

# Development

## Introduction

The Government's performance in recent years in relation to development cooperation has been hailed in many quarters as a considerable success. The decision in 2005 to re-instate the commitment to meeting the UN target of spending 0.7 per cent of GNP on development aid, and the achievement of the first interim target of 0.5 per cent by 2007, have been widely welcomed. Ireland continues to provide a high quality of aid, having good aid predictability, not tying its aid to conditions and being poverty focused. Given its relatively small population, Ireland is not a big donor in terms of overall volume of aid but its per capita contribution is high and is set to improve further. The most recent OECD survey places Ireland sixth in the global league table of countries' contributions to development aid as a percentage of Gross National Income.<sup>1</sup>

The publication of the first ever *White Paper on Irish Aid*,<sup>2</sup> and the central role accorded to development cooperation in Irish foreign policy, are widely regarded as major achievements of the present Government. These are achievements that will have lasting implications far beyond the island of Ireland. The White Paper places strong emphasis on the need for good governance, tackling corruption and ensuring value for taxpayers' money. There is now a need, in the context of a rapidly expanding aid programme, to ensure that the structures and staff levels are consolidated to assure programme quality and focus.

Whilst all of this is good news, there is no room for complacency in terms of Ireland's commitment to international development. As one of the wealthiest countries in the world, meeting the UN target is about honouring our long-standing commitment to those living in poverty. Rather than meeting the grandly titled 'Millennium' Development Goals, it is about meeting the 'Minimum' Development Goals to respect basic human dignity.

For the next Dáil, there are a number of key areas of concern which will need to be addressed in order to ensure that Ireland moves forward on its commitment to international development and becomes a leader in this area.

## Aid Legislation

The introduction of legislation to safeguard Ireland's

continued commitment to spending, from 2012 onward, *at least* 0.7 per cent of GNP annually on overseas development is urgently required. Trócaire, for example, has called for such legislation on a number of occasions. Legislation of this kind would enable Irish Aid to plan its programmes for a number of years without concern that a change of government or of policy priorities would result in a reduction of its budget.

In making this commitment, the Irish Government also needs to ensure that Irish Aid is properly resourced in terms of professional and experienced staff, so that the quality of Irish aid, globally acknowledged to be of a very high standard, can be maintained to maximise its impact in improving the lives of the world's poorest people. There is need also for continued promotion of aid effectiveness, through Irish Aid sustaining and enhancing its own programme as well as supporting donor action on the Paris Declaration and other international initiatives.

## Action at EU Level

Another key area where Ireland can take the lead is within the European Union, which is an increasingly important player on the world development stage. Between them, the EU and its twenty-seven Member States account for over half of global development assistance and have a powerful voice in international bodies such as the G8, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the World Bank. The EU is also a key trading partner for most developing countries.

The proportion of Ireland's overseas development aid being channelled through the EU is rising – in 2004, it stood at 15 per cent. It is crucial, therefore, that Ireland monitors how EU development aid is spent and that it tries to influence policies at European level that affect the lives of the poor.

Among the critical issues for EU development policy over the course of the lifetime of the next government will be: ensuring coherence between development policy and other policy areas of the EU; working to improve the effectiveness of EU aid, and managing the EU's relations with Africa.

According to the guiding document for EU development policy, *The European Consensus on Development*, the overarching objective of the EU's

development work is poverty reduction.<sup>3</sup> However, competing agendas at EU level, such as security, trade and migration, frequently threaten to undermine this goal. For example, the current negotiations surrounding the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) have given rise to fears that economic growth in the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) partner countries may be hampered by having to open up their markets to EU products. The EU has committed itself to ensuring coherence between its various policy areas and a report on progress is due to be published in April 2007. Ireland has made an input to this report and is stepping up its own domestic efforts to increase policy coherence for development.

In the context of global discussions on aid effectiveness, which are building up to the planned High Level Forum in Ghana in 2008, the EU is looking at how to streamline development aid across recipient countries, avoiding duplication between its own efforts and those of Member States. The European Commission has published proposals for a voluntary code of conduct on 'division of labour' between the EU and Member States under which donors would concentrate on specific countries and sectors where they have a comparative advantage. If these proposals are adopted they will need to be promoted and monitored on an ongoing basis.

