

The Irish national Anti Poverty Strategy and the NAP Inclusion

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1. Poverty in Ireland

Ireland has experienced the fastest economic growth in the European Union, benefiting from a range of factors, including the investment in human resources, education and industrial policy.

For most of the 1970s and 1980s, Ireland was one of the poorest countries in the European Union, with exceptionally high levels of unemployment and emigration. It is now, in terms of GDP per capita, the second richest country in the European Union, after Luxemburg.

This growth has led to a dramatic reduction in unemployment, including long-term unemployment, but also a widening gap between rich and poor. Overall unemployment has dropped from 15% in 1994 to 4% in 2004. However, much of this unemployment is concentrated among ethnic minorities, such as Travellers, and among lone parents, the disabled, people in isolated rural areas and in areas of multiple deprivation in the cities. These are also the groups, along with older people, who are most at risk of poverty.

On the other hand, Ireland also has the worst 'relative poverty rate' in the EU and one of the worst in the World, and this rate is getting worse.

This is not a matter of chance, but reflects deliberate political choices about taxation, welfare, services, spending and rights over many decades.

The EU Joint Inclusion Report, 2004, points out that *'in Southern countries, and in Ireland, poor people not only benefit less from the overall prosperity of their respective countries, but are more likely to be subject to more persistent forms of deprivation'*

2. The National Anti Poverty Strategy

Ireland demonstrates a contrast between mainstream budgetary policies leading to greater social divisions and a series of 'targeted' policies designed to tackle poverty.

In 1997, the Government adopted a National Anti Poverty Strategy (NAPS) called *'Sharing in Progress'*¹ after a long consultation and discussion. Anti poverty NGOs at national and local level were contributed to this, although the actual Plan, and particularly the targets, were decided by Government.

This NAPS sets a ten-year target to reduce 'consistent' poverty in Ireland to 2% by 2007, or ideally to eliminate it.

It identified five themes needing particular attention, and set targets for each:

- Income adequacy
- Unemployment
- Educational disadvantage
- Rural poverty and
- Poverty in disadvantaged urban areas.

The Government reviewed the strategy in 2002, updated the targets in these areas and added six new themes:

- Child poverty
- Women's poverty
- Health and poverty
- Older people's poverty
- Housing and accommodation and
- 'New and emerging forms of poverty', such as racism

The strategy was designed to achieve the targets under these themes through a combination of new administrative mechanisms and mainstreaming instruments, including *'poverty proofing'*.

¹ All of the main documents are available on the NGO site www.eapn.ie and the Government site www.socialinclusion.ie

The Plan has been considerably amended and built on by the two National Action Plans (NAPs Inclusion) adopted in 2001 and 2003 as part of the EU social inclusion strategy.

3. Defining Poverty

The ‘headline’ commitment in the NAPS is to reduce poverty to 2% of the population, or ideally eliminate it, by 2007. This has been described by the European Commission as the first ‘global target’ for poverty reduction in the EU.

The commitment refers to a new measure introduced by the Strategy and called ‘consistent poverty’ which combines relative income poverty with a set of ‘basic deprivation indicators’. In effect a person is deemed to suffer from ‘consistent poverty’ if:

- their income falls below the 60% relative poverty threshold
- and**
- they cannot afford any of a set of ‘deprivation indicators’, such as a substantial meal once a day, new rather than second-hand clothes, or a warm overcoat.

In the first years of the NAPS, this target seemed achievable, with household panels showing falls from year to year. This year, however, the EU SILC (Survey on Income and Living Conditions), using direct surveys rather than panels, shows ‘consistent poverty’ at 9% of the population as against 6% at the start of the strategy. While it is unlikely that ‘consistent poverty’ has increased, in such a fast changing economy, the new figures show that poverty levels have been severely under-estimated, even by this most basic measure.

The Government has resisted pressure from groups like EAPN Ireland to set also targets in terms of ‘relative poverty’ (the number below 60% of Gross National Income, used by the EU and most member states), not least because Ireland has the worst rate among the 25 EU member states.

4. Poverty proofing

One of the most important innovations in the strategy has been the introduction of ‘poverty proofing’. This is a process which requires Government Departments, local authorities and state agencies to assess all major policies and programmes at design and review stages to ensure that they either contribute to reducing poverty or, at least, do not increase poverty.

The experience of poverty-proofing has also encouraged the development of a range of other proofing systems, such as gender-proofing, equality proofing and rural proofing and there has been some discussion of the need to introduce an integrated framework for all types of proofing.

