities involved in the Act's formulation, notably during the national exercise *The Wales We Want*. This is contrary to Brundtland principles, as communities were referred to and name-checked rather than properly engaged. Echoing the localism literature, this theme illustrates how decades of little or no engagement of communities in policy and delivery at the local level, will require effort to build interest and draw communities into discussions, to eventually empower them.

Cross-cutting issues

Fifth, where the Five Ways of Working were seen to be creating space to tackle cross-cutting issues in collaborative ways, this was contrasted with stories of no organisation having enough power or resources to affect change. This meant that the process of change and implementation was slow, further hindered by the persistence of old structures, silos, and hierarchies.

Most interviewees identified national silos as impeding the implementation of the Act. This was felt to be evident with the Act formulated alongside the similarly named Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act (2014), as key concepts were felt to have different meanings:

“the meaning of well-being in the Social Services and Well-being Act and the meaning of well-being in the Well-being of Future Generations Act is different, and that causes confusion. The meaning of integration, in the two Acts, is different. That definitely causes confusion” (C2)

Funding also created issues, as “Welsh Government and Westminster Government [...] will only give you funding for a year [...] which] is alien to the way that the Future Generations Act want people to work” (D1). D3 agreed with this, arguing this was:

“because you still have departments within government that allocate funding and [...] there is [no] cross-fertilisation of that at that level [...]so] it manifests itself down into individual authority allocations”.

Many offered a solution of pooled budgets, co-budgets and “participatory budgeting” (B3) to solve “the ongoing frustrations and challenges we’ve got in terms of finance [...] in a more realistic way” (B1).

Another concern were silos. Even though the Act is:

“very innovative [...] brilliant [...], you’ve got a framework wrapped around it that is very set in the old way of working, which is local-authority led”
(B3).

D1 expanded on this, explaining that “the legislation put a lot of onus on local authorities [...meaning that] the responsibility for PSBs has resided with Local Authorities”. This often means that the Chair of the PSB is either the Leader or Chief Executive of the Council (still the case for 12/19 PSBs), despite individual advice from the FGC to at least ten of the PSBs. The FGC reminds that “[t]he chair... can have an impact on shifting mindsets” (FGC, 2017a) and commends PSBs like Pembrokeshire for “nominating the Chief Executive of the National Park as chair [of the PSB]” (FGC, 2017b). C2 stated that this old hierarchy and organisational models had hindered cross-working:

“[T]he guidance for PSBs has tried to replicate the guidance for single organisational structures... We’ve developed hierarchies and a bureaucracy that suits that single-interest organisation... [but these] are not suitable for collaborative organisations like the PSB.”

This, combined with the ambitious timescale demanded by the Act, left no chance for organisations to think creatively, as it left them:

“feeling time-pressured [...so they...] fall back on their single organisational interest and they say, “This is the priority for my organisation, this is what I want the PSB to contribute to”” (C2).

This left NI3 exasperated with “the madness of government sometimes and the inability of them to deal with local government reform”, arguing that the multiple demands on local areas for “leadership, funding, still working in silos, the myriad of complex governance arrangements, performing to targets, reporting arrangements” slowed the process of implementation.

This section illustrates how the Act has gone some way to create a context to think of and address cross-cutting issues. However, it also highlights how difficult cross-cutting work can be when SD policies are formulated at a national level in traditional silos, not challenging old ways of thinking about governance and public service delivery and creating issues at the implementation stage. Nevertheless, some examples in our case studies illustrated constructive and innovative approaches.

Conclusion

With policy-makers’ interest and actions in SD policy increasing, there is a need for critical examination of how these policies are implemented, especially at the local level. Current research focuses on formulation and the national level, rather than implementation and the local, despite the latter being crucial for success. Building on conceptual discussions of localism and street-level bureaucracy, we constructed four case studies to examine how, a

ground-breaking SD legislation, the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, is implemented in different spaces in Wales.

Our data led us to develop five points of investigation. We found that politics – understood as negotiation over meaning and practices – was key to understanding and interpreting the Act. For example, the meaning of various key terms within the Act, such as SD, well-being and ‘the local’, differed across localities. Relationship building, trust and time within the new PSB structure, and with other pre-existing structures were important for implementation. Each area and interviewee constructed their own understanding and practices around these ideas, meaning the Act was made sense of, interpreted, adapted and negotiated in varying ways across our case studies – which can be extrapolated across Wales. This multifaceted aspect of SD policy implementation, and the importance of developing means of documenting these, is part of this study’s contribution and has relevance for other research.

Our study contributes to the localism and street-level bureaucracy by illustrating how the increasingly popular policy area of SD presents new challenges and opportunities for local negotiations and civic entrepreneurship, where spaces, territories and the local are up for grabs. Negotiations are key, especially surrounding the meaning of key principles of policies formulated nationally. In line with the agendas in both literatures, this study documents how empowerment of local actors and local areas may manifest itself and how to document this. The many interpretations and practices built locally around the Act provided space for local context, history and politics to manifest themselves, delivering better implementation that suits the local. Beyond allowing us to understand locally differentiated responses to government policy, these literatures present opportunities for examining the Cameron-esque normative meaning of localism, as enhancing (or not) local autonomy.

In contrast, the role of communities in the formulation and implementation of the Act was limited. Despite the Act encouraging this engagement, it seems the appetite for public engagement might still be limited; a potential consequence of centuries of limited involvement of the public in policy-making and service delivery. The ‘implementers’, those local actors grappling with the Act, also felt that they were insufficiently engaged in the formulation of the Act. This led to confusion over the permitted leeway in interpreting the Act, and how the Act, the new PSBs and the well-being plans would ‘work’ in practice alongside other national structures. We contribute to the SD policy and policy-making literature through a critical discussion on the consultation and engagement of as many players and groups as possible in the formulation of SD policies. Successful implementation of complex and ground-breaking SD ideas requires consultation and negotiation throughout the formulation and implementation process (Mouffe, 2007).

This study has limitations, arising from studying four out of nineteen PSBs. There would be value in gathering data from other PSBs in Wales, as well as individual organisations, to understand how the Act is being implemented, especially as Welsh Government develops new implementation strategies. Documenting these initiatives would present interesting opportunities for examining how the national and local negotiate meanings, interpretations and policy implementation, alongside whether the Act has changed practice and is delivering its goals. However, developing such an evaluation that emphasises the informal/soft processes demanded by the Act – e.g. culture change – will be difficult and will require blending different methods. The goal-orientated focus of the Act and its lack of detail, might mean that evaluating its implementation will be difficult given its constant reinterpretation. The decades-old underfunding and disempowerment of local government in Wales – as elsewhere – is highlighted by attempts at implementing an Act that requires oft-undervalues local power and networks.

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