EU–Africa relations are also coming under scrutiny with discussions on a Joint EU–Africa Strategy due to be completed by the end of 2007. Africa is a major recipient of Irish aid: six of the eight countries to which Ireland gives priority in its development aid are African. Much needs to be done to promote and enable participation by African politicians and civil society in the development of the EU–Africa Strategy so that it can adequately reflect their development priorities. Ireland will also need to monitor the roll out of monies committed under the 10<sup>th</sup> European Development Fund (2008–2013), the main funding instrument for EU–Africa co-operation.

### Addressing Trade Injustice

Addressing injustices in world trade remains vital to global poverty reduction and to achieving development goals. The EU has a very significant role to play in promoting trade justice. However, the increasing emphasis on bilateral trade agreements threatens to undermine this role: the EU has been using these negotiations to support an aggressive market access agenda and to pursue liberalisation in various economic sectors – approaches already rejected by developing countries in multilateral negotiations.

In order to fulfil the potential for economic development and poverty reduction through the negotiation

of fairer international trade, Ireland needs to ensure that the pace and level of liberalisation reflects each country's development needs. It is critical that countries are afforded the policy space to extend protection to sectors that are fundamental to their long-term social and economic objectives.

For Irish Aid's priority countries in sub-Saharan Africa, agricultural trade rules and policies are of particular importance. The fact that, for example, 86 per cent of the Malawian workforce and 83 per cent of Mozambican workers are employed in the agricultural sector, highlights how trade rules that contribute towards food and livelihood security as well as rural development are of the utmost importance. This means that, on the one hand, tariff cuts in agriculture should not put in danger poor and vulnerable groups and, on the other, the EU and other northern countries should develop effective alternatives to subsidy systems which distort developing country markets.

### Addressing Debt

Ireland has also adopted a commendable stance in relation to the debt issue: in its *Policy on Developing Country Debt*, the Government took the position that the most Heavily Indebted Poor Countries should receive 100 per cent debt cancellation.<sup>4</sup> Ireland has already paid in full its contribution under the G8 deal. Its key challenge remains to be a voice for enlightened policies at EU level and in discussions at international fora, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Despite the progress on the debt issue at international level, much remains to be done – for example, the promises made at the Gleneagles meeting in July 2005 have not been fully honoured and there needs to be some fundamental changes to the criteria set down for debt relief.

### Tackling Climate Change

In 2005, amid great fanfare, northern governments committed themselves to 'make poverty history' and to meeting the Millennium Development Goals, through raising aid levels. However, the Millennium Goals, agreed in 2000, fail to take the impact of climate change into account in any meaningful way. Such an omission means that aid efforts and money may not achieve the desired results in the long term.

The Irish Government's current aid strategy is a case in point. While the Government's commitment to increase aid is welcome, it may well be asked why the 2006 White Paper on aid devotes only half a page (out of the document's total of 127 pages) to climate change – and why there is no mention of the issue in relation to the vision, principles, rationale, and objectives set out in the Paper?

Could it be that highlighting those linkages may create real discomfort for the Government? The White Paper calls for greater 'coherence' across government, but fails to even mention how our own carbon dependent domestic energy and transport policies, and our consequent failure to reach our Kyoto target, are perhaps wiping out the benefits of aid in the medium term?

If we are serious about our contribution to global poverty reduction, a radical rethink is required so that addressing climate change becomes integrated into our international development policy. It has become abundantly clear that while aid is certainly a vital component of our responsibility to the wider world, it is by no means enough.

In its *Human Development Report 2006*, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) makes the case for a 'two pronged approach' to addressing climate change in the developing world.<sup>5</sup> The first part of that is a strategy of adaptation, to assist developing countries as they face the mounting burden of climate change impacts. This is the role of aid programmes.

The second part is overwhelmingly domestic – namely, a drastic reduction in our carbon emissions. The UNDP Report terms this 'mitigation' and states: 'Mitigation is an imperative. If the international community fails in this area, the prospects for human development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will suffer a grave setback.'<sup>6</sup> Mitigation requires a coherent approach to global poverty reduction that cuts across all government departments, including energy and transport.

