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# Crafting the competitiveness agenda of the Irish state: the national competitiveness and productivity council

Ali Saqer 

School of Public and International Affairs, ADA University, Baku, Azerbaijan

## ABSTRACT

Across Europe, improving living standards and quality of life has become unimaginable without improving competitiveness. This faith in the power of competitiveness is conspicuously strong in the Irish political discourse. Ireland's National Competitiveness and Productivity Council is a key site for coordinating the competitiveness agenda of the Irish state. It utilizes international benchmarks to construct competitiveness-enhancing policy recommendations for the Irish government, informing its competitiveness strategies. Through a process-tracing analysis, this article examines how the Council-made Irish competitiveness narrative and recommendations feed into national policy and politics. By tracing the journey of the Council's recommendations into the employment, infrastructure and legal services policy areas in Ireland, I show that while the political ambitions of domestic actors are anchored in this narrative, the translation of the Council's recommendations into direct policy influence is conditioned by their degree of congruence with the government political priorities and the competing interests within the Irish political economy. I underscore how Irish policymakers govern with international benchmarks rather than strictly through them.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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public policy

## 1. Introduction

Ahead of the Competitiveness Summit held in September 2024 in Dublin, Simon Harris, the Irish Taoiseach, declared that his government “is not – and will not be – complacent about Ireland’s competitiveness position” (Department of the Taoiseach 2024). Competitiveness, for policymakers, has become a matter of reputation that needs to be consolidated for businesses to flourish, the economy to grow and living standards to improve. Measuring success in such an endeavour is often done by reference to ranking on international and regional competitiveness benchmarks such as the International Institute for Management Development’s World Competitiveness Yearbook (WCY), World Economic Forum’s Global Competitiveness Index (GCI), World Bank’s Ease of Doing Business Index (EDBI) and European Commission’s EU Regional Competitiveness Index (RCI). These organizations have made competitiveness “a knowledge brand” (Sum 2009), conveying a claim of knowing what an economy needs to prosper and how policymakers can overcome hurdles preventing this prosperity. Their benchmarking

**CONTACT** Ali Saqer  [asaqer@ada.edu.az](mailto:asaqer@ada.edu.az)

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indices compare and rank states based on their performance on indicators thought to constitute national competitiveness.

A key argument running through the competitiveness benchmarking literature is that policymakers' increasing attention to these indices and the widespread reference they receive are signs of the power of these benchmarks and the organizations producing them. They arguably discipline states by influencing how policymakers govern their jurisdictions (Cooley 2015; Fougner 2008; Hansen and Mühlen-Schulte 2012; Löwenheim 2008). Benchmarks as such are technologies that initiate a process whereby states are governed "at a distance" (Broome and Quirk 2015, 820). However, the evidence supporting this argument is scarce. Schueth (2015) offers the only empirical study, focusing on the policy impact of EDBI ranking. Bridging this gap is key to enriching our understanding of how the processes of neoliberal globalization continue to unfold today and how the knowledge tools deployed to govern it work in practice. Moreover, empirical studies of other benchmarks such as the UN's development goals (Clegg 2015; Porter 2015), the World Bank's governance indicators (Sending and Lie 2015) and the financial standards of the OECD and Financial Action Task Force (Sharman 2009) revealed interesting insights into the power dynamics initiated by benchmarking within different national political economies. From empirical and theoretical perspectives, an examination of the interaction between competitiveness benchmarks and those whom they aim to govern can thus say much about how, when and where they work.

This article explores the influence of competitiveness benchmarks in the Irish political economy context. By differentiating between "benchmarks as programs" introduced to affect change and benchmarks as "program technologies" focusing on how they work in practice (Dale 2004, 188), I interrogate the extent to which competitiveness benchmarks influence Ireland's public policy. I do so by exploring the role of Ireland's National Competitiveness and Productivity Council in coordinating Ireland's competitiveness agenda. The Council utilizes a diverse set of international benchmarks to monitor Ireland's competitiveness performance and makes policy recommendations to enhance Ireland's ranking. Using the method of process-tracing (Dür 2008; George and Bennett 2005), I follow the journey of benchmarking indicators drawn from the GCI, WCY and EDBI into the Irish political debate and policy system. Focusing on the employment, infrastructure and legal services costs policy areas, I identify the Council's recommendations informed by these indicators. Then, I trace these recommendations in governmental publications, assessing whether and how they translated into policy actions. The findings show that while competitiveness benchmarks have penetrated the Irish competitiveness policy discourse, their policy influence is often constrained by the tension between ranking aspirations and governmental policy priorities and contestations of these benchmarks by domestic actors. Developments in the global political economy accentuate these constraints.

This article makes empirical and theoretical contributions to the literature on benchmarking. Empirically, it analyzes a benchmarking area, competitiveness benchmarking, that is largely under-researched in comparison with other global governance benchmarks. It provides an empirical account of the processes triggered by international competitiveness benchmarks in Ireland, a case wherein the faith in the power of competitiveness is conspicuously strong in the political economy discourse. Theoretically, the article adds to this literature by demonstrating that rather than only "governing

at a distance”, benchmarking is utilized by policymakers as a tool with which they govern themselves in ways reflective of their priorities and interests. In Ireland, policymakers deploy these benchmarks as inputs into an evolving national competitiveness strategy informed not only by the numbers and norms contained in these benchmarks but also by political priorities and competing interests that constrain their influence on public policy. The policy areas explored below show that policy reforms required for enhanced competitiveness performance and ranking can get ignored or resisted by domestic actors who shape the state’s competitiveness strategy. Thus, this article provides valuable insights into the overarching question of this Special Issue: “how do the dynamics of both governing and participating contribute to the (re)constitution of socio-economic spaces” (authors anonymized).

Importantly, rather than seeing states as “objects of governance” rendered “flexible and manipulatable market subjects” through benchmarking (Fougner 2008, 305, 312) and assuming that competitiveness is rooted only in a “globalizing rationality” (Cerny 2010, 6), crafting the competitiveness agenda of the state is a process that is rooted also in domestic interests and power struggles. The “global governmentality” logic operationalised through competitiveness benchmarks may normatively define the contours of legitimate policy conduct and benchmarking organizations may exercise authority through benchmarks (Broome and Quirk 2015; Hansen and Mühlen-Schulte 2012), such authority, however, is never complete or uncontested and policymaking may not always follow the normatively-drawn policy paths.

The article is organized into five more sections. Section two reviews the literature on competitiveness benchmarking. Section three provides an overview of the place of competitiveness in the Irish political economy discourse and introduces the National Competitiveness and Productivity Council. Section four describes the method used in the study and the data sample analyzed while section five presents three policy areas exploring the process and influence of competitiveness benchmarking. The discussion and conclusion section summarizes the argument and highlights areas for future research.

## 2. Competitiveness benchmarks and the state

Benchmarking the competitiveness of the state is a relatively recent phenomenon that began with the World Economic Forum (WEF)’s Europe-focused competitiveness reports in 1979. Prior to its suspension in 2020, the GCI covered 141 economies. The International Institute for Management Development (IMD) partnered with the WEF between 1989 and 1995, jointly producing the World Competitiveness Report, before working independently to produce its WCY which covers 67 economies today. In 2003, the World Bank produced its first EDBI, which, before it was discontinued in 2020, covered 190 economies. The GCI, WCY and EDBI are composite benchmarks, comprised of aggregated indicators chosen to measure social phenomena that arguably constitute the state’s competitiveness. The GCI included 103 indicators divided into 12 competitiveness pillars; the EDBI had 120 indicators distributed in 10 competitiveness areas; and the WCY’s competitiveness measurement uses 336 indicators divided into 4 factors of competitiveness (IMD 2024; WEF 2019; World Bank 2019). These organizations hold that higher rates of productivity, economic growth and prosperity are possible once the “right” policy action is undertaken by policymakers to enhance national

competitiveness. They claim to offer the knowledge needed, expressed in indicators that serve as guides for policy direction (Sum 2009). Although their indices do not prescribe tailored policies or policy implementation formulas, they communicate “best practice” and encourage continuous policy actions by states to improve their rankings.

