

Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion: Ireland's Strategic Approach

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The issue of poverty is one with which Ireland can readily identify. For much of its history, Ireland has been a relatively poor and underdeveloped country. This poverty resulted in high levels of involuntary emigration. In the UN Plaza, a sculpture entitled "Arrival - The New Dawn" commemorates the millions of Irish people who, for economic reasons, emigrated to so many countries throughout the world during those times. It was donated to the United Nations by the Irish government and it remembers the Irish experience of poverty, an experience that we have shared with so many other nations, while symbolising hope and the prospect of a better future.

In more recent times, from the 1990s, consistently high levels of economic growth enabled Ireland to catch up with more developed countries, in terms of economic and social development, especially the countries of the European Union. This resulted in huge reductions in unemployment and in particular in long term unemployment, a significant increase in female participation in the workforce, a virtual end to involuntary emigration, major increases in return migration and immigration, and improvements in living standards across the board.

But a significant level of poverty remained, although it was at a lower level and was affecting fewer people. Furthermore, there was a pressing residual need from the time

when economic development was low to address the legacy of underinvestment in social services, such as health, education and child care.

Like so many other countries across the globe, Ireland is currently experiencing economic difficulties which may reduce the pace of progress in combating poverty in the years ahead.

The Irish Government is nonetheless committed to continuing now to pursue the goal of social inclusion and to making up for any lost ground, once economic growth resumes.

Mr. Chairman,

Multi-faceted nature of poverty

Meeting the challenges of reducing poverty and improving living standards has become a major overall goal for Ireland and will remain so during this period of economic difficulties.

Direct experience and considerable research and analysis have resulted in a growing awareness of the multi-faceted and deep-seated nature of poverty. This has led to the recognition that State services and supports need to adopt a more coordinated “whole of government” approach if poverty is to be effectively reduced or eradicated.

However, poverty eradication cannot be achieved by the State alone. A “whole of society” approach is also needed, which involves and mobilises other stakeholders, including families, communities, the social partners, principally employers’ organizations, trade unions, and farmers’ groups, as well as NGOs, faith communities and especially those who experience poverty firsthand.

Vulnerable Groups

People who experience poverty include persons who may find themselves in one or more of a range of vulnerable groups in different circumstances and with differing needs.

These include the unemployed; older people, especially those living alone; people with disabilities; the homeless; immigrants; ethnic minorities; people subject to addictions; and so on.

There is also a major gender dimension with women of all ages being more vulnerable to poverty than men. Mainstream social provision is usually insufficient to meet the needs of each group. These groups need to be identified and provided for, often with additional targeted support.

Spatial Dimension

Poverty also has a strong spatial dimension. Disadvantage is caused not only by lack of personal resources, but also by unsatisfactory community infrastructure such as poor housing stock and poor public transport networks. An attitude of resignation in some such areas can also contribute to an unfulfilling and unpromising future.

Mr Chairman,

Coordinated Social Provision

In Ireland, a whole range of services are provided to meet those needs at both national and local level. Experience shows that much better outcomes can be achieved if service provision can be effectively coordinated. Coordination with macroeconomic policies is also essential since economic development is crucial for social progress.

National Anti- Poverty Strategy

Since 1997 National Anti-Poverty strategies have been adopted in my country to meet the challenges I have just outlined. These are based on a broad consensus between Government and the social partners – employers, trade unions and farmers, known as the “three pillars”.

A “fourth pillar”, the “community and voluntary sector”, made up mainly of non-profit organisations which directly work with those experiencing poverty, has since joined the process.

Ireland's participation in a corresponding EU strategic approach on social inclusion, further enables us to evaluate our progress compared to other Member States of the Union and to learn from their policies and experience.

The strategic approach to combating poverty is now fully accepted in Ireland and embedded in our governance structures. The main issues of contention relate to how the strategic approach can be improved upon and, in particular, how there can be better consultation and transparency.

Mr. Chairman,

Strategic Approach - Implementation

It is not possible in the time remaining to give a detailed overview of the implementation of our national strategies and what has been achieved over the past decade and more. The details can be obtained on our website: www.socialinclusion.ie.

Instead, I will give a brief account of some of the key features of the process.

Analysis

Plans always begin with an analysis of social, economic and demographic trends and the progress made in broad terms over the previous period. In this way, the challenges need to be addressed and the priorities identified.