For those involved in, or concerned about, development issues, the challenge of making the links between domestic and international policy is critical. Just as in the 1990s we began to recognise the impact of our domestic trade and agriculture policies on the world's poor, now is the time to make the case for a review of all policies which impact on climate change. This is not just a question of our own environmental sustainability: it is a question of justice for the world's poor.

#### Notes

1. OECD (2007) 'Development aid from OECD countries fell 5.1% in 2006', 3 April 2007. ([www.oecd.org/document/](http://www.oecd.org/document/))
2. Government of Ireland (2006) *White Paper on Irish Aid*, Dublin: Stationery Office.
3. Council of the European Union (2005) *The European Consensus on Development*, Joint Statement by the Council and the Representatives of the Member States meeting within the Council, the European Parliament and the Commission, Brussels, 22 November 2005.
4. Government of Ireland (2002) *Policy on Developing Country Debt: Strategy*, prepared jointly by Ireland Aid and the Department of Finance.
5. United Nations Development Programme (2006) *Human Development Report 2006: Beyond Scarcity – Power, Poverty and the Global Water Crisis*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 170.

# Alcohol and Drugs

One of the notable features of prosperous Ireland has been its level of spending on alcohol and illegal drugs. The Strategic Task Force on Alcohol report of 2004 calculated that the country's annual expenditure on alcohol of nearly €6 billion of personal income in 2002 represented €1,942 for every person over fifteen years of age.<sup>1</sup>

The illegal drugs trade in Ireland is estimated to be worth €1 billion per year – which means that €3 million worth of drugs are being consumed each day in a country of just over four million people.

## 1. ALCOHOL

In mid-March 2007, there was considerable media coverage of the findings of an EU study showing Ireland to have the highest incidence of binge drinking in Europe.<sup>2</sup> In fact, these findings can hardly have come as a great surprise. In a context where there has been a marked rise in alcohol consumption, every study on alcohol in Ireland in the past decade has revealed harmful levels and patterns of drinking.

A 2002 study conducted in a number of European countries had already shown that Ireland 'had the highest reported consumption per drinker and the highest level of binge drinking.'<sup>3</sup> The *European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs* (ESPAD), conducted in 1995, 1999, and 2003, showed that, compared to the rest of Europe, Irish sixteen year-olds tended to drink more, binge drink more frequently and more often drink to the point of drunkenness.<sup>4</sup>

Excessive alcohol consumption is not, contrary to the popular view, confined to young people. The 2002 comparative study already referred to showed that among men in the age-group 50–64, 60 out of every 100 drinking occasions ended in binge drinking, a figure not much lower than that for men aged 18–29. Women's drinking patterns, which also showed a high incidence of binge drinking (30 out of every 100 occasions when they drank), again revealed that the incidence among those aged 50–64 was almost as high as that among the 18–29 age group.<sup>5</sup>

### The Price of Alcohol

Ireland is paying a very high price, not for alcohol, but for the consequences of its misuse. The Strategic Task Force on Alcohol estimated that at a *conservative* calculation, alcohol-related harm cost Ireland about €2.65 billion, equivalent to 2.6 per cent of GNP,

in 2003.<sup>6</sup> The financial costs are, of course, only one, limited, way of calculating the impact of alcohol problems. The costs in terms of human misery can never be truly measured but are reflected in the illnesses and deaths arising from diseases associated with alcohol misuse, and in the deaths and injuries resulting from alcohol-related accidents (on the roads, in homes and workplaces), and from disputes and fights (on the streets and in homes). They are reflected too in broken relationships, family disharmony, financial hardship, and in a failure to realise academic and occupational potential. Of particular concern, in terms of its immediate and long-term impact, is the damage done to children and young people both by their own use and abuse of alcohol and as a result of harmful drinking by their parents or other people in their family circle.

### Policy Non-Implementation

In 1996, the year before the two parties that make up the present Government came to power, the *National Alcohol Policy* was published. This put forward the objective of 'encouraging moderation, for those who drink, and reducing the prevalence of alcohol-related problems in Ireland.'<sup>7</sup>

Despite the Government's reiteration in subsequent policy documents of its commitment to promote moderation and responsibility,<sup>8</sup> no concerted effort has been made to implement the *National Alcohol Policy*. In some instances, developments have taken place that are directly contrary to the aims of the Policy.

