

Community Work Ireland (CWI) and the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) Ireland collaborate annually to organise a series of workshops to support participation at the Social Inclusion Forum and to identify issues of concern to people affected by poverty and the organisations working with them. This year was slightly different. The pre-SIF workshops in Rialto, Dublin and Galway and focus group on homelessness were part of the consultation process for the new National Action Plan for Social Inclusion. This feedback is provisional and three additional consultation events will take place after the Social Inclusion Forum. The main themes emerging from the workshops are presented below. Text boxes contain the words of participants.

New National Action Plan for Social Inclusion

There was broad welcome for the Government's intention to develop a new National Action Plan for Social Inclusion and the commitment that it will represent a whole-of-government approach to improve outcomes for vulnerable and marginalised groups, while recognising a shared responsibility to implement actions to achieve the revised National Social Target for Poverty Reduction. A number of points were made in this regard:

- While the opportunity for initial engagement was welcomed, participants felt that a much more thorough consultation process needs to take place;
- Concern was expressed about the way at the intention to take an 'active inclusion' approach is being interpreted and implemented. Notwithstanding the focus on adequate income and access to quality services, participants were concerned at the prospect of an over-emphasis on labour market activation to the detriment of social inclusion.
- Participants challenged the use of the term 'citizen' in the consultation briefing paper. A social inclusion strategy needs to be for everyone in the country – not just citizens.
- There needs to be far clearer links between the NAPinclusion and the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme and other social inclusion programmes. There needs to be far more visible links to the community sector and those engaged in community development to address poverty, social exclusion and inequality.
- The new strategy needs to be informed by the Public Sector Duty that imposes a positive duty on public **sector** bodies to have regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, promote equality, and protect human rights.
- The language in the new strategy needs to be rights-based language.

Implementation, Progress & Feedback

As in previous years, the gap between policy in relation to poverty reduction and social inclusion on the one hand and policy implementation and actual visible positive change on the other was highlighted as a key issue. While the annual Social Inclusion Forum was welcomed as one of the very few opportunities to engage with government and senior civil servants, there were doubts about whether it actually makes any difference.

Poverty Target

The current target to reduce consistent poverty to 4% by 2016 and to 2% or less by 2020, from a baseline rate of 6.3% in 2010 was cautiously welcomed, though regret was expressed that the original ambition to eliminate poverty has been lost. Participants understood the technical issues that make elimination of poverty difficult, but felt it illustrated an important commitment on the part of the State.

Concern was expressed at the assertion in the Department's consultation paper that the current target is 'very ambitious and unlikely to be achieved'. There was consensus that the poverty target should be retained at least at this level and that we need to concentrate on policy change to achieve it.

'We would be very concerned at the prospect of the current target being less ambitious. It needs to remain at least at the current level as an important indicator of government's commitment and ambition'

While the majority of the discussions are now focused on the 'economic recovery', participants were keen to emphasise that real poverty still exists. Certain areas continue to experience deep poverty. In a number of areas, drug-dealing and gang-land violence is becoming common-place. While there have been commitments to

address these issues, people on the ground have yet to see any action.

'How do we break the cycle of poverty and crime for young people? A young person gets €100 on the dole but can make multiples of that selling drugs – how are we supposed to tackle that?'

Certain communities and groups of people continue to experience significant poverty and social exclusion. Lone parents, people with a disability, Travellers, Roma, migrants, asylum seekers, unemployed, homeless or living in disadvantaged or isolated communities are among the groups most likely to experience poverty and social exclusion. Participants were keen to stress that the government knows this and called on the Minister and colleagues to address the disproportionate impact of poverty on these groups.

Regeneration areas are, by the very nature, some of the poorest areas in the country. Specific focus needs to be maintained on these areas to make sure that the old problems do not re-emerge.

There were suggestions that community clauses could and should be used in all construction and other projects to ensure that benefits go to people in the communities.