International Political Economy and Public Policy scholarship has focused mainly on examining the methodological foundations of these benchmarks and interrogating their ideological underpinnings. Criticism targeted the biases underlying their conceptualizations of competitiveness, supposed universal applicability and data limitations (Besley 2015; Broome, Homolar, and Kranke 2018; Kaplan 2003; Lall 2001). Critics have also pointed to the conspicuous advocacy of market-conforming reforms in these benchmarks. Their underlying competitiveness logic delegitimizes anything that falls outside of the neoliberal policy paradigm and aims to subjugate domestic politics not only to domestic market actors but also to global ones (Broome, Homolar, and Kranke 2018; Cammack 2022; Linsi 2020; Saqer 2023). Following the normative and policy orientations of these benchmarks, the literature views competitiveness as a matter of enhancing the attractiveness of the national business environment for corporate enterprises. This entails offering the economic, social and political resources that would enable enterprises to produce competitive value-added goods and services and succeed in domestic, regional and global markets. Competitiveness then is a “policy paradigm” centred on attracting and capturing value created by enterprises within the state’s territories, which would bolster employment, productivity, growth and prosperity (Sum 2009, 188). As states work to shape their economies and societies in service of these actors (Cerny 2010; Fougner 2008; Lunt 2009), competitiveness benchmarking brings states into endless competition to keep existing enterprises and attract global ones.

This scholarship treats competitiveness benchmarks as power instruments in the hands of their makers. This is explained primarily by reference to the credibility with which these benchmarks are credited by policymakers. The ability of these benchmarks to express complex social phenomena through seemingly impartial “simplified numerical representations” and expertise enables policymakers to better understand how to govern (Broome and Quirk 2015, 827). Moreover, their competitiveness discourses depict a reality (global competition) that sits well with politicians’ intuitions (Linsi 2020). There is also an instrumental dimension to this as governing by indicators allows policymakers to claim transparency and impartiality (Davis, Kingsbury, and Merry 2012). Concerned with economic and political survival, policymakers adopt these benchmarks and, subsequently, “governing at a distance” processes are assumed to unfold altering political conversations, perceptions, identities and behaviours (Broome and Quirk 2015, 219–221; Cooley 2015; Hansen and Mühlen-Schulte 2012; Löwenheim 2008),

The issue with this argument is that such an impact by competitiveness benchmarks is mainly assumed rather than proven. A reaction from those whose performance is measured and ranked is taken as a given and this is assumed to be a reaction that corresponds to the responsibilities transpiring through the benchmarks. The assumption that policymakers, working in an intensely competitive global economic environment, are compelled to adapt their social and economic policies in line with best practices and recommendations conveyed through these benchmarks, is taken as proof of the power of benchmarks. A major gap in this competitiveness benchmarking literature is that it

has developed with little empirical application. The broader benchmarking literature reveals that the grounding of these benchmarks in national settings is evidently a complex process, attesting to the limits of the power of benchmarks.

This complexity originates from several factors. International benchmarks enter domestic policy contexts with existing domestic politics and conditions which may generate contestation to these benchmarks (Clegg 2015). Even when these benchmarks become sponsored by a domestic actor, their application may turn incomplete (Porter 2015). This is so even when the discourses contained in the benchmarks spread and trigger political processes and interactions. Moreover, as Sending and Lie (2015) and Schueth (2015) demonstrate, the presence of an institutional sponsor (i.e. a state department) is not sufficient for the full performativity of benchmarks. Resistance from other actors (i.e. other state departments) who may hold different interests or reject the policy prescriptions advanced through benchmarks is not uncommon. Thus, the authority of benchmarkers depends on whether the benchmarked shows positive or negative reactions (Sending 2015). Such reactions depend on calculations of the perceived cost/benefit of following the benchmark's prescriptions (Sharman 2009) and the intentions behind the adoption of the benchmark (Radaelli 2005). Thus, the recognition of benchmarks by others does not mean full performativity.

My analysis adds to these accounts by demonstrating that despite the presence of “rhetorical convergence” (Lodge 2005, 663) around competitiveness in Ireland, this convergence does not translate into full commitment to the responsibilities embodied in competitiveness benchmarks. I provide an empirically grounded account of the influence of benchmarks on the actors and issues that these benchmarks aim to govern “at a distance”. The point here is that although governments may react to competitiveness rankings, their reactions can be constrained by other prominent concerns and politics that may prevent the policy reforms required to improve their rankings. I show that both the benchmarking and the benchmarked actors exercise agency. As Lerner and Le Heron (2004) argue, benchmarking is a tool used by benchmarkers to govern others (activities, systems, individuals) at a distance but also a tool with which these others govern themselves from a distance.

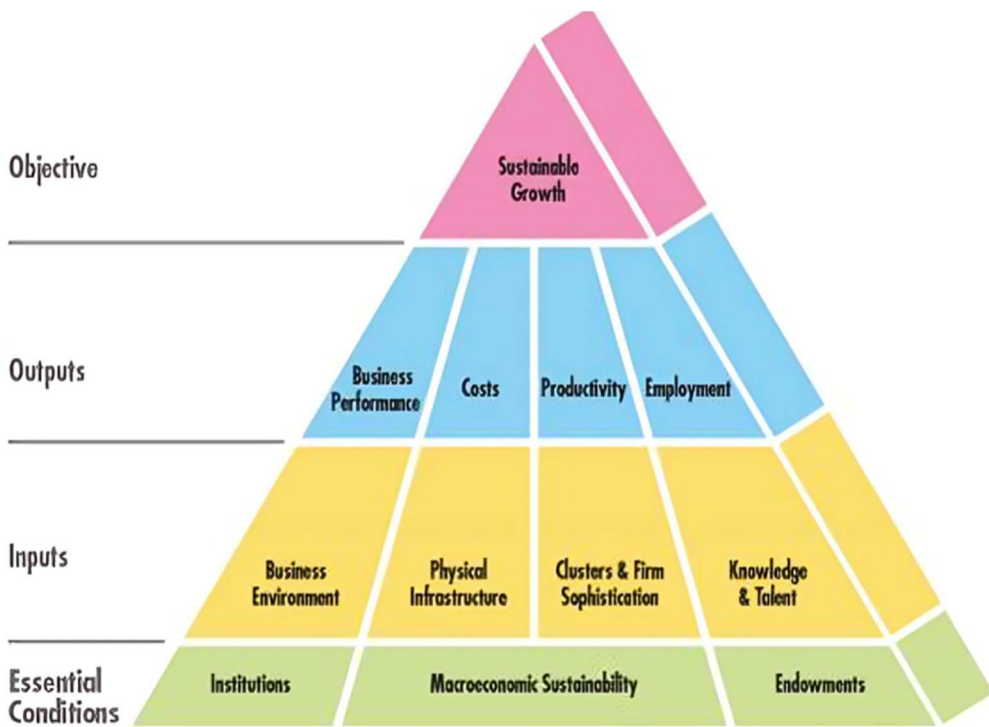
### 3. Competitiveness in the Irish political economy

In the Irish political discourse, Ireland's strong economic growth rates in the 1990s and early 2000s, the “Celtic Tiger” phenomenon, are depicted as a product of Ireland's robust competitiveness profile. As the former Taoiseach Bertie Ahern put it, “it is our competitiveness, i.e. the ability to win and keep business in domestic and foreign markets, which has underpinned this success” (NCC 2000, 3). Since the mid-1980s, Ireland has pursued competitiveness as a strategic policy priority for economic and social development, adapting social and economic policy and the Irish social partnership model accordingly (Dellepiane Avellaneda and Hardiman 2012; Kirby and Murphy 2007; O'Donnell 2008). By the early 2000s, Phelan (2007, 38) notes, there existed in the Irish political economy discourse a “cultural anxiety that any deviation” from such policy path could send Ireland back to “a pre Celtic Tiger gloom”. The processes of European integration and accelerating globalization accentuated this anxiety, fostering stronger adherence to the competitiveness imperative (Hay and Smith 2005).

