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**TACKLING POVERTY COMPREHENSIVELY**

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# EFFECTIVELY TACKLING SOCIAL EXCLUSION

## Tackling Poverty Comprehensively - The Irish Experience

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### INTRODUCTION

We, in Ireland, are now at a key moment in our history. We are faced by a period of extraordinarily rapid and largely positive political, economic, social, cultural and demographic change. This poses us with a major choice or challenge. Will we use the opportunities that now exist to create a more inclusive and fairer and more just society or will we adopt a laissez faire approach and allow the divisions within our society to deepen? If the latter we will undoubtedly end up with a more divided or dual society in which most people prosper but in which a significant minority are cast behind on the scrap of history. To pose the question facing us in another way, have we over the last decade of analysis and experimentation learned enough about how to tackle poverty and social exclusion? As a result have we now put in place the appropriate policies and mechanisms to end poverty and social exclusion?

Over the past decade the issue of poverty and social exclusion has moved from the periphery to the centre of Irish policy making. We are currently attempting to come to terms with the danger that our current prosperity may actually lead to a more divided society. As a result we are engaged in a national experiment or project to try and reconcile rapid economic and social change and progress and the globalisation of the world economy with a desire for increased social integration and inclusion at a local and a national level. I think that this is well illustrated by the banner headline on a recent front page of the *Examiner* (9<sup>th</sup> September), following the publication of another report on homelessness. It read: *“5,000 people live on the streets in land of plenty. Wealth creates uncaring society”*.

### CHANGES OVER THE PAST DECADE

Essentially what Irish policies to tackle poverty and social exclusion have evolved from are from a collection of disparate, largely unconnected and sometimes

overlapping local projects and a series of compartmentalised national policies to a developing partnership framework at local level and an increasingly integrated national policy framework. Looking back to the late 1980s one can detect three main developments or phases in Irish anti-poverty policy. Phase one being the growth of local community groups and self-help groups, phase two the development of local urban and rural development partnerships and phase three the establishment of a national framework for anti-poverty action. The developments in each phase have not so much been superseded by the next phase as incorporated into it.

We have not arrived at a perfect solution to tackling poverty and social exclusion. However, we have made significant progress. There is not time this morning to give you a full history of the evolution of Irish policy. What I thought might be the most useful contribution that I could make to your discussions on effectively tackling social inclusion is to cover three things:

- identify some of the key learning points and considerations that have influenced the evolution of Irish policy;
- briefly describe the main elements in our current approaches and in particular the National Anti-Poverty Strategy;
- draw out some ongoing issues about tackling poverty and social exclusion.

## **REASONS FOR CURRENT POLICY FRAMEWORK**

### **From Local Projects to Partnerships**

First, let me look at why we moved from isolated local projects to area based partnerships. The main reason for this is that, while the multitude of local community and voluntary projects had done much good work and helped many individuals and had done much to improve understanding of the nature and causes of poverty, it became increasingly clear there were significant limits to what they could achieve. The projects themselves identified a number of limits. These included:

- \* the pressure on local projects to be reactive and deal with the symptoms of poverty rather than work to prevent it occurring; that is there was and is such a demand for immediate help from people who are living in poverty that there is

rarely time to address the underlying causes and reduce the inflow into poverty;

- \* a lack of access to sufficient resources, expertise and skills to bring about real change in their communities;
- \* being isolated from other agencies and services and thus unable to ensure progression routes back into society (especially into employment) of those who are most marginalised;
- \* finding it difficult to link to and engage mainstream economic development.

At the same time as local projects were identifying the limits to what they could achieve at a national policy making level it was, in the late 1980s, beginning to be recognised that, in spite of economic growth and a growing number of disparate government and EU funded programmes, little impact was being made on the overall levels of poverty. Indeed policy makers were becoming increasingly aware of the growing levels of long-term unemployment and social exclusion and the concentrations of multiple disadvantage in particular communities and especially in public housing estates. Similarly, a number of difficulties in regards to the impact of existing state run services at local level became increasingly recognised. These included:

- \* the very fragmented and compartmentalised nature of state services often meant that it was impossible to achieve an integrated and holistic response to the needs of disadvantaged individuals, families, groups and communities;
- \* related to this there was a lack of integration between the economic, social and cultural dimensions;
- \* the very centralised nature of government and the lack of effective local government structures led to a very rigid and controlling implementation of policies and a lack of innovation and creativity. This highlighted the need for

more responsive models of service that involve and reach the most disadvantaged ;

- \* things were done **for** and **to** the poor but not **with** them thus reinforcing dependency- i.e. there was limited participation;
- \* the skills and expertise of employers and trade unions had not been engaged in the search for solutions.