It is widely agreed that a key measure in reducing harm is limiting the availability of alcohol. However, in the last few years, Ireland has moved in the opposite direction, as a result of the extension of opening hours of licensed premises, the marked increase in the number of outlets for off-licence sales, and, more recently, the removal of the restrictions that prevented below-cost selling. With regard to the promotion of alcohol, the Government's adoption in 2003 of policy to curb advertising and other forms of marketing was effectively abandoned in 2005 when the drafting of legislation in this area was halted in favour of a Voluntary Code in relation to advertising<sup>9</sup> – a Code which was prepared by the drinks and advertising industries and the broadcast media, and which is being self-regulated by them.

In two reports (2002 and 2004), the Government-

appointed Strategic Task Force on Alcohol set out a wide range of recommendations. No firm plan to implement these has ever been published.

It might have been thought that since a core feature of the 2006 social partnership agreement, *Towards 2016*, is a comprehensive programme of measures to address the key social issues affecting the country over the next ten years, this would have included strong agreed positions in relation to alcohol abuse. The Agreement does reiterate firm commitment to alcohol testing to deter drink driving. Otherwise, however, it refers to alcohol problems only in relation to one group of the population – young adults. Furthermore, the Agreement gives a commitment only to the implementation of the recommendations of the Working Group on Alcohol which was established under Sustaining Progress, the previous partnership agreement, and ‘taking into account’ the recommendations of the Strategic Task Force on Alcohol.<sup>10</sup> However, the mandate given to that Working Group excluded the key issues of taxation of alcohol, availability and marketing, so a commitment to implement its recommendations hardly constitutes serious intent to address alcohol problems.

### The Failure of the ‘Partnership’ Approach

The basis of alcohol policy has to be recognition that alcohol ‘is no ordinary product’: it is a psychoactive drug, *albeit* one that is legal and that provides harmless pleasure when used appropriately. The fact that alcohol is a toxic substance which has addictive qualities makes its sale and consumption a matter of public concern; policy in this area should be determined by the requirements of protecting public health and promoting the common good.

The ‘partnership approach’ with the drinks industry that the Irish Government has adopted in relation to the development of alcohol policy has clearly not worked. There are too many examples showing that ‘partnership’ has led to yielding to the interests of the industry. This is contrary to stated national policies and to the commitments which Irish governments gave when they ratified international agreements, such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which assert the right to health of every person and which recognise the right of children to be protected from harm. The WHO Declaration on Young People and Alcohol, to which Ireland has also subscribed, puts the issue plainly: ‘Public health policies concerning alcohol need to be formulated by public health interests, without interference from commercial interests.’

### The Challenge Ahead

Ultimately, individuals have a personal responsibility to adopt responsible behaviour in relation to alcohol. But individual attitudes and behaviour are shaped in a social and cultural context and in the Ireland of today that context is one where unhealthy patterns of alcohol consumption are almost the norm.

The introduction of random breath testing has been an extremely important development in addressing alcohol-related harm but it is essential that it is not seen as all that must be done to address Ireland’s alcohol problems.

There is evidence that the public is increasingly aware of the damage which alcohol misuse is doing to our society and wants to see Government action to address this.<sup>11</sup> However, it is not yet apparent that these concerns have evolved into a clear demand for action – or a readiness to accept the kind of measures that would actually be effective.

Some politicians have shown leadership in highlighting alcohol-related problems: for example, TDs and Senators on two Joint Oireachtas Committees have signed up to reports which include strong recommendations on a range of measures to control availability.<sup>12</sup> In a March 2007 Report, the Joint Committee on Arts, Sport, Tourism, Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs recommended that the Government should acknowledge ‘the extent of the problem of alcohol abuse in the country, and the underlying role that drinks sponsorship and promotion plays in it’.<sup>13</sup>

However, political commitment at the highest level is required if the legislation that is needed in this area is to be enacted and properly enforced and if policies and services adequate to the scale of the problem are to be put in place.<sup>14</sup> If Ireland’s alcohol problems are to be properly addressed, the next Government needs to:

- Draw up an Action Plan to implement the key recommendations of the Strategic Task Force on Alcohol and of the Oireachtas Committees;
- Establish an agency to have specific responsibility for implementing the Action Plan;
- Enact legislation to control the marketing and promotion of alcohol;
- Commit to the legislative and enforcement measures needed to control the availability of alcohol, especially to young people;
- Support the extension of the kinds of community mobilisation initiatives which have begun to be established in recent years;
- Ensure that a full range of treatment facilities are in place, and ensure also that services are available on the basis of need, not income.