To support competitiveness as a strategic policy priority, the National Competitiveness Council (known as the National Competitiveness and Productivity Council since 2020) was founded in 1997 by the Fianna Fáil government “to provide a permanent watchdog” on Ireland’s international competitiveness (Fianna Fáil 1997). It would advise the government on the construction and implementation of “a long-term approach to improving” the Irish economy “to its fullest potential” (Forfás 1996). Despite Ireland’s favourable economic growth rates then, there existed concerns over rising costs, inflexibility in public administration, increasing export competition from Asia and Eastern Europe, globalization and FDI flows, and Irish living standards remaining below the EU average (NCC 1998a). The Council’s mission therefore was set to diagnose key competitiveness issues facing the Irish economy and recommend policy reforms to enhance Ireland’s performance on benchmarks such as the GCI, WCY and, since 2005, the EDBI. Following the European Council’s recommendation for euro area countries to establish National Productivity Boards, diagnosing productivity issues was added to the Council’s mission (NCPC 2020a, 2).

The Council’s work is spearheaded by the Competitiveness Scorecard Report (CSR) and the Competitiveness Challenge Report (CCR). The CSR, produced annually until 2020 and triennially thereafter, benchmarks Ireland’s competitiveness performance against its key competitors, composed largely of EU and OECD countries although the list often extends reflecting developments in the global export markets and FDI flows. Based on the CSR, the CCR identifies the challenges facing Ireland’s competitiveness and includes the Council’s annual competitiveness-enhancing policy recommendations. Both reports are debated among the Council members (representing the social partners) and advisors (representing government departments) before getting published. Decisions regarding publications are made by members only. The Minister for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE) and the Cabinet note the reports prior to publication. The DETE provides the Council with research and secretarial support needed in compiling evidence and preparing publications. Additionally, the Council publishes bulletins and statements on productivity and costs and makes formal submissions to government initiatives such as the Action Plan for Jobs (APJs) 2012–18. Through these publications, a senior economist at the Council (Keith Fitzgerald, pers. comm., October 12, 2023) explained, it attempts to create a common vision across the political spectrum of the policy reforms required given the available evidence and its perception of the needs of the Irish economy.

To measure Ireland’s competitiveness performance, the Council designs its own frameworks. In 1998, it developed a bespoke framework composed of 125 indicators (NCC 1998a). It was replaced in 2003 with the Competitiveness Pyramid (Figure 1) which served as a framework of analysis until 2023 before it was substituted with the Competitiveness and Productivity Framework in 2024 (NCPC 2024). Composed of 133 indicators, the Pyramid contained four tiers (essential conditions, inputs, outputs, sustainable growth) comprising “the different types of factors... which combine to determine overall competitiveness and sustainable growth” (NCPC 2023a, 13). Following the priorities set by the Council’s members, its research team selects the indicators that matter for Ireland’s competitiveness and uses domestic and international data sources to measure Ireland’s performance (Keith Fitzgerald,



**Figure 1.** The Competitiveness Pyramid. Source: NCPC 2023a, 2.

pers. comm., October 12, 2023). The Pyramid is used to operationalize a definition of competitiveness that is centred on enabling Irish-based enterprises “to achieve success in international markets” (NCC 2007b, 2). Enhancing competitiveness thus entails accounting for factors and policy inputs in areas such as education, entrepreneurship, taxation, infrastructure, and the regulatory framework, which impact enterprises’ ability to compete in these markets. Success is measured against Ireland’s ranking on several benchmarks (Figure 2).

Below, I examine two aspects of the Council’s work. The first aspect concerns how the Council incorporates GCI, WCY and EDBI indicators and rankings into the diagnosis of Ireland’s competitiveness. Specifically, I explore the Council’s utilization of these benchmarks to craft Ireland’s competitiveness agenda as reflected in the CCR. The European Commission’s RCI is excluded as it was not used before 2023 while the GCI, WCY and EDBI have been used consistently. The second aspect concerns the extent to which the Council’s recommendations translate into policy influence. Following a method and data section, I provide (1) an overview of the Council’s use of GCI, WCY and EDBI indicators in the CSR and CCR, (2) an assessment of the influence of recommendations made based on these indicators on the APJs in 2012–18, and (3) an assessment of their influence on infrastructure and legal services costs policies. These two policy areas have received considerable attention from the Council.

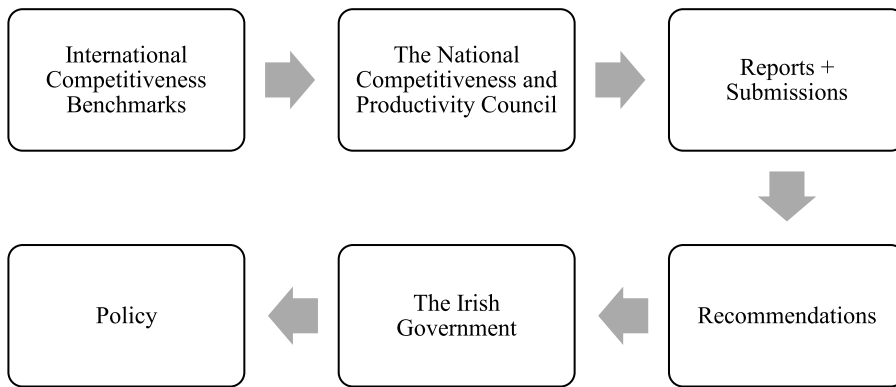


**Figure 2.** Overview of Ireland's International Rankings. Source: NCC 2017a, 17.

#### 4. Methods and data

The main objective of this article is to explore the reach and influence of the GCI, WCY and EDBI benchmarks within political debate and policymaking in Ireland. Influence here is defined as “the extent to which expert groups shape the problem understandings and policy solutions adopted by decision-makers” (Christensen and Hesstvedt 2024, 1260). This influence may be direct where expertise is provided directly to policymakers, shaping their understanding of particular issues and the corresponding policy measures. It may also be indirect where expert groups influence the broader discourse of a specific issue and affect the corresponding policy measures. This article focuses on examining direct influence as the Council is a governmental agency whose reports are mainly published for the government.

The method of process-tracing is applied for measuring such influence. Process-tracing attempts “to identify the intervening causal process ... between an independent variable (or variables) and the outcome of the dependent variable” (George and Bennett 2005, 206). Dür (2008, 562) outlines five steps for tracing the process of expert groups' influence: (1) tracing the preference of the expert group, (2) tracing the point of experts' access to decision-makers, (3) tracing experts' attempts to advance their preferences, (4) the response of the decisionmakers to these attempts and, (5) the degree of congruence between experts' preferences and the decisions made. While this method is helpful in identifying causality relations (Christensen 2023), I consider that



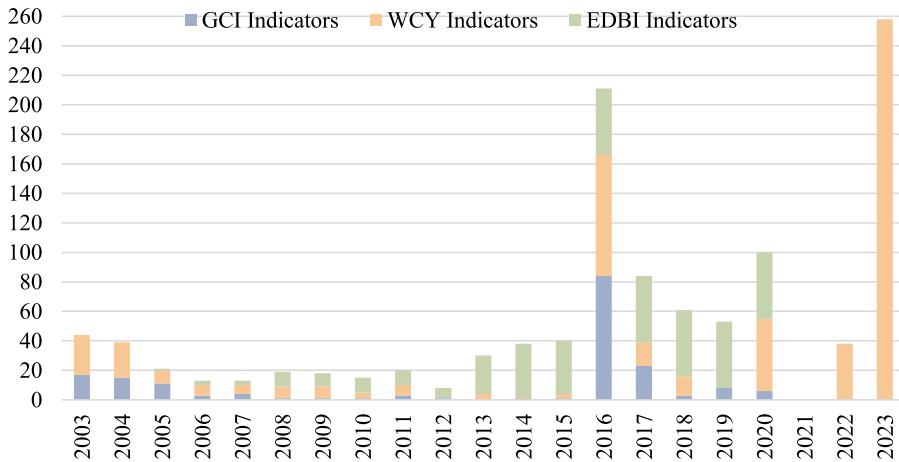
**Figure 3.** Process-Tracing Conceptual Framework.

other factors may also have influenced the outcomes. The Council is one among several expert and interest groups that have access to the Irish government.

