



IMPLEMENTING THE ROADMAP FOR
SOCIAL INCLUSION: REDUCING
POVERTY AND IMPROVING SOCIAL
INCLUSION

**PREPARATORY WORKSHOPS
KEY MESSAGES TO THE
SOCIAL INCLUSION FORUM
2021**

Implementing the Roadmap for Social Inclusion: reducing poverty and improving social inclusion

Preparatory Workshops

Key messages to the Social Inclusion Forum 2021

Introduction

The Social Inclusion Forum is part of the Government's structures to monitor and evaluate the State's strategy to address poverty and achieve social inclusion. This annual event is part of the institutional structures put in place to underpin the implementation, monitoring and on-going development of the Government's social inclusion agenda. It provides a forum for wider public consultation and discussion on social inclusion issues, in particular for people experiencing poverty and social exclusion and the organisations/groups that work with them. The Forum also provides an opportunity for engagement between officials from Government Departments, community and voluntary organisations and people experiencing poverty in.

Launched in 2020, *The Roadmap to Social Inclusion 2020 – 2025* is the current national strategy and the theme of SIF 2021 is ***Implementing the Roadmap for Social Inclusion: reducing poverty and improving social inclusion***.

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. In 2021, four thematic workshops were held by CWI and EAPN Ireland, reflecting the four themes of this year's SIF:

- Core Essentials
- Supporting Families and Children
- Expanding the Opportunity of Employment
- Ensuring the voices of marginalised communities are heard

They were attended by over 200 people from all over the country, from a broad range of backgrounds and experiences. Each workshop provided for the opportunity for four to five breakout room discussions, resulting in a significant amount of information and a longer report than the one that is usually presented to the Social Inclusion Forum but one we hope will prove useful as a record of the discussions. Text boxes contain the words of participants.

The key issues highlighted below as the key messages participants wanted heard at the Social Inclusion Forum are not new and they are not unknown. They have been stated and repeated in one guise or another at many of the SIFs and in other policy spaces. While COVID-19 has brought many challenges, particularly for those already living in poverty, marginalised communities and women experiencing domestic violence, the issues that these people and communities are facing have been exacerbated rather than created by the pandemic. COVID has also brought a new focus on issues such as domestic violence and mental health that were previously relatively hidden and it is important that we not allow the attention on them to wane.

There is an opportunity now that we must grasp. Our ambition should not be to return to normal. Rather it should be about building back better, fairer, more equally and more sustainably. We must ensure a commitment to equality, to leave no one behind, and to ensure that the voice of marginalised communities and minorities are to the fore as we emerge from the pandemic.

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Core Essentials

Roadmap Goal: to ensure that all people can live with confidence that they have access to good quality healthcare, housing, energy and food.

Chapter within Roadmap: Chapter 8

General

Access to adequate and affordable healthcare, housing energy and food are central to health, wellbeing and to the life experiences of people, families and communities. When people and families are poor, they cannot access these core essentials, and this has a significant impact on their lives.

There was consensus amongst workshop participants that poverty levels are increasing significantly, and COVID-19 has exacerbated issues for already marginalised communities and families. People and families are being affected by poverty in ways not seen before. The levels of poverty can be invisible and affecting people from all sections of society. While COVID has had a significantly exacerbating affect, housing was considered to be a major factor as people juggle keeping a roof over their heads with all their other needs. Poverty is complex and multi-layered and affects different communities differently. Specialised interventions are required that meet the needs of communities as they are affected.

Concern was expressed that poverty and reliance on charities, particularly food banks, is becoming normalised and may be seen as a mechanism to deal with poverty, an extremely retrogressive step. Income adequacy and ensuring that people have access to minimum levels of income must be a top

There is an opportunity now to develop creative, inclusive and sustainable responses to poverty based on solidarity, autonomy and community work approaches.

priority for the State. Social welfare needs to lift people out of poverty and be at a level which ensures that no one is left without core essentials.

There is an opportunity now it was felt, to develop creative, inclusive and sustainable responses to poverty based on solidarity, autonomy and community work approaches. Many social issues and public order offences are rooted in poverty and addressing them requires a wholistic, multi-agency approach as opposed to a punitive criminal justice approach. There needs to be an increased focus on cross-sectoral work where State agencies and community workers and youth workers collaborate and work in real partnership to address the issues in their areas.

Social Inclusion is a responsibility of all Gov depts, we must hold them accountable.