The availability of good quality data underpinning the analysis is very important. It is also necessary to drill down below the surface statistics to get a sound basis for effective, targeted policies. For example, statistics illustrating the overall level of unemployment at national level may mask the fact that there are much higher levels of unemployment in some areas of disadvantage and among certain vulnerable groups. We constantly work to improve the quality of our data and each Government Ministry is now required to have a data strategy.

Goals

High-level goals are set for each life cycle, which clarify the policy directions to be pursued. The overall goal in the current plan is to reduce basic poverty to between 2% and 4% of the population by 2012, with the aim of eradicating poverty fully by 2012. Due to a change in the system of data monitoring, it is not possible to compare trends with statistics from the period previous to 2003.

However, in 2007, the level of basic poverty had already been reduced to 5.1% from a level of 8.2% just four years previously. In addition, 12 specific goals across various policy areas are designed to achieve the overall goal.

Targets and measures

A series of specific, focused targets (over 150 in this plan) are designed to ensure that clear objectives are achieved within a specific time scale. These targets must be realistic and realisable. If not, the credibility of the process will be undermined. The first five-year plan was introduced in 1997. The success of the process was illustrated with the introduction of a more ambitious revised five-year plan in 2002, and a second ten-year national plan in 2007 that will apply up to 2016. A list of measures forms the core of the plan, through which the Government will meet the goals and targets to which it has committed itself in the coming years.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Another key element of the process involves monitoring progress in achieving the goals and targets. For that, we use indicators to measure inputs, outputs, and most importantly outcomes. Inputs, for example, may include the amount spent on employing persons to train the unemployed; Outputs, the number trained up to a set standard. However, the key outcome is how many find relatively good employment. If the outcomes are not satisfactory, then the policies and approach need to be re-examined with a view to achieving better outcomes.

Institutional Structures

The strategic process cannot operate on its own. It has institutional structures to sustain and develop it. In Ireland, a Cabinet Committee chaired by the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) monitors the process. This is supported by a Senior Officials Group, with membership drawn from across a number of Ministries, which coordinates the process at a high official level and reports to the Cabinet Committee. The Office for Social Inclusion drives the process at Ministry level and with Local Authorities. It is now being merged with a Combat Poverty Agency to strengthen support for the strategic process and increase partnership and consultation with the stakeholders outside Government. Each relevant Ministry and most local authorities have social inclusion units which provide coordination for those institutions. A number of specific integrating Ministries have also been established.

Partnership and Consultation

Partnership with the four pillars of stakeholders is a key element of the process. Structures are in place which involve the social partners with Government in the process of developing strategies and monitoring progress. An annual Social Inclusion Forum allows representatives of the community and voluntary sector and people experiencing poverty to engage in dialogue with senior officials from the various relevant Ministries.

There are regular bilateral exchanges between these groups and Ministers and Ministry officials. A comprehensive consultation process is usually arranged when national action plans are being drawn up. To ensure transparency, reports on the proceedings of formal consultations are drawn up and circulated.

Conclusions

So what has the strategic process achieved? It has enabled us to recognise more clearly the nature, extent and causes of poverty and the need for a particular focus on vulnerable groups and areas of disadvantage.

The strategic plan provides for clear objectives, targets, and measures to achieve them, and structures for monitoring and evaluating progress.

This strategic focus leads to better outcomes with the resources available, especially through a more integrated approach to policy and its implementation.

Social partnership and consultation with stakeholders at every stage of the process helps to build consensus for the measures needed to combat poverty and contributes to better quality and targeted policy. The approach has and is contributing to significant reductions in poverty as shown by the findings of the latest survey that applies to 2007.

Mr. Chairman,

If I had been giving this talk some months ago, I would be concluding on a high note with an outline of our continuing success both economically and socially. However, as mentioned earlier, the situation has now changed significantly for all countries represented here, and my country is no exception. The current economic difficulties have put much of our economic and social development on hold.

But the strategic process is just as relevant now, if not more relevant, than ever. Its main purpose now is to help steer us towards setting realistic priorities that protect the least well off, and towards even more effective policies and more effective implementation to achieve the best possible outcomes with the reduced resources available.

I am confident that the process which has grown in strength and effectiveness now for over 10 years will be fit for purpose in meeting, perhaps, its biggest challenges in the years ahead.

Thank you

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