The method is operationalized in the manner described in the framework shown in Figure 3. First, I surveyed the CSRs and CCRs produced in the period 2003–23 (NCC 2003a, 2003b, 2004a, 2004b, 2005a, 2005b, 2006a, 2006b, 2007a, 2007b, 2008a, 2008b, 2009a, 2009b, 2010a, 2010b, 2011a, 2011b, 2012, 2014a, 2014b, 2015a, 2015b, 2016a, 2016b, 2017a, 2017b, 2018a, 2018b, 2019a, 2019b; NCPC 2020a, 2020b, 2021, 2022, 2023a, 2023b; Forfás 2013) and the Council’s submissions to the APJs (NCC 2013, 2015c, 2015b, 2016b, 2017c) for GCI, WCY and EDBI indicator citations. I counted only the indicators cited along with Ireland’s ranking on these indicators. In cases where a competitiveness pillar, factor or area (these include several indicators) is cited, I counted their total indicators. This is done following the methodologies of the GCI, WCI and EDBI (WEF 2017; IMD 2019; World Bank 2010). Second, I counted the Council’s recommendations made based on these indicators, paying close attention to the congruence between the recommendations and the indicators. I did so by consulting with the description of the indicators in the GCI, WCY and EDBI reports. Third, I traced these recommendations in governmental publications, assessing whether and how they translated into policy actions. Since a formal response by the Irish government to the Council’s recommendations commenced only in 2020, I searched the publications of the government departments targeted by the recommendations for the period 2003–19. For the period 2020–23, I examined the government’s formal responses to the Council’s CCR publications. Additionally, I conducted semi-structured interviews with two former Council members (referred to below as Participants A and B) who served a 6-year membership (2015–2021), one senior economist (Keith Fitzgerald) from its research team who is involved in the production of the CSR and CCR, and one member (Kieth Kelly) of the Economic Policy Unit at the Department of the Taoiseach. This Unit is responsible for the competitiveness and productivity area and the production of the Government’s response.

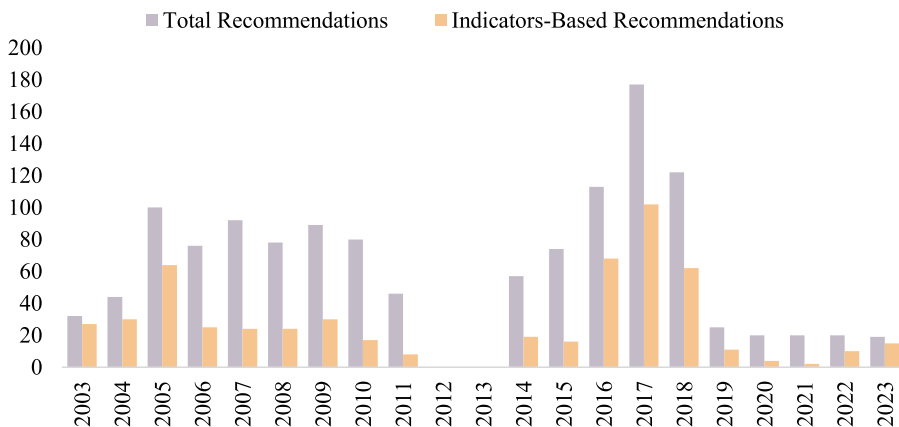
## 5. The Council and Ireland’s competitiveness agenda

Since 1998, the Council has always noted Ireland’s ranking on the GCI, WCY, and EDBI and used their indicators relatively consistently (Figure 4). It has viewed ranking declines



**Figure 4.** International Competitiveness Benchmarks Indicator Citations. Source: Author’s Calculations, CSR and CCR 2003–23.

as signs of vulnerability and constantly sought to convince policymakers of the need to improve Ireland’s ranking, particularly given the openness of its economy and reliance on exports. The view that competitiveness is “the best instrument of security in maintaining and enhancing the living standards of our citizens” (NCC 1999, iv) dominates its competitiveness discourse. Indicators drawn from the three benchmarks into the CSRs and CCRs totalled 1,123 during the 2003–23 period (GCI: 183, WCY: 564, EDBI: 376). Importantly, 990 of these indicators were used as evidence that informed 558 of the Council’s recommendations in this period (Figure 5). Conversely, 133 indicators were used for reference only. It should be noted that the variation in the indicators’ citation is, as Fitzgerald (pers. comm., October 12, 2023) explained, driven by the “shifting priorities of the Council members” who may wish to benchmark Ireland’s performance in a particular area, thus changing the data sources required. Variation is also influenced by the tendency to cite entire competitiveness pillars since 2014.



**Figure 5.** The Council’s Total and Competitiveness Indictors-Based Recommendations. Source: Author’s Calculations, CSR and CCR 2003–23.

The heads of Irish governments have always written the forward section of the CSR and CCR, highlighting their commitment to the Council's recommendations and promising follow-up actions. According to Kelly (pers. comm., December 3, 2024), these recommendations are “carefully considered during the policy-making process and are also a useful resource for general economic debate/dialogue in Ireland”. Tracing the influence of all these recommendations is a daunting mission. Therefore, I consider three cases that shed light on the influence of recommendations specifically informed by international competitiveness indicators. I chose the first case, the APJs, for two reasons; Firstly, the Council was formally invited to make recommendations in a particular policy area and, secondly, the APJs was monitored through quarterly reports highlighting the actions taken in response to the recommendations. The second case is infrastructure, a policy area that has received considerable attention from the Council as reflected in the high number of recommendations informed by GCI and WCY indicators. The third is legal services costs which have similarly preoccupied the Council, resulting in consistent recommendations made based on EDBI indicators.

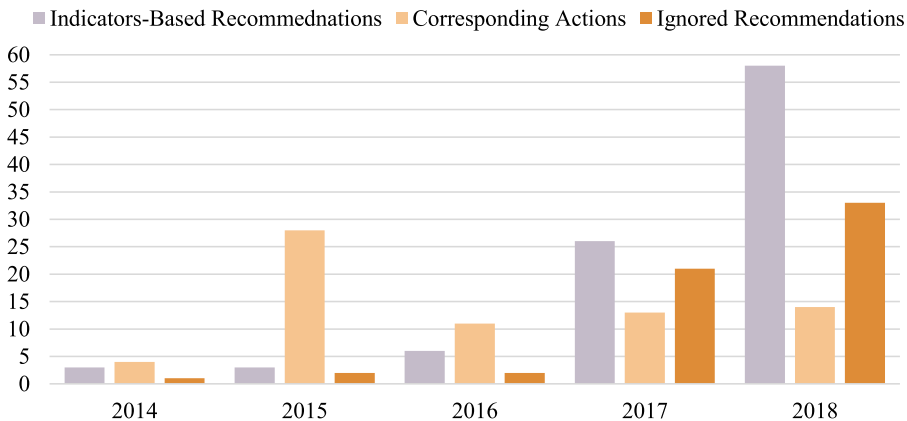
### ***5.1. The action plan for jobs 2012–18***

Amid the Eurozone crisis, which hit Irish jobs and economic growth hard, the Irish government initiated the APJs 2012–18. Its objectives included raising employment to 2 million by 2020, constructing “world-class’ business clusters, strengthening Irish enterprises” export capacity, making Ireland “the best small country in which to do business” and placing Ireland in the “top-5 ranking in international competitiveness” (Government of Ireland 2012, 14). These objectives would be achieved by implementing policy actions covering various areas of the economy. Regarding the top-5 competitiveness ranking objective, the WCY was set as the target benchmark, and additionally the government sought to place Ireland “in the top three most competitive small countries in the world” on the EDBI (Government of Ireland 2016a, 117, 2017a, 26). Job creation was deemed attainable when the Irish economy offered stronger competitive advantages to enterprises. Therefore, a special section in the APJs was designated for competitiveness-specific actions, which reached 311 actions by 2018, focused on addressing weaknesses identified by competitiveness benchmarks with a particular emphasis on the EDBI.