Lifecycle approach

While, the Lifecycle approach was acknowledged as a useful framework. However, it was criticised for being gender-blind.

Children and young people

There was a broad welcome for the focus on young people, there needs to be a far greater focus on children and young people that are facing particular disadvantage, such as Traveller, Roma, migrant, LGBTQI, children and young people with a disability and those living in direct provision.

Participants believed that the focus on young people needs to continue. The importance of services for very young children to break the cycle of poverty and educational disadvantage was emphasised but participants criticised the fact that these services were only available in certain areas.

The fact that many children are forced to grow up in direct provision was criticised, as was children living in homeless situations. Children and young people should have the right to a 'proper home' and this needs to be a policy priority.

All forms of discrimination and racism being faced by young people in schools and other areas need to be addressed.

Older People

The focus on the negative in relation to older people was criticised. People are living longer and this should be a cause for celebration but older people are often portrayed as a burden – not as a resource.

Older people must be assured of an adequate income in late years. They also need access to a range of services to support them to live independently for as long as they can. When that is no longer an option, affordable, accessible supported living facilities should be available.

People of Working Age

The focus on labour market activation (outlined below) was deeply criticised. Discussions were held on the concept of social inclusion and it was widely felt that social inclusion cannot be viewed solely as being about access to employment. Whilst having a quality job was seen as an important element of inclusion, a sense of belonging, security, having a say in the decisions and policies that affect your life, respect and a sense of security were also seen as critical in this regard. Any plan or programmes aimed at promoting social inclusion it was argued, must take these aspects into consideration and measures must be put in place to ensure the protection and promotion of fundamental human rights.

Income and Work

Low wages and precarious work

The prevalence of low paid jobs it was argued, has not been addressed and this it was stated is particularly affecting women who make up the majority of low paid workers in state. The cost of childcare was highlighted and whilst the introduction of the 2nd pre-school year was very much welcomed, the fact that childcare costs for families in Ireland continue to remain at one of the highest levels in Europe was considered to be unacceptable.

There was consensus that the minimum wage is not sufficient to keep people out of poverty.

'What people need are 'proper' jobs – not more schemes'.

The issue of precarious work, the proliferation of zero-hours contracts, lack of job security and the vulnerability to poverty that this leads to was highlighted. The importance of quality work, including with regard to accredited training and apprenticeship schemes was noted and the National Apprenticeship Scheme referred to as a potentially useful mechanism in this regard.

Significant concern was expressed at the prospect of the government continuing to over-emphasise labour market activation as it currently being implemented. There was agreement that labour market activation is forcing people into very precarious work situations with low wages and zero-hour contracts still common. People in jobs are experiencing poverty as a result. This is compounded for those that have additional costs such as childcare.

Participants were critical of JobPath and Intreo stating that there was more concern with getting 'clients' off their books than supporting them into quality work.

The current labour market activation model tends to be blind to added difficulties face by some. Travellers and Roma can face huge discrimination in all areas of life, including when looking for a job. People with a disability also face considerable barriers to work. Asylum seekers are not allowed to work, causing significant poverty and hardship.

Pensions

There was consensus that there needs to be far greater planning for sustainable publicly funded pensions given that people are living longer so that older people do not find themselves living in poverty.

Social Welfare

The social welfare system is key to ensuring that people do not fall into poverty. As in other years, the reduced rate of social welfare for young people was criticised as having a hugely detrimental effect on young people and their ability to develop independence.

The social welfare system was criticised for its lack of flexibility. For example, people living abroad that want to come home temporarily to look after older relatives cannot access the Carer's Allowance or any other support.

Services

Health

Access to good primary health care was emphasised by participants. This has to be properly resourced and include access to diagnostics.

Access to health care needs to be made more affordable. For those without a medical card, the cost of going to the doctor can be prohibitive. There were call for the development of a free at the point of access single-tier health system.