Food Poverty

With specific regard to food poverty, organizations working with people in this situation described the numbers of people experiencing food poverty as at an all-time high and highlighted that people and families presenting with food poverty issues are reflective of a wide range of society and 'not the usual suspects.' There is an increasing need and demand for food banks and a serious concern at the normalisation of food poverty and the prospect of food banks becoming an acceptable response to the ongoing needs of many families.

Food poverty was particularly high during the economic crisis. It had begun to decrease but was persistent for many and COVID-19 has made things far worse. Food banks and other initiatives have been important in supporting people and families, but we must not allow this to become the norm

People living in direct provision are becoming dependent on food parcels. They are provided with meals but what is being provided is enough to survive but not to thrive.

Food poverty impacts unequally on people in society. Asylum Seekers in reception or direct provision centres cannot cook their own food or access the ingredients they need to cook their own food. Older people and others that have been forced to restrict their movements because of the pandemic have great difficulty accessing the food they require. Many on low incomes choose less nutritious food, due to the cost. There are particular issues for, children, young people, older people and disabled people in relation to accessing correct levels of nutrition, that cheap food does not always provide. While there was agreement that inadequate income was the root cause, there were suggestions that there should be a greater emphasis on healthy eating and budgeting for this in the education system and in the community, such as the programmes that a number of Healthy Ireland initiatives are supporting. The Hot School Meals programme also needs to be expedited and move beyond DEIS schools in acknowledgement that many students from poor backgrounds attend schools that are not in the DEIS programme.

Accessibility is linked to affordability. If you don't have a car in a rural area, you cannot get to the cheaper shops, especially now when travel and public transport is restricted. If you only have a minimum income, you can't afford the two-for-the-price-of-one offers.

There are attempts by many organisations to link people that are reliant on support for food and other basics to economic programmes that can over time support people to improve their income. There was consensus that employment opportunities for marginalised groups such as disabled people, Travellers, etc. need to be strengthened in order to ensure these groups have income adequacy.

There is a need for a national discussion on food poverty and gathering accurate data of the numbers of people accessing food banks and engaging with charities and community groups for core essentials must be part of that discussion and subsequent responses.

Energy Poverty

With regard to energy, there was consensus that there needs to be a greater understanding of the link between energy and poverty. Marginalized individuals, families and communities are most likely to be living in fuel poverty and dependant on unhealthy and unsustainable fossil-based forms of energy. These are also the types of fuel that are most linked with ill health and environmental pollution.

Poor quality housing is linked to high energy costs and greater vulnerability to health risks.

The State needs to invest heavily in retrofitting and upgrading homes, particularly those in marginalised communities, the benefit of which will be at least two-fold – supporting affordability and energy efficiency and positively impacting on pollution and air quality. There needs to be a far greater focus on sustainability at local and community levels, including expanding the community garden initiative.

Critically, climate action needs to be poverty and equality proofed so that already marginalised communities are not further disadvantaged in the era of just transition. Grants to cover full costs of retrofitting should be available and the climate action plan should be poverty and equality proofed.

We need to move away from dependence on a bag of coal for heating – it has a negative impact on both climate and health, particularly those in lower income areas as it damages the air and environment.

Health Poverty

Health poverty must be considered in tandem with health inequalities, and the impacts both have on life experience, wellbeing and ultimately the life expectancy of individuals, families and communities. We know that many communities such as Travellers, Roma, disabled people, people in direct provision, etc are disproportionately affected by health poverty and this knowledge must be accompanied by strategies that are adequately resourced to address the issues.

Access to health care, particularly preventative health care, is a significant issue, leading many to access acute hospital services when prevention would have been better for them and more cost effective for society. Many children with disabilities have been left without adequate supports or early intervention diagnosis. While this was an issue prior to the onset of the pandemic, it has been considerably exacerbated over the past year. Waiting lists in general are a considerable issue for individuals and families. Many minor health issues are not being dealt with due to waiting lists, by the time consultation comes around the issue has progressed. These were issues pre-COVID, but the situation has considerably deteriorated over the past year.

Primary Care Centres, where they exist, are a critical part of the picture but they are often dispersed and not easily accessible, particularly for those that are reliant on the now restricted public transport service.

Mental ill health requires a particular mention, with many participants emphasising the impact the pandemic has had on factors such as isolation, fear and stress, in some instances creating mental health issues for people, in others exacerbating already existing issues. These issues cannot be looked at without an examination of the mental health concerns of those who are living on poverty. Investment is needed in mental health services, including in community-based mental health supports on which the State is increasingly relying.