In 2013, the Council was invited to make submissions to the competitiveness section. Its task included identifying Ireland's immediate competitiveness challenges and recommending response measures. Governmental departments and cabinet committees would then work to monitor the weaknesses identified by the Council and propose policy actions to address its recommendations. This reflected the government's effort “to ensure that all official government decisions are analyzed for any potential impacts on competitiveness before they are made” (Government of Ireland 2014a, 45–46, 2013a, 71–73). The Cabinet Committee on Economic Recovery and Jobs (CCERJ) assumed a prime role in this process, assisted by Senior Officials Groups and the APJs Monitoring Committee. The government considered quarterly competitiveness reports by the CCERJ, and a list of medium-term priority competitiveness challenges and recommendations to address them by the Council. The Plan's impact was assessed by monitoring Ireland's competitiveness ranking through the CSR alongside monitoring employment, export and FDI trends.

The Council made 5 submissions to the 2014–18 APJs, with a total of 331 recommendations. Of these recommendations, 96 were informed by 368 GCI, WCY and EDBI indicators, with 108 indicators highlighted as evidence of weak performance. Three of these 96 recommendations called for improving Ireland’s EDBI ranking by addressing weaknesses stemming from the burden of administrative and regulatory procedures (NCC 2013, 33; 2015b, 96; 2015c, 18). In response, the government listed 30 actions to address this burden and initiated a reporting mechanism between government departments and cabinet committees regarding these weaknesses (Government of Ireland 2014a, 46; 2015a, 96–99; 2016a, 54; 2017a, 76; 2018a, 62). The CCERJ planned response actions, monitored Ireland’s progress and reported to the government on a quarterly basis. Further, the CCERJ undertook initiatives to enhance the ease of doing business in Ireland and the Council conducted more benchmarking studies focusing on Eurozone and OECD economies and made further recommendations to address the identified challenges. Consequently, individual departments responded to the Council’s priority policy issues with planned actions in the following APJs.

The Council also recommended reforms in various areas: infrastructure (41), export (14), legal services costs (12), education (5), cost of living (4), administrative burden (4), finance (3), product development (3), the macroeconomic environment (2), foreign languages (2), management development (2), and electricity (1). Nevertheless, while some of these recommendations (34/93) were met with 40 planned actions in the following APJs, others (59/93) were ignored (Figure 6). Based on the 2014–18 APJs’ content, the recommendations ignored were as follows: infrastructures (35), legal services costs (9), cost of living (4), finance (3), administrative burden (2), education (2), foreign language skills (2), electricity (1) and macroeconomic environment (1). In the areas of export and product concentration, the government ignored none of the Council’s recommendations and formulated 9 response actions. This is a context where Brexit had materialized as a business threat; responding to it was deemed essential for the competitiveness of Irish-based enterprises and their job creation capacity. Just as Brexit influenced the 2017 and 2018 CCR recommendations, the 2017 and 2018 APJs contained



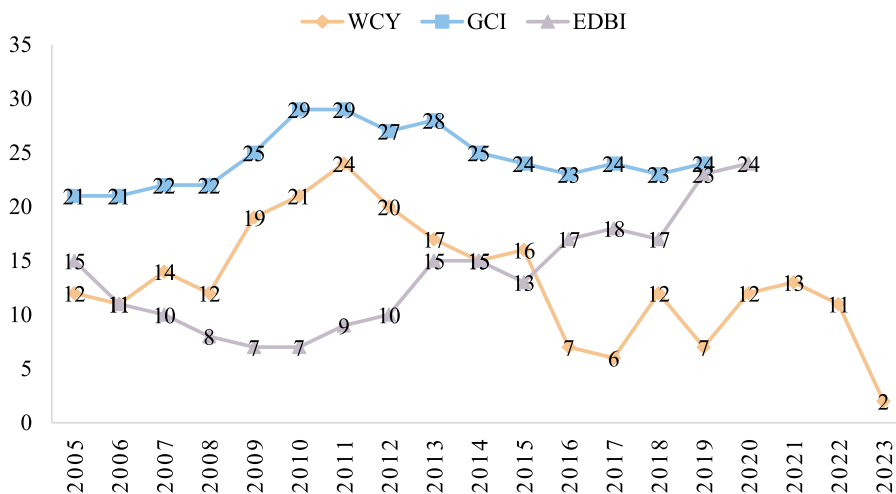
**Figure 6.** The Council’s APJs Recommendations Informed by GCI, WCI and EDBI Indicators. Source: Author’s Calculations, NCC 2013, 2015b, 2015c, 2016b, 2017c.

specific sections designated for policies aimed at meeting the Brexit challenge (Government of Ireland 2017a, 37–42; 2018a, 28–37).

In addition to the Council's citations of competitiveness indicators, the APJs included references by the government to 89 indicators where weaknesses were identified (EDBI: 78, GCI: 4, WCY: 7). Combining the actions taken in response to the Council's recommendations with those informed by the government's own citations, the total number of actions reached 75 by 2018. The 2018 APJs states that the implementation rate of the total 1,893 actions planned was 92% (Government of Ireland 2018a, 4). Based on the progress reports published by the APJs Monitoring Committee, 56 of the 75 actions were completed and the rest were marked as ongoing, indicating actions initiation (Government of Ireland 2013b, 2014b, 2015b, 2016b, 2017b, 2018b). The APJs delivered on its job creation objective, putting over 2.1 million people at work and driving down the unemployment rate from 16% in 2012–5.7% in 2018. Also, in 2015, GDP grew by 26.3% and remained above the Euro area average until 2018 (NCC 2016a, 12; NCPC 2023a, 24). However, as Figure 7 shows, a top-5 WCY ranking was not achieved by 2018 and Ireland's EDBI ranking declined from 10th in 2012 to 17th in 2018. Ireland still fared better on the WCY in 2017 and 2018 compared with 2012.

## 5.2. Infrastructure

To measure Ireland's infrastructure development performance, the Council followed the GCI's Quality of Overall Infrastructure (2003–17) and WCY's Efficiency of Distribution Infrastructure (2003–11) indicators. These are survey-based indicators. The former is based on a 1–7 scale, 7 being the most developed. It provides an assessment of the general state of infrastructure such as transport, communications and energy (WEF 2017, 343). The latter is based on a 1–10 scale, 10 being the most efficient. It measures the efficiency with which goods and services are distributed by the transport system