Mental health continues to be a significant and growing issue in many communities at a time when services to assist people to maintain mental health and wellbeing and/or address their mental health concerns are cut. Services in this area have to be made available to all those that require them, including children and young people. There are areas in the country that have no access to mental health services and this is contributing to the high rate of suicide. Significant investment is required in this area.

'Every group and community is affected by mental health and suicide. Access to mental health supports are crucial'

Education

Education was viewed by participants as being key to life chances. However, many children are still leaving school without any qualifications. As a recent ESRI report highlighted, Traveller children and young people are still far more likely to leave school without their Leaving Cert. Children and young people in the asylum process often cannot afford school books and access to third level education is severely restricted.

The importance of positive action and resourcing for specific groups experiencing educational disadvantage was named as a core priority including for Travellers, Roma, migrant communities and children with a disability.

Safety and Community Policing

Participants were agreed that everyone should have a right to live in communities safe from crime and violence. To that end, there was consensus that there is a need to increase the presence of community Gardaí that are friendly and respectful of the communities in which they work.

'Community Gardaí should get to know the people in the community and they should be visible'

Housing, Traveller Accommodation and Homelessness¹

Housing

The lack of supply has meant that access to reasonably priced housing is now a dream for many people. People are stuck in rented accommodation and they see no future in terms of owning their own home.

The private rented sector is precarious for many people. Despite efforts by government, rent hikes are common

¹ There was a specific focus group discussion on the issue of homelessness and housing, homelessness and Traveller accommodation also featured in the two regional focus groups.

and tenants are often required to make payments to landlords.

The lack of social housing means that people that should be in social housing are renting from the private sector and this is causing blockages in the system and is resulting in homelessness.

Traveller Accommodation

Traveller accommodation is in crisis all around the country. Funding for culturally appropriate accommodation is actually being returned by local authorities. Travellers are still living in dire circumstances without access to basic services such as running water and electricity and there is no political will to change.

'Our people, our children are still living in dire circumstances. Our only choice is to try to find private rented accommodation and with the levels of discrimination, that is impossible.'

Homelessness

While there was a view that the Government was humane in providing some social supports, there was also a strong feeling that it takes a short-term view and often fails to deliver on its promises. It should be held to account if it doesn't achieve its manifesto.

In discussing the underlying causes of poverty and inequality, there was agreement that people from disadvantaged areas do not have access to the same opportunities as those that are from more affluent areas.

'It's hard for people coming from disadvantaged areas where very little resources because they can't access the same opportunities as people from more advantaged areas.'

The need for increased social housing options was highlighted and not a reliance on the private rented sector. Young people were particularly vulnerable and should not just be left on a list.

For some people the loss of a job or change in their family circumstances has led to homelessness. Some just need a little support to get through a difficult situation e.g. to access a course or get short term support with rent, but if that isn't available they can end up homeless. It can take a long period of time to get their lives back in order. People who are homeless or in a difficult situation are

'I was working and then I got sick and lost my job. Very quickly things changed...there's a stigma to being homeless, you distance yourself from others. You feel a psychological shock.'

stigmatised by wider society. Their lives can completely change and they quickly lose their dignity.

Hostels can be difficult places to stay so more stable longer-term accommodation provide a much better and safer option. People who are homeless can be moved around from one service to another at short notice and can be made to feel disrespected and dehumanised. At a minimum people should have a right to a bed for an agreed period (unless there's violence) and an agreed notice period to move hostels. Staff in hostels can be under a lot of pressure and be desensitised and lose their patience. Staff in services need to treat people with respect and staff in hostels need to have more information than they currently have, as do local authorities and the Central Placement Service.

People sometimes need continuing after-care after they have moved on from emergency accommodation or an emergency situation e.g. into private rented accommodation. This is to ensure their situation is stable and they don't fall back into difficulty. Having access to a key worker is crucial for many people who are in contact with homeless services. They can help the person being able to get access to services or supports which are effectively closed to the person if they try to access them directly on their own.