Housing Poverty

The cost of accommodation was considered to be at the heart of the experience of poverty for many. There was particular concern in relation to those who are living in overcrowded accommodation, with lack of sanitation and basic needs. Housing conditions are making those in these situations more vulnerable to COVID. Public health authorities need to hold local authorities to account in regard to accommodation, specifically Traveller accommodation.

Digital poverty

Digital poverty was named as a new type of poverty, with the potential to disadvantage many already marginalised people, families and communities. Over the past year, there has been a significant increase in the dependence on technology to access services, remain engaged and for education purposes, particularly for children and young people. However, there are many that do not have access to the technology required either as a result of affordability or access. This digital divide is growing and there is a fear that many groups and communities will be left behind as we move more and more towards online education, working and communication. The State must protect against this disadvantage by ensuring that all households have access to adequate levels of equipment and connectivity.

Supporting Families and Children

Roadmap Goal: to reduce child poverty in Ireland and to ensure that all families have the opportunity to fully participate in society

Chapter within Roadmap: Chapter 5

There was consensus that, as a society, we need to be steadfast in ensuring that a child poverty target is retained and there should be a strong message that this should be 0% - there should be no acceptance of child poverty or social exclusion in any form. In setting a new child poverty target, it was highlighted that we need to understand why there is a failure to meet the existing target.

The fact that poverty affects children in different groups/communities differently and the need for specialised strategies and policies to address their different needs was made clear. Those mentioned included Traveller children, children from low-income families, young carers, children in lone-parent families, children with disabilities, children in Direct Provision and homeless children. It was agreed that the barriers and situation faced by many had worsened, with many experiencing institutionalisation due to their circumstances and extreme poverty, especially children in Direct Provision and children in homelessness.

It is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a particular impact on children from marginalised and minority groups, and the fear was expressed of the danger of the creation of 'a lost generation'. Some of the issues highlighted included the wider conditions impacting on families and the impact of isolation and school closures, including on children's education. The situation is amplifying problems that existed pre-COVID including children's mental health and the impact of domestic violence and substance abuse on children.

The major increase in food poverty and its impact on children is at a crisis point. With school closed and many not providing an alternative to school meals, children who availed of the school meals are more deprived and more families are now dependent on food banks.

Frustration was expressed at the resources being put into reactive supports and measures because of the lack of initial adequate investment and past cuts, including to prevention and early intervention measures.

We are engaging people too late to prevent the damage intergenerational poverty does to people's lives. It would mean less investment would be needed on reactive measures.

The lack of joined up thinking and services, including children's services, was raised, but also the role some organisations in the community play in both providing services and supports and in signposting people to the other services they need.

It was agreed that a multi-agency holistic approach is urgently needed to supporting children and families in poverty. This approach is necessary to tackle intergenerational poverty, as well as educational disadvantage. Lack of adequate income to meet cost of living was highlighted as a key cause of intergenerational poverty, including the cost of housing and childcare.

Policy measures to prevent intergenerational education disadvantage were discussed with concern raised about children in families who experience poverty and disadvantage but are not in DEIS areas. For those

who drop out of school early, the importance of being able to re-access as an adult through the access programme was highlighted, but the barriers many face in accessing the SUSI grant was raised.

Participants saw that the digital divide was growing and impacting on children's education and wider exclusion.

It was highlighted that the way that the **National Childcare Scheme** is currently constructed discriminates against children from poor families whose parents are not in work.

It was mentioned that **TUSLA** does good work, but that many families that need their support are not on their radar. As a result, significant numbers who are accessing state services later in their lives have already been through too much and should have been supported earlier.

Many young people are falling through the cracks

There was a call for county strategies and targets, including area-based childhood programmes based on locally identified need and backed up by investment.

The importance of strong advocacy to address the root causes of child poverty was stressed and the importance of children's voices being heard was highlighted.

Community work needs to be resourced as a response to supporting groups and communities experiencing poverty and social exclusion. The current pandemic has highlighted how the lack of community infrastructure exacerbated the difficulties in reaching marginalised communities and we need to take this opportunity to re-establish a robust community development infrastructure and programmes.

COVID-19 has shown that funding can be found when there is a political will and this approach needs to be maintained and investment, rather than recession, needs to drive the recovery efforts.

Expanding the Opportunity of Employment

Roadmap Goal: give everyone who can work the opportunity of employment as a means to improve their well-being

Chapter within Roadmap: Chapter 2

Employment is one of the most critical anti-poverty measures. However, participants were clear that access to employment must involve access to **decent jobs**, and a move away from precarious work on which many still depend.