Alongside the growing awareness of these problems experience from a number of pilot programmes such as the EU Poverty Programmes had helped to define more clearly some of the key elements necessary to tackle poverty at a local level. In brief these included:

- \* the need for an integrated and strategic response to the multi-dimensional nature of poverty and social exclusion;
- \* the participation of those excluded is necessary in anti-poverty programmes to overcome dependency, to ensure sustainability and to foster a sense of citizenship;
- \* the empowerment of people who are marginalised is an essential element in tackling their poverty and this requires imaginative local projects aimed at developing people's skills, creativity and self-confidence;
- \* overcoming difficulties in accessing the labour market is a vital issue for many people who are socially excluded;
- \* regenerating disadvantaged communities involves developing local economies and promoting the growth of new local businesses;
- \* in very disadvantaged communities and amongst those who are most excluded a process of pre-development and of social and cultural development is often an important precursor and reinforcer of economic development.

The solution to the problems was seen as being the development of partnership structures to lead and promote development at local level. Importantly this approach was seen as a way of replicating at local level and applying to the specific problem of unemployment the growth of social corporatism a national level. This had developed through a series of national agreements on economic policy between the Government and the traditional Social Partners, that is the business, trade union and farming sectors. The one new dimension was the involvement of the increasingly vocal and self-confident community and voluntary sector. The intention was that these new partnership structures would provide an organisational framework for policy making and implementation at local level which would mobilise a coalition of interests (i.e. government agencies, the social partners and local voluntary and community groups) around a common agenda. The intention was to ensure a strategic approach at local level based on a clear analysis of local problems, the pooling of resources, a planned and integrated approach to tackling poverty and long-term unemployment, maximizing the efficiency of existing services and supports and identifying and planning new services and supports where necessary. Hence, there are now nearly 40 partnership companies operating in the most disadvantaged urban and rural communities supported under a major national Local and Urban Rural Development (LURD) programme.

### **From Local Partnerships to National Policy**

While my own agency had been at the heart of the arguments for increased support for local community projects and then for the development of area based partnerships we, and others, became concerned that these would be seen as the solution to poverty. Our experience and research clearly demonstrated that, while important, the extent and impact of such local action would depend on a supportive national policy framework. There were several key reasons for this.

**First**, it is clear that most poverty is the product of deep-seated structural inequalities in Irish society. The main systems for distributing resources and opportunities (i.e. the labour market, the tax and social welfare system and the provision of public services, particularly education) have not been successful in overcoming, and in some

cases have actually perpetuated, these inequalities. Addressing these inequalities requires national policy decisions that will change these systems.

**Secondly**, it has been increasingly recognised at a policy level that poverty is a problem which affects many aspects of people's lives, the social and cultural as well as the economic. It is much more than just a matter of inadequate income but it is also about the exclusion from participation in the normal life of society. Thus solutions need to ensure that policies and actions are put in place across a range of government departments and are carefully integrated. There needs to be a co-ordinated approach to policy making so that the actions of different government departments are reinforcing.

**Thirdly**, and particularly in a very centralised political and administrative system like Ireland's, the possibility of creating a more co-ordinated response at local level can only occur if there is greater co-ordination of policy at national level.

**Fourthly**, while there are concentrations of poverty and an area-based approach is important, it is clear that a large number of people who are poor do not live in these areas and can only be reached by wider national policies.

All of this led organisations like my own, but also many of the networks representing local community groups tackling poverty and disadvantage, to argue for a much more strategic and planned approach to tackling poverty by central government with anti-poverty action being embedded at the heart of national policy making. We urged that "all government departments and agencies should be required that the policies and programmes for which they are responsible contribute to tackling poverty and social exclusion" and that a system of social auditing or poverty proofing should be put in place in the public sector. This is essentially what is now happening.