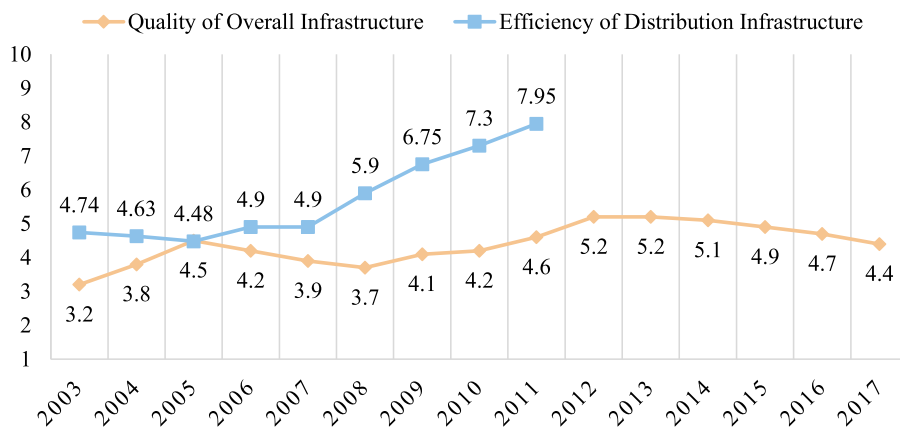


**Figure 7.** Ireland's International Competitiveness Rankings 2005–23. Source: CSR and CCR 2005–23.

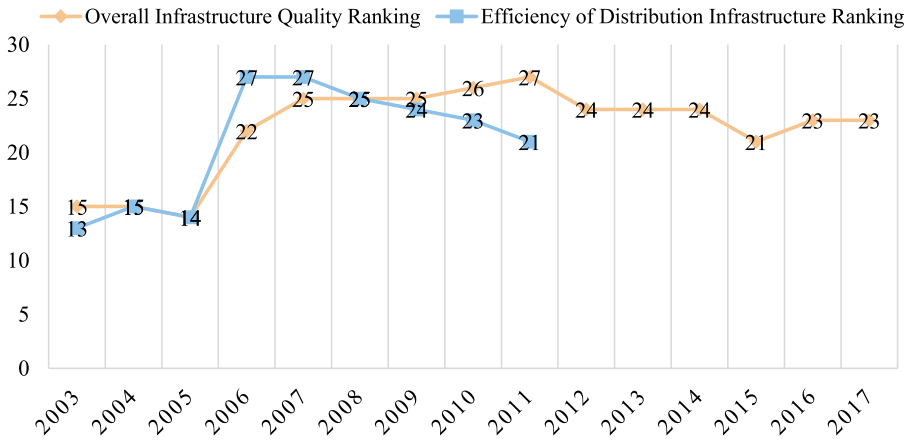
(IMD 2019, 444). After 2011, the Council occasionally monitored Ireland's performance on the WCY's general infrastructure pillar, without reference to this indicator. It also cited the GCI's indicator after 2017, focusing on 2017 data as the GCI methodology changed in 2018.

The Council consistently stressed that the business community perceived Ireland's infrastructure as relatively weak and warned against the impact of this perception on competitiveness and FDI inflows (NCC 2004a, 42). Initially, it ascribed this perception to underinvestment in the late 1980s (NCC 2003a). Its criticism shifted afterward to planning system inefficiency, social infrastructure investment prioritization instead of physical one, weak competition (NCC 2005b; NCPC 2020b), infrastructure delivery delays (NCC 2007b, 2018a; NCPC 2023b), and the lack of adequate management skills in the public and construction sectors (NCC 2019b). Between 2003 and 2023, it made 173 infrastructure-specific recommendations; 2005 and 2016 were notable for including 31 such recommendations each year (NCC 2005b, 36–47; 2016b, 14–25, 39–53).

The Council's concerns were acknowledged in the National Development Plan 2007–13. Informed by several expert reports including the 2006 CSR, the Plan promised €54.7 bn in infrastructure investment (Government of Ireland 2007). However, delivering on this investment was interrupted by the macroeconomic realities resulting from the 2008 global financial crisis. Between 2008 and 2010, GDP fell by 11% and the budget deficit rose to 11.7% and unemployment to 13.5%. As the government commenced fiscal consolidation measures, infrastructure and public investment levels declined. The 2010 National Recovery Plan included €15 bn in fiscal consolidation measures over the 2011–14 period, seeking to reduce the deficit to below 3% by 2015 (Government of Ireland 2010). In its input to the Plan, the Department of Transport stressed that Ireland's infrastructure deficit was addressed between 2000 and 2008 and that past investments were enough to meet the expected infrastructure demand in the medium term. While Figure 8 shows relative improvement on the WCY infrastructure indicator, the GCI score and the overall infrastructure ranking (Figure 9) do not. Nonetheless, the Plan's major resource allocation went toward social infrastructure, productivity and



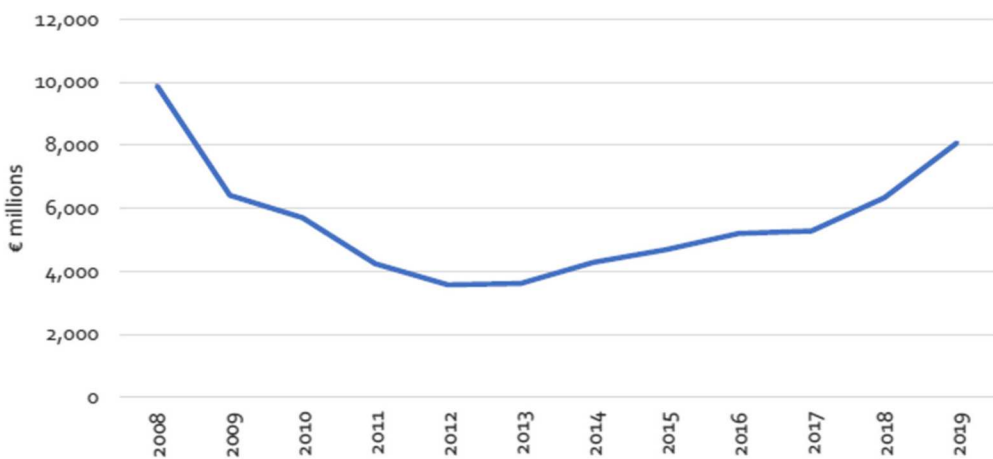
**Figure 8.** Ireland's WCY Infrastructure Score Improvement vis-à-vis its GCI Score Fluctuation. Source: CSR and CCR 2003–17.



**Figure 9.** Ireland's OECD Ranking on Selected GCI and WCY Infrastructure Indicators. Source: CSR and CCR 2003–17; Forfás 2013. The comparator group included 16 countries (2003–05), 28 countries (2006–12) and 32 countries (2013–17).

enterprise support, three areas considered key to addressing unemployment and recovering economic growth. This decision contrasted with the Council's call for physical infrastructure investment to enhance Ireland's ranking.

Soon after, the government signed an €85 bn financial assistance programme with the IMF, European Central Bank and the European Commission (European Commission 2011). The programme included further expenditure constraints. Thus, public expenditure declined from about €10 bn in 2008 (5.3% of GDP) to €3.6 bn in 2012 (2% of GDP, Figure 10). The government's attention shifted to infrastructure maintenance mainly, rather than new infrastructure. In its Infrastructure and Capital Investment 2012–2016 framework, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) justified the shift by citing Ireland's improvement on the WCY's indicator (evident in Figure 8). Moreover, it contested the perception-based GCI and WCY rankings for failing to

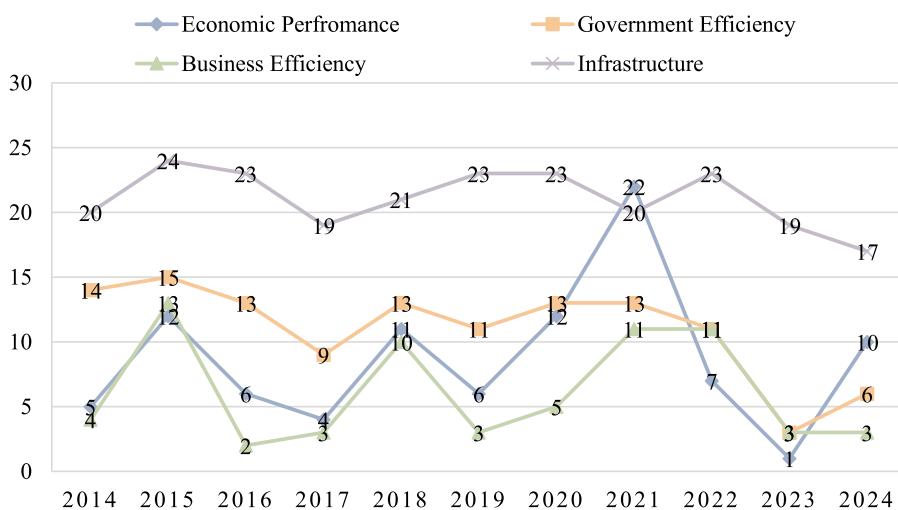


**Figure 10.** Public Investment in Ireland 2008–19. Source: NCP 2020b, 60.

account for Ireland's €55 bn in infrastructure investment between 2000 and 2009 (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform 2011, 5). Ireland completed the assistance programme in December 2013 but remained under a post-programme surveillance mechanism aimed at reducing its public debt (123.7% of GDP) and budget deficit by 1% annually. When the deficit fell below 3%, the European Commission required a 0.6% further reduction in 2016 and 2017 (European Commission 2014, 2016), thus limiting the fiscal space available for infrastructure investment.