'When I first became homeless I didn't know what to do. I went to [named centre] and they just told me where to go that night. I had no idea what to do next, no one to help me. The staff are so desensitised that they have no patience and you feel dehumanised.'

The needs of those leaving the care system need to be recognised and taken account of, particularly at the point where they turn 18 and have to leave the care system as adults, with little support and are technically homeless. Some can access aftercare for some time but there are then major challenges when this also comes to an end.

'You feel like you're on a roundabout, you can't get out of the system. There's nowhere to rent, you're not even in the running for private rented housing even with HAP because they don't want someone with "issues".'

Many private landlord do not want people on the Housing Assistance Payment or with 'issues' so it is very difficult for these people to move on and find accommodation. All landlords are now looking for references and this is causing great difficulties for people who are homeless.

'How is someone who is homeless supposed to get a reference?'

There were mixed views on how easy it was to access second chance education but those who were able to access it saw it as a very good opportunity to move on in their lives.

It was strongly agreed that emergency accommodation was clearly not a suitable for long term accommodation, particularly for families and renaming them as 'family hubs' does not change this.

Services are better if the people who are using them can participate in decisions about how they are designed and delivered.

People with disabilities

There is a delay in ratifying the UN Convention on the Rights of People with a Disability and this was greatly criticised. There were calls for Ireland to ratify immediately and to develop a strategy for the implementation of a rights-based approach for people with disabilities.

Rural Areas

There needs to be a specific focus on rural areas. Participants indicated that, however poor services are in urban areas, the situation is far worse in rural areas, particularly because transport is such an issue everywhere.

'Even if there was a job – and that's a long-shot, how is someone in a rural area supposed to get to that job. Even if there was public transport available, how is someone on minimum wage supposed to afford it?'

Island communities face particular difficulties. There are few services and communities are disappearing because there is no future for them there. School children often have to leave home from a very early age as services as basic as education after primary level are not available.

'Someone needs to speak for island communities. We are always forgotten. There is no access to services for any stage on the lifecycle. The island communities are disappearing.'

Structures, Strategies and Programmes

Structures

Structures such as the Local Community Development Committees and Public Participation Networks are here to stay. However, the majority of them need to substantial capacity building if they are to have any impact on social exclusion and facilitating the right of people in marginalised communities to participate in decision-making structures.

Strategies

The new National Plan for Social Inclusion needs to ensure that it reflects a number of important national strategies and international obligations. It needs to be reflected in local strategies such as the Local Economic and Community Plans that are in each local authority area. The LECPs should have to demonstrate how they will address social exclusion in all its forms.

Programmes

As mentioned above, there was consensus that the new National Action Plan for Social Inclusion needs to have far greater links with social inclusion programmes such as SICAP. It should also influence LEADER and others to ensure that every programme has a strong social inclusion element. The current programmes need to be strengthened in relation to their focus on social exclusion. The bureaucracy in SICAP, for example, is detracting from the community work on the ground.

Community Development and Community Infrastructure

Many participants highlighted the damage done to the community infrastructure in the recent past. However, it remains an important consideration in seeking to address poverty and promote social inclusion.

Participants highlighted the importance of community development in addressing the root causes of social exclusion and stressed that this needs to be autonomous and adequately resourced so that it can contribute to the vision of the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion.

Policy Development & Participation

'Policies are being created without proper analysis and discussion and knee-jerk policy formation always leads to unintended consequences. People who understand the consequences of policies need to be engaged in policy development.'

Many participants highlighted the fact that policy development is frequently based on reacting to issues rather than considered responses. This can lead to unintended consequences of policy development. A number of participants highlighted what are unintended consequences to policy implementation. This can be avoided if those that are familiar with issues are included in policy development. Participants also emphasised the right to participate in policy development and decision-making on issues that affect their lives.

Notes