## **CURRENT POLICY FRAMEWORK**

Since April 1997 successive Government's have been committed to implementing a National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS). The strategy grew out of a commitment given by the Irish Government at the UN World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen in March 1995. The Government announced its intention to "set out an

across the board national strategy to address all aspects of poverty and inequality.” The key aims were to ensure that issues of poverty and social exclusion would be mainstreamed at the heart of national policy making and that there would be a much more integrated and co-ordinated approach. The strategy was developed over a two year period by an Inter-Departmental Policy Committee comprising senior officials from relevant Government Departments and lead by the Taoiseach's (Prime Minister's) department with expert advice and support from my own agency, the Combat Poverty Agency. The process of drawing up the strategy involved widespread consultations and participation of the community and voluntary sector. The key features of the Strategy are:

**An Agreed Definition:** This relative definition is that *“People are living in poverty if their income and resources (material, cultural and social) are so inadequate as to preclude them from having a standard of living which is regarded as acceptable by Irish society generally. As a result of inadequate income and resources people may be excluded and marginalised from participating in activities which are considered the norm for other people in society.”* The key elements to note here is that poverty is seen as relative, as multidimensional (i.e. encompassing economic, social and cultural dimensions) and as about exclusion and marginalisation and all these dimensions need to be addressed in combating poverty.

**A Shared Analysis:** The NAPS is underpinned by an analysis which points to very unequal access to resources and opportunities as being the key factor in the production and perpetuation of poverty. It thus particularly focuses on the main systems of resource distribution and weaknesses in these systems. These are the labour market, the education system, the tax/welfare system and the system of public services. It also recognises that the impact of inequality, discrimination, disability and resource distribution within households can reinforce the impact of these other causes of poverty. It further notes that the consequences of poverty such as the concentration of poverty in certain communities, poor physical and mental health, increases in crime and drug use and the alienation of young people are inextricably linked with the causes of poverty and can result in a vicious circle of poverty.

**Agreed Principles:** The NAPS is underpinned by a number of principles. These are:

- ensuring equal access and participation for all
- guaranteeing the rights of minorities especially through anti-discrimination measures
- the reduction of inequalities and in particular, addressing the gender dimensions of poverty
- the development of the partnership approach building on national and local partnership processes
- actively involving the community and voluntary sector
- encouraging self-reliance through respecting individual dignity and promoting empowerment and
- engaging in appropriate consultative processes, especially with users of services.

**10 Year Timescale:** Given the recognition that poverty requires the addressing of deep-seated structural inequalities it is recognised that there is a need for a sustained and long-term strategy, thus the NAPS is a ten year strategy.

**Key Areas for Intervention:** Arising from the understanding and analysis of poverty and social exclusion five key areas have been identified as priority for attention and the overall policy direction within each has been outlined. These are:

- educational disadvantage
- unemployment, particularly long-term unemployment
- income adequacy
- disadvantaged urban areas
- rural poverty

**Clear Targets:** For the first time ever the Government set a target for the reduction of poverty, *“reducing the numbers of those who are “consistently poor” from 9 to 15% to 5 to 10%”* over the ten years of the Strategy as well as setting specific targets in relation to educational disadvantage and unemployment.

**Institutional Arrangements:** A range of institutional arrangements have been put in place to oversee the implementing of the strategy and to ensure that there is a co-ordinated cross-departmental and multi-dimensional approach and that addressing

poverty and social exclusion is a key concern of all government departments and agencies. These include:

- *Cabinet Committee on Social Inclusion*: This is chaired by the Taoiseach (Prime Minister), involves Ministers from eight departments and meets on a monthly basis. As well as the NAPS it integrates other related areas such as local urban and rural development programme targeted at disadvantaged communities, the work of the Drugs Task Force and an Integrated Services Initiative. It is supported by a group of senior officials.
  - *Inter-Departmental Policy Committee (IDPC)*: This consists of senior civil servants from most government departments and a number of key agencies (FAS, Area Development Management Limited and the Combat Poverty Agency). It provides the strategic focus for the NAPS, addresses issues that arise during its implementation, establishes sub-committees to look at specific issues that arise (e.g. homelessness, income adequacy and literacy), monitors progress towards achieving targets and agrees future plans and programmes of activity.
  - *NAPS Liaison Officers*: Each relevant Department has appointed a NAPS Liaison Officer who fulfils an important communication and co-ordination role within Departments.
  - *NAPS Unit*: A dedicated NAPS Unit has been established in the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs with responsibility for co-ordinating and developing cross-Departmental action in support of social inclusion initiatives and acting as the secretariat to the IDPC.
- \* *Combat Poverty Agency*: The Agency provides technical advice and support to the IDPC, the NAPS Unit, individual departments and local government on the implementation of the NAPS. It also has a specific role in monitoring and evaluating the strategy.

**Strategy Statements:** All departments are now expected to address the question of poverty in the development of their statements of strategy and to produce annual progress statements to the IDPC setting out progress achieved over the previous year in relation to the strategy and this is to be extended in due course to state agencies and local and regional bodies.

**Poverty Proofing:** When launched the NAPS contained a statement that the impact of poverty will be a key consideration when decisions are being made about spending priorities in the context of the national budgetary process and the allocation of EU Structural Funds. In the light of this the IDPC, with the assistance of the CPA and in consultation with the social partners, developed guidelines to assess policy proposals at design stage for their impact on poverty. Government approved these and this system of poverty proofing is being implemented on a one year pilot basis in Government Departments. It is expected to be applied in the preparation of departmental strategy statements, annual business plans, the design and preparation of memoranda to government on significant policy proposals, the preparation of the Estimates and Annual Budget proposals and the preparation of legislation. Currently it is a key factor in the preparation of a new national development plan and other relevant EU Plans and Programmes.

## **KEY ISSUES THAT HAVE ARISEN SO FAR IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF NAPS**

It is still too soon to draw firm conclusions about the impact of the NAPS. My own agency will be shortly publishing an interim review as a prelude to a major evaluation. However, overall I believe that while somewhat slower than many would have hoped, the NAPS is making a significant and positive impact on national policy making in relation to poverty and social exclusion.

A number of important issues have arisen during the implementation of the NAPS to date. These include the following:

- How to identify appropriate targets and how often to review and update them
- How to ensure ongoing involvement of the community and voluntary sector and to create a positive dynamic between systems of representative and participatory democracy
- How to ensure effective two-way linkages between national strategies and integrated local strategies which will allow for flexibility and locally led initiatives
- How to maintain and enhance social partner support
- How to maintain public awareness and support in a rapidly growing economy
- How to ensure that there is a real integration of economic and social policy
- How to take on board new issues that have arisen in the context of a very rapidly growing economy such as widening income gaps or growing numbers of homeless people
- How to build into the NAPS issues that have come more to the fore as a result of new research such as numeracy and literacy problems, the links between poor health and poverty, child poverty or access to public transport
- How to ensure that policies and programmes to combat poverty and social exclusion have a strong rights base
- How to ensure that new approaches are embedded and understood throughout the public sector, at local as well as national level and how to really achieve an integration of services at local level
- What balance to give to measures that will reduce poverty versus measures to prevent poverty

- How to ensure that more targeted policies do not increase a sense of exclusion and difference.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion I would emphasise three things from the Irish experience that I believe are essential to effectively tackling poverty and social exclusion. First, the issue must be at the centre of public policy making and there must be a commitment to a strategic, integrated and long-term approach. Secondly, those experiencing poverty and social exclusion must be directly involved in the design and implementation of policies and programmes or we will end up with the wrong policies and the wrong programmes. Thirdly, there must be the maximum overlap and co-ordination possible between the national level, the regional or local government level and the local community level so that the efforts of the three are reinforcing and integrated.

Finally I would stress that, however good our policies, planning and implementation arrangements are and however much they lead to a better use of existing resources, it is vital that we also ensure that more resources are redistributed in favour of marginalised groups and communities. If we do not we may be merely rearranging deck chairs on the deck of the Titanic.

20th September 1999