Public capital investment began to revive in 2018 and in 2021 the government promised €165 bn over the 2021–30 period, estimated at 5% of GNI\* up from 2.5% in 2017 (Government of Ireland 2021a). However, the Council still voiced concerns over infrastructure rankings. The decline in Ireland's 2020 WCY overall ranking from 7<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup>, with basic infrastructure being the weakest component (ranking 23<sup>rd</sup>), and ranking 40<sup>th</sup> on the 2019 GCI general infrastructure pillar underpinned its argument that the weak perception of infrastructure is “the most important barrier for doing business in Ireland” (NCPC 2020b, 58, see Figure 11). Hence, between 2020 and 2023, 22 of the Council's 31 CCR recommendations, informed by GCI, WCY and EDBI indicators, were focused on several infrastructure areas (recommendations 4.1 4.2, and 4.4 in 2020; 4.3 in 2021; 2.1, 2.2, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, and 4.4 in 2022; 3.1, 3.3, 3.4, 3.5, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 6.1, 6.3, 6.4, 6.5, and 6.6 in 2023). In what follows, I briefly outline the characteristics of the government's response to these recommendations drawing on its annual formal response. Although I include only two examples, these are representative of the nature of the government's responses. While its responses to recommendations 4.1 (2020), 2.1 and 4.2 (2022), and 3.3 and 3.5 (2023) included undertaking actions in the areas covered, its responses to the rest consisted of reporting on ongoing actions that were considered consistent with the recommendations (Government of Ireland 2020, 2021b, 2022, 2023).

The Council's 2020 recommendation 4.1 called on the DPER to “provide supports such as resource packs and templates to complement the updated Public Spending



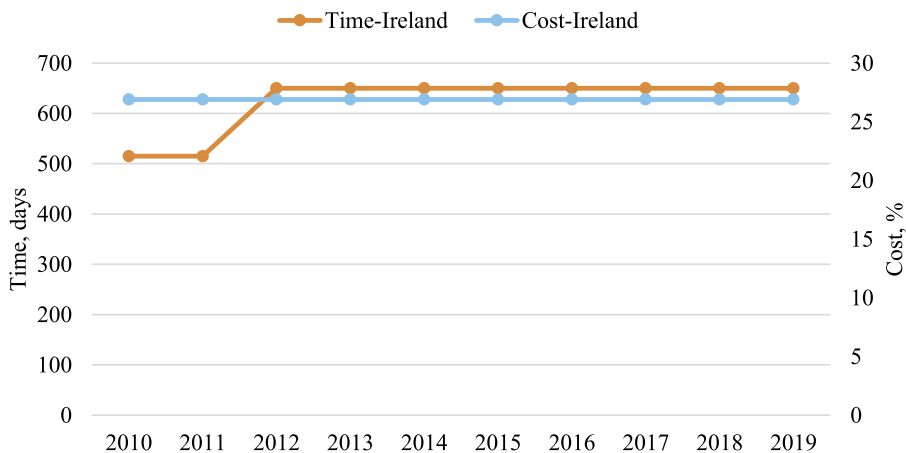
**Figure 11.** Ireland's Ranking on the IMD's Four Pillars. Source: IMD 2019; <https://www.imd.org/entity-profile/ireland-wcr/>

Code and support public bodies in meeting their requirements in evaluating, planning and managing public investments” (NCPC 2020b, 62). The government agreed with the Council on the need for a rigorous assessment of planned projects to enhance the quality of planning decisions and noted the DPER’s preparation of technical guidance to support financial analysis and resources packs and templates to support public bodies in planning and executing projects (Government of Ireland 2020, 10–11).

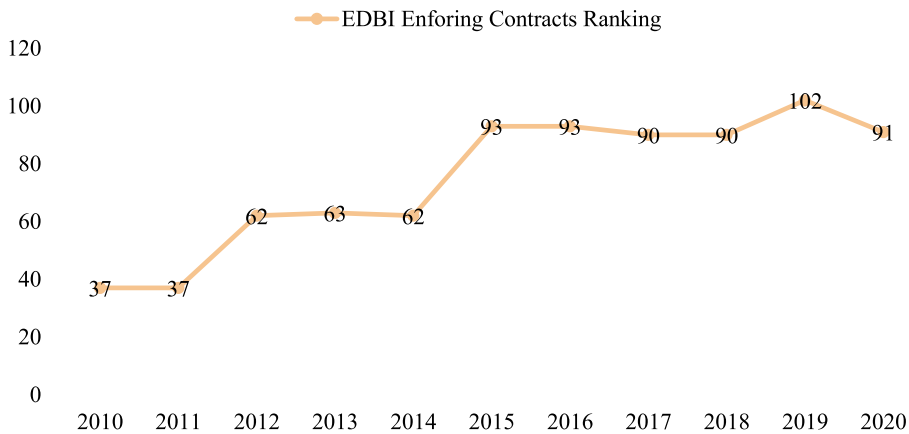
In comparison, the government’s response to the 2021 recommendation 4.3 only reported ongoing processes without promising specific actions. The Council’s concern was with the prioritization of housing and delays in granting planning permissions for physical infrastructure such as transport. Thus, it called for ensuring that “the planning authorities are sufficiently resourced, with appropriate training and accumulation of expertise” to overcome such delays (NCPC 2021, 73). The government referred to existing commitments in its Housing for All strategy to provide adequate resourcing for local authorities (Government of Ireland 2021b, 13–14). Its response made no reference to physical infrastructure.

### 5.3. Legal services costs

Since 2000, the Council has persistently called for reforms to address the challenges of legal services costs and delays. Between 2010 and 2021, it used the EDBI’s Enforcing Contracts indicator to benchmark Ireland’s performance in this area. This indicator measures “the efficiency of the judicial system in resolving a commercial dispute” by counting the number of procedures needed to file a claim, and the time and cost involved as a percentage of the total value of the claim (World Bank 2010, 92–93). Informed by Ireland’s ranking on this indicator, the Council made 27 recommendations for reforms (NCC 2010b, 27; 2015b, 45, 82; 2016b, 61–63; 2017b, 97–98; 2018b, 64–67; 2019b, 10; NCPC 2020b, 80; 2021, 41; 2022, 100; 2023b, 49). Despite this persistence and several policy reforms, Ireland’s ranking declined from 37th to 102nd. The EDBI’s country coverage expanded only slightly in this period (from 183 to 190). Therefore, this decline was



**Figure 12.** Ireland’s Enforcing Contracts Cost & Time Status. Source: World Bank 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014; CCR and CCR 2015–19.



**Figure 13.** Ireland’s EDBI Enforcing Contracts Ranking. Source: World Bank 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014; World Bank, [https://archive.doingbusiness.org/en/data/exploreconomies/ireland#DB\\_ec](https://archive.doingbusiness.org/en/data/exploreconomies/ireland#DB_ec); CCR and CCR 2015–19.

largely driven by stagnation in costs, fixed at 26.9%, and deterioration in time from 515 to 650 days (Figures 12 and 13).

Several procedural and regulatory reforms in Ireland’s justice system were undertaken between 2004 and 2015 to address these issues. This includes the guidelines recommended by the Department of Justice’s Legal Costs Working Group, the competition-enhancing measures proposed by the Competition Authority, the efficiency-enhancing measures introduced by the Legal Services Regulation Bill 2011 and the reforms contained in the Legal Services Regulation Act 2015 (NCC 2015b, 44–45). None of these reforms decreased costs or time. Alarmed by the 12% increase in legal costs between 2006 and 2010 (NCC and Forfás 2011, 14, 16–17), the Council criticized the Bill for disregarding its cost-reduction recommendations (NCC 2011b, 15). In 2015 and 2016, it called for implementing the outstanding reforms recommended by the Legal Costs Working Group and the Legal Services Regulation Act 2015 (NCC 2015b, 45; 2016b, 62).