## 2. ILLEGAL DRUGS

### Statistics

Statistics on illegal drug use are very outdated. In 2000/2001, heroin users numbered 14,500, of whom 12,400 were in Dublin (that is, one person in every hundred in Dublin was a heroin addict). In 2003, a survey found that 3 per cent of the population had used cocaine at some time in their lives, and 1 per cent had used it in the previous twelve months. A 2004 survey found that 40 per cent of fifteen year olds had tried cannabis.

What is undeniable is that the problem of illegal drug use is increasing: cocaine is spreading rapidly, not only to all social groups (due to its cost, it was previously the preserve of professional classes) but to every city and town in Ireland. Poly-drug use (the use of several drugs simultaneously) is increasingly the norm amongst drug users, which makes dealing with their drug problem a much more difficult task. Drug misuse is at the root of a great deal of the crime perpetrated in our society – including not just drug offences themselves but the thefts and burglaries that constitute 80 per cent of all offences committed and, at the extreme, the gangland murders that have become common in recent years.

### The Response to Drug Misuse

There are huge inconsistencies in our current policies in response to illegal drugs. Harm reduction policies, such as needle exchange, advocated and supported by the Government, are in direct conflict with the criminal justice policies, advocated and supported by the Government, which have a zero tolerance for illegal drug use. Similarly, the discretion given to Gardaí in dealing with a person who is found in possession of a small amount of illegal drugs for their own personal use is inconsistent with the stated Garda Drug Policy, which is 'to enforce the laws relating to drugs'. The Minister for Justice's stated opposition to needle exchange in prisons is inconsistent with Government support for needle exchange in drug-using communities as a harm reduction measure.

### The National Drugs Strategy 2001–2008

The National Drugs Strategy outlined a response to the drug problem under four headings or 'pillars': 'Supply Reduction', 'Prevention', 'Treatment' and 'Research'. The 2005 Mid-term Review of the Strategy showed that some progress had been made: for example, the number of methadone places available to heroin users (7,390) had exceeded the target (6,500) by the end of 2002 and there had been a small expansion of services outside Dublin.

Nevertheless, major gaps in services were identified.

These included:

- the continued absence of any services in most parts of the country;
- the need for more residential facilities and half-way houses;
- the need to reduce long waiting lists to access services;
- the need for rehabilitation policies, in order that drug users would not be maintained on methadone indefinitely;
- the need for after care in terms of access to employment and appropriate housing.

An amended National Drugs Strategy sought to reduce these identified gaps. In particular, a fifth and new pillar, 'Rehabilitation', was included. Overall, with just over one year left to run, the National Drugs Strategy has failed in many respects.

- Waiting lists for methadone treatment vary from location to location, but a two-year waiting list for some categories of heroin users (for example, homeless people) exists.
- Despite the emphasis in the Mid-term Review on increased residential detox services, less than 30 such beds are available. Given the scale of known drug abuse, this is a lamentably inadequate level of provision. No new residential places have come on stream since the Mid-term Review.
- Even though the Mid-term Review emphasised the importance of after care accommodation, it is not clear if any accommodation specifically for this purpose is available, other than the two houses run by the Peter McVerry Trust and one house provided by Merchant's Quay Ireland, all of which were up and running prior to the Review.
- The introduction of 'Rehabilitation' as a fifth 'pillar' of the National Drugs Strategy has not resulted in any new rehabilitation services coming on stream.
- The 'Supply Reduction' pillar of the Drugs Strategy has failed miserably, as evidenced by the increasing supply of drugs, their accessibility now in every city and town in Ireland, the increasingly widespread use of cocaine and the increasing incidence of poly-drug use among drug users.