The impact of COVID-19 on jobs and income was a topic of much discussion and in the recovery period from the pandemic there are concerns:

- at the numbers of people that will require support to access employment
- that there will be emphasis on those that are newly unemployed and/or most job-ready to the detriment of those long-term unemployed.

There was unanimous agreement that in the recovery period the State needs to prioritise adequate levels of investment and support, with tailored and focused measures, for people who are long-term unemployed and most distant from the labour market.

There was a strong call for the system of supporting people into work to be more person centred and holistic, providing the person with choice on the best route for themselves. Instead, it was highlighted that many people who are genuinely trying to access work find the system difficult and strict and being forced into following routes in conflict with their own needs, skills or potential and which can make them worse off, possibly with their welfare support cut. The Department of Social Protection was seen as having a work first approach with less priority given to personal choice.

*Labour **market programmes** are time-bound and not bottom-up or client focused. Flexibility needs to be improved to allow for a greater investment in those with complex support needs.*

Lessons are not being learned and it is unclear on what basis employment programmes are being designed. There needs to be feedback on the review of Community Employment. The benefits of CE to the community need to be maintained and it should not be a purely activation programme. A significant cohort of people experience low self-esteem, mental health issues and lack of confidence. However, it was highlighted that current supports are not sufficiently flexible to allow for the investment of time people need in pre-development and the development of soft skills such as communication. The time limit on programmes such as Tús or CE are sometimes insufficient for people with complex issues and barriers and greater flexibility should part of the programmes where appropriate.

It was stressed that there is little creative or innovative thinking regarding the generation of employment and that rather than opening opportunities, the Department of Social Protection can sometimes act as gate keepers to opportunity.

The importance of career guidance was highlighted in supporting people to find the best route for themselves and that this needs adequate investment.

The experience of many was that while organisations providing employment supports should collaborate and work together, the way programmes are structured and measured leads some programmes to compete with each other and potentially to focus on those who are easiest to progress.

The significant barriers experienced by specific groups in accessing employment were highlighted. This included those experiencing intergenerational and long-term unemployment, who have a disability, who parent alone or are from ethnic minority backgrounds, including Travellers. The specific barriers faced by asylum seekers were raised as was the particular discrimination based on a person's address and socio-economic background which results in some people not even trying to access training or employment. Transport continues to be a major issue, particularly in rural areas.

Transport is the number 1 barrier in rural areas. There is one bus at 7am from the area I live in and one that returns at 5pm. Transport issues been exacerbated during COVID as there is reduced capacity on public transport and there are now significant delays for driving tests for those that can actually afford a car.

The challenge that many people find it difficult to manage the welfare to work transitions was raised in particular the impact understanding how changes in incomes from welfare or work, or both impacts on them.

Questions were raised over the engagement of the private sector in the employment of people with disabilities, including their failure to address stereotypes and stigma which act as major barriers. Training in companies and organizations on inclusivity was seen as one means of tackling this, and this training should be designed and delivered by people experiencing the issues. It was felt that the reasonable accommodation scheme is not currently fit for purpose.

It was felt that supported employment is necessary for some people but is often not available so more needs to be done to address this. It is important to tackle the notion that someone coming through a supported service is less capable of maintaining employment.

A culture shift was called for, with greater ambition for inclusion and flexibility to improve the employment of people from groups with low employment levels including:

- work cultures that can benefit everyone
- addressing poverty traps
- making the wage subsidy scheme available regardless of hours
- better system to recognise prior learning and of non-EU qualifications,
- job share and remote working options
- making CE more ambitious and inclusive.

Many called for a more meaningful, well-resourced and well publicised apprenticeship programme, which makes better use of information and technology for forward planning. For those who cannot afford it, a proposal was made for a social welfare type support while on apprenticeship. It was also suggested that schools need to be brought into this discussion and become a part of the process.

There are anomalies in the system which results in inequalities in how different people can qualify for different programmes and supports. These need to be addressed.

The potential for the social economy to be further developed and invested in was highlighted.

Some participants had experience of successful pilot employment support programmes which once mainstreamed became over-formalised, making them less accessible to people.

It was proposed that all jobs/projects supported by public funding should have a social clause and that jobs should be ring-fenced for people who are on the live register or distant from the labour market. Whilst Covid presents many challenges it also provides decision makers and programme planners with an opportunity to do things differently into the future, to look at what the labour market looks like and to develop more creative and innovative responses including employment opportunities being generated in relation to community development.

Ensuring voices are heard

As a starting point it must be recognised that it is difficult for those whose basic needs are not being met to participate in groups, networks or community activity, and meeting basic needs is essential to facilitating participation.