5. Running the Strategy

The Strategy put in place a set of structures to promote the fight against poverty. These included:

- A Ministerial Committee, chaired by the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) to oversee the strategy, supported by a ‘senior officials group’
- Departmental ‘liaison officers’ responsible for promoting the strategy within each Government Department (Ministry), who came together in an inter-departmental committee.

The process is monitored and supported by the Combat Poverty Agency, an independent state agency, and by the National Economic and Social Forum, made up of Government, parliamentarians, local government representatives, social partners, social NGOs and independent experts.

The 2002 Review strengthened these structures with the addition of a ‘consultative group’, involving social partners (which in Ireland means employers, trade unions, farmers and social NGOs), a public social inclusion forum and a stronger role for the Parliamentary Committees on Social and European Affairs.

Perhaps most importantly, it introduced a new Office for Social Inclusion, within the Ministry for Social and Family Affairs, to oversee and coordinate the Strategy. This Office is now also responsible for the Irish National Action Plan for Inclusion (NAP Inclusion)

6. Impact of poverty-proofing

Anti-poverty NGOs in Ireland, including EAPN Ireland, welcomed the introduction of poverty-proofing as a central feature of the NAPS. Indeed, the EAPN at European level has identified the lack of poverty-proofing mechanisms as a key weakness in the NAPs Inclusion of most of the other EU member states.²

On the other hand, the actual impact of poverty-proofing on policy, particularly fiscal policy and politically sensitive policies, is harder to discern. At times, there are suspicions that the system simply dampens public debate on the lack of action on poverty.

To make poverty-proofing work, there is a need for strong political direction and a practical commitment by officials. Many officials complain, understandably, that they are required to carry out a lot of ‘box-ticking’ or form-filling, to no obvious purpose. Without a serious political commitment, the resources and policy decisions needed to make an impact on policy will not be put in place.

There are important areas of policy which contribute dramatically to poverty and social exclusion which show no signs of having been poverty-proofed. These include, for example, recent legislation which criminalizes Travellers, an indigenous and nomadic ethnic minority in Ireland, parking beside roads; the introduction of a basic subsistence regime called ‘direct provision’ for asylum seekers, who may have to wait years for a decision on their claim and restrictions on the right of migrant workers.

The key problem is that poverty-proofing is still essentially a secretive and internal government system, which makes public accountability or debate in the media or even the parliament almost impossible.

EAPN strongly advocates the use of poverty-proofing throughout Europe, adapted to the needs of each particular country and level of government.

Some conclusions by EAPN Ireland on the Irish experience are:

- Poverty-proofing is a way to deliver on political commitments to eradicate poverty, not a substitute for political will
- The system needs to be led and supported at the highest political level and no area can be considered ‘too important’ for poverty-proofing
- It must be transparent and open to scrutiny, promoting and not closing-off public debate
- There is a need for continuous learning to refine the system and make it effective
- To work well, there is a need for considerable investment in personnel, training, data collection and resources generally
- Poverty proofing mechanisms and discussions must involve people affected by poverty and organisations representing them and working with them

7. Conclusions

The NAPS and the NAPs Inclusion have achieved a lot in Ireland, particularly in developing clearer strategies and information. They have kept a policy and political focus on poverty, often in a harsh political climate.

The NAPs Inclusion allow us to compare and learn from approaches to fighting poverty across the EU, particularly the peer review process and the Joint Inclusion Report.

The commitment to participation of people experiencing poverty in the EU Objectives, as well as the involvement of all ‘actors’ such as community groups, local and national government and

² *Where is the Political Energy?* A response to the second round of NAPS Inclusion, October 2003, available on www.eapn.org

social partners is important, even if it has still to be fully realised. Equally the commitment to social rights, even if weak in reality, is important.

The Joint Inclusion Report, drafted by the European Commission and signed off by the Prime Ministers of the 25 EU states at the ‘summit’ last Spring, has a section on challenges for each country.

The Report says ‘*the major challenge is to ensure that resources are made available to meet the agreed targets*’

Some of the other challenges listed include:

- Access to services, particularly in rural areas
- Tackling educational disadvantage to break the cycle of hereditary poverty
- Integration of ethnic minorities.
- A greater focus on income inequalities,

EAPN Ireland takes the view that the NAPS and the NAPs Inclusion provide the instruments which could be used to mobilise the resources of this newly rich country to eradicate poverty. The persistent and increasing poverty come from a lack of political will, not a lack of ideas or imagination.

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