In 2017, the Irish government commissioned the Administration of Civil Justice Group to recommend measures to achieve early resolution of disputes, reduce litigation costs and improve access to justice (Review of the Administration of Civil Justice 2020). The Group initiated a consultation process and received submissions from public bodies, business actors and others. These submissions revealed division over the issue of costs particularly. For example, the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, IDA Ireland, and Enterprise Ireland called for caps on certain costs and used EDBI 2018 data as evidence of the “prohibitive” legal costs in Ireland. In contrast, representatives of the legal and insurance professions (i.e. Law Society of Ireland, Alliance for Insurance Reforms) opposed caps, claiming it would harm practitioners and advocating instead procedural cost-reduction reforms (i.e. simplifying procedures, better case management). In addition to these submissions, the Group considered evaluations by the European Commission, the EDBI, GCI and the Council (Review of the Administration of Civil Justice 2020, 4). The Group’s report reflected this division with a majority opinion arguing for the introduction of non-binding cost guidelines and criteria to

enhance cost calculation transparency and a minority opinion calling for binding maximum cost scales.

In 2021, the Department of Justice requested a tender for an economic analysis of the practicality of these two options (Department of Justice 2021). Indecon International Consultants won the tender and conducted consultations with 14 stakeholders and an opinion survey of 12 corporate consumers of legal services and 20 legal practitioners. Its report, published in 2024, acknowledged that introducing binding maximum cost scales was the most effective action for cost reduction and that non-binding cost scales would change nothing. However, it stressed that the former would be the hardest to implement given “the complexity involved in setting these maximum costs across a large variety of litigation cases” and the risk that legal practitioners may “decide to charge at this maximum level”. It concluded that the practical option was to introduce non-binding scales combined with requirements to enhance transparency in cost setting (Indecon International Consultants 2024, ix–xv). Noteworthy here is that, in their consultation submission, the Bar of Ireland and the Law Society of Ireland (2022, 6–9), which advocated non-binding cost guidelines, contended that legal costs had decreased over the past ten years. Moreover, based on the World Bank’s reported data irregularities in its 2018 and 2020 EDBI reports, they questioned the use of “unsound” EDBI data by the Group and the Council.

Justice Plan 2024 refers to the ongoing preparation by the Interdepartmental Group for the introduction of non-binding scales of legal fees and measures to enhance transparency and competitiveness in the legal services market (Department of Justice 2024). Today, Irish legal services costs remain highlighted as a competitiveness challenge (NCPC 2024). The Council’s dissatisfaction with the lack of progress on the costs issue was reflected in several of its recommendations. The government’s formal responses were contextualized within the process discussed above, mainly insisting on the need for further evidence and research and reporting on the progress of the research and consultations mentioned above (Government of Ireland 2020, 16; 2021b, 4; 2022, 25–26; 2023, 5).

## 6. Discussion and conclusions

This article has explored the reach and influence of international competitiveness benchmarks in the Irish political economy context. By tracing the journey of the GCI, WCY, and EDBI indicators into three policy areas, I have shown that while these benchmarks enjoy extensive reach, their influence is constrained by competing priorities and interests specific to this context. Ireland’s National Competitiveness and Productivity Council has consistently brought these benchmarks to bear on the political and policy debate. However, the desired policy influence was often confronted with these priorities and interests.

From the three cases presented above, four points can be inferred regarding the influence of competitiveness benchmarks. First, this influence is conditional upon the existence of alignment between the government’s political priorities and the recommendations constructed based on benchmarking indicators. In the APJs, the government used the EDBI and WCY as a compass guiding the pursuit of its employment and growth priorities with the Eurozone crisis and the Brexit challenge unfolding in the

background. These priorities and contexts shaped its attitude to the Council's recommendations; it adopted some but ignored others. Regarding infrastructure, fiscal consolidation appeared higher on the priority list, following the 2008 crisis, than GCI and WCY rankings. As Kelly (pers. comm., December 3, 2024) clarified, there are "other, often competing, government objectives and ambitions which are not considered within the remit of the Council". These objectives and ambitions may be driven by various domestic or external factors. Participant B (pers. comm., January 16, 2019) noted electoral concerns as one principal factor that influences policymakers' perception of Ireland's policy needs. Generally speaking, these factors produce divergence over policy priorities between the Council and the government even when both are committed to strengthening Ireland's competitiveness.

Second, such influence is constrained when the indicators-based recommendations are contested by domestic actors. Regarding legal services costs, corporate actors whose interests would be harmed by the proposed justice system reforms questioned the credibility of the EDBI data used to construct the Council's recommendations. In the case of infrastructure, the Department of Transport and DPER contested the GCI and WCY perception-based rankings; they were satisfied with the WCY score improvement while the Council had higher aspirations. As participant A (pers. Comm., January 17, 2019) noted, there emerges "discomfort among some members of the council when the problem has been highlighted". This is more so when the benchmarking data is deemed questionable. Building recommendations on "uncomfortable" or "unsound" information may thus lead to their resistance as occurred when these actors advocated alternative policy actions.

Third, the sheer number of recommendations the Council makes can be overwhelming from a policy perspective. As Participant A (pers. Comm., January 17, 2019) put it, "the policy system wants a simple message and the answer is a complex message". Consequently, policymakers resort to selectivity; following their existing orientations, they favour certain recommendations and ignore others. Participant B (pers. comm., January 16, 2019) noted that "government ministers will reference the Council as the justification for something that they have either decided or needs to happen and they want to sell it". This view is also reflected in Radaelli's (2005) and Lodge's (2005) studies of the influence of the OECD's Regulatory Impact Assessments and Clegg's (2015) study of the UN development goals. Existing policy orientations shape what and how indicators are adopted.

Fourth, it is nonetheless evident that the Council's indicators-based recommendations have triggered debates and political processes even when it seemed that the government's responses were limited to reporting only. As Fitzgerald (pers. comm., October 12, 2023) explained, the Council would "be aware of ongoing policy work in other Departments and may use the opportunity to follow up or agree with recommendations made by other bodies in order to strengthen the position put forward to Government". Therefore, benchmarking indicators are deployed not only to trigger reforms but also to generate momentum behind existing policy processes.

The generalizability of the findings of this article is limited by the fact that it considered three policy areas only and focused on one state, Ireland. Thus, it cannot be argued that competitiveness benchmarking faces similar fates across all policy areas or national political economies. However, these findings suggest that benchmarking does

not always discipline states, easily rendering them “flexible and manipulatable market subjects” (Fougnier 2008, 312). In the Irish case, the “globalizing rationality” driving the competition for competitiveness (Cerny 2010, 6) confronted domestic priorities, interests and rationalities. Crafting the competitiveness agenda of the Irish state has been shaped by the powers of both the benchmarkers and the benchmarked.

Further empirical research on other policy areas and contexts where the faith in the power of competitiveness is equally evident (i.e. UK, Germany, France, US and Japan, see Linsi 2020), can offer insightful findings on the politics of numbers and the grounding of international competitiveness benchmarks in national and other settings. There is also a need to explore the intersection and possible tensions between domestic and international evidence sources utilized in the policymaking process. These tensions are likely to undermine the legitimacy of internationally sourced knowledge especially when the latter’s foundation is called into question by the organizations producing it as happened in the cases of the GCI and EDBI.

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## Author contributions

CRedit: **Ali Saqer**: Conceptualization.

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## Notes on contributor

*Ali Saqer* is an Assistant Professor in International Relations at the School of Public and International Affairs at ADA University, Baku. His broader research interests lie in the international political economy of benchmarking and the global governance of Sustainable Development.

## ORCID

*Ali Saqer*  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8228-8671>

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