Ensuring the voices of marginalised communities are heard at policy and decision making arenas is critical to the success of interventions to support those living in poverty and who experience social exclusion. It is the right of people to participate in decisions and policies that affect them and their communities, and the participation of people and communities benefits and improves decision-making and policy development. This will not happen automatically and needs to be systematically supported. The Public

In some cases, there is a fear of speaking out, amongst asylum seekers for example. In others, there is a despondency in relation to engaging in policy making as the feeling is there is no point...nothing will change. We need to do something about this as this is the very thing that is feeding into the Far Right movement

Sector Duty¹ has significant potential but communities need to be supported to use the duty and State agencies need to be supported to implement the duty.

Distance from decision-making is creating disaffection and disconnection all over the world. The Far Right movement is capitalising on this disaffection and are particularly focusing on poor communities stirring-up tension and division. It is essential from a social cohesion perspective, to find ways to engage people and demonstrate that their participation makes a difference to the policies that affect their lives. Community policing has become completely under resourced. When done well, community policing can work hand in hand with community work and youth work. A key issue now is the over policing and under protection of communities, criminalisation of poverty, a sense of growing alienation and lack of agency.

The Far Right is mobilizing within the communities creating misguided views and tensions. They are targeting marginalised communities and stirring up hatred and division, often based on race. Community work and youth work needs to be resourced to challenge this

Spaces need to be created for voices to be heard at local and national level. There was consensus that community development is critical to building capacity to articulate issues. This takes time and skill but is necessary. There was an equal consensus that policy makers need to listen to the people on the ground who know what the needs are and what effective strategies should be developed to meet those needs.

There was much discussion about the negative shift from community development to labour market activation, service delivery and a more individualistic approach for over 10 years. This has been exacerbated by competitive tendering process and a focus on targets that often do not take into account the needs on the ground. There was a broad welcome for the pilot Community Development Programme and the promise that it brings for more autonomous community work.

¹ The Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty is a statutory obligation for public bodies in Section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014. Section 42(1) requires public bodies, in the performance of their functions, to have regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, promote equality and protect human rights of staff and people availing of their services. Section 42(2) requires public bodies to assess, address and report on progress in relation to equality and human rights in their strategic plan and annual reports in a manner that is accessible to the public.

There needs to be increased transparency on how voices are heard at local level and there needs to be systems to ensure that such representatives are accountable back to communities.

COVID-19 has brought the importance of community work and youth work into stark focus. Community development organisations, Family Resource Centres, Traveller organisations, migrant groups and networks and others were to the fore in supporting the most marginalised communities and were an essential support to public health efforts over the past year. We need to recognise the importance of this work and ensure investment in these organisations.

Many people have experienced a technical exclusion as they do not have the technology or are not able to engage with others online. Many need face to face engagement that technology cannot replace. However, during the past year some community organisations have used zoom and other means of bringing people together for social activities to keep people engaged and to build community spirit. This has had wider benefits in maintaining personal and community spirit. Being online also enables some to participate in meetings and activities that they would find a challenge, even outside Covid times for various reasons. After COVID-19 groups are likely to use a better mix of face to face and online ways of engaging people.

The Social Inclusion Forum

The workshops discussed the Social Inclusion Forum and how SIF can be strengthened.

There was consensus that the SIF should not be 'just another conference' and it needs to be constructed as:

- an opportunity for the State to report on progress on the actions set out in the Roadmap for Social Inclusion and associated strategies to address poverty and achieve social inclusion and a chance for critical debate and respectful engagement. It should be part of a process involving real feedback from the Department on progress and how recommendations from previous years have been progressed
- an opportunity for those that are affected by poverty and social exclusion and the organisations that represent them to have a say in the priority areas of action

The Social Inclusion Forum needs to be respectful of engagement and participation. It must involve real listening rather than an 'us and them' approach with Government Departments and agencies are operating within pre-set boundaries or possibilities. It should be clear how policy and programmes have been impacted through this and wider ongoing engagement. Crucially, policy and programmes need to change as a result of the contribution of civil society

We need to see the outcome of participation in the SIF – otherwise what is the point?

While it is necessary for the SIF to be online it makes it more difficult for people from marginalised communities to participate. It might also make it more difficult for people to engage the Minister in listening to people's lived experience. However, being online is also an opportunity to engage groups who would not usually get an opportunity to participate, such as young people, disabled people or those in rural areas.

There should be ongoing communication and engagement with all those that have engaged with the SIF.