### Need for Additional Services

There clearly needs to be increased provision in all four categories of drug services – detox; treatment; rehabilitation, and after care. Common sense – not to mention common humanity – would demand that services should be sufficient to allow any user who wants to obtain treatment for their drug problem to do so without undue delay.

There is urgent need also to ensure co-ordination and cohesion among services: too often gaps can occur so that a person who has completed one stage in the process of recovery is unable to access a service at the next stage, with the result that he or she relapses and the progress achieved is undone. Since drug abuse is no longer confined to major cities, the full range of services needs to be accessible to people living in all parts of the country.

A majority of people imprisoned in this country are drug-users: leaving aside the question of whether we should be using imprisonment to the extent we now do, it seems obvious that we should at least ensure that while people are incarcerated they are given every opportunity and encouragement to engage in treatment. Some services are currently available, but on nowhere near the scale that is needed.

In addition to services to deal with misuse, there is need for further development of prevention services: education in schools about drug misuse is still patchily provided and frequently is not made available early enough. Early intervention programmes that could address drug use soon after it begins and before it causes serious problems are important but are completely underdeveloped in this country.

### Need for an Honest Debate

Beyond these obvious measures, however, some more radical questions need to be asked about our approach to dealing with drug abuse. Much of the public debate about illegal drugs takes place in either a moral context ('Drugs are bad, therefore we must clearly be seen to condemn them') or an emotional context, based on fear. A debate based solely on moral and/or emotional arguments leads to the exclusion of serious consideration of alternative approaches to dealing with the problem of illegal drugs. This stifling of debate allows politicians to exploit the drugs issue for their own political purposes. Politicians will compete with each other to convince the public that they are tougher on drugs and consequently their policies will make society safer, despite the wealth of evidence which suggests that the exact opposite is happening, under our very eyes.

We need to address drug issues, not by demonising illegal drugs and drug users, or by scare-mongering, but examining the evidence-based outcomes from around the world – that is to say, what policies can actually reduce the harm done to individuals, families and society by illegal drug use?

A starting point might be for us as a society to agree that a priority of every intervention by the criminal justice system should be to direct users, through encouragement and incentives, towards treatment – and then to ensure that the full range of treatment facilities is provided. In Portugal, for example, users of illegal drugs caught by the police are no longer charged and brought to court but are referred to a local 'Commission for the Dissuasion of Drug Use', made up of social workers, medical and legal professionals, which decides on a sanction and recommends appropriate treatment or education.

### Conclusion

Some argue that the National Drugs Strategy's focus on illegal drugs blinds us to the fact that the three most widely used drugs in our society are alcohol, tobacco and valium and the extent of health damage and social harm caused by these legally tolerated drugs far exceeds the harm caused by illegal drugs. A National Drugs (or 'Substance Misuse') Strategy, they argue, should classify all drugs, legal and illegal, according to the harm that each causes and then produce policies to reduce these harms. Others argue that to include legal drugs, particularly alcohol, in a National Drugs (or 'Substance Misuse') Strategy, would be to lose our focus on the two most destructive drugs, heroin and cocaine.

What is not in dispute is that current approaches to both legal and illegal drugs are patently not working.

### Notes

1. Department of Health and Children (2004) *Strategic Task Force on Alcohol, Second Report*, Dublin: Stationery Office, p. 12.
2. *Attitudes to Alcohol*, Special Eurobarometer, 272b/Wave 66.2 (Fieldwork October 200) Brussels: European Commission, March 2007.
3. Mats Ramstedt and Ann Hope (2002) 'Summary of Irish Drinking Habits of 2002: Drinking and Drinking-Related Harm in a European Comparative Perspective', in *Strategic Task Force on Alcohol, Second Report*, Annex 4, pp. 50–55.
4. In 2003, Irish sixteen year old girls had a higher prevalence of regular alcohol use (39 per cent) than the equivalent age group in any of the other 34 countries surveyed. Bjöon Hibell et al (2004) *The ESPAD Report, 2003*, Stockholm: The Swedish Council for Information on Alcohol and Other Drugs and The Pompidou Group at the Council of Europe.
5. Mats Ramstedt and Ann Hope (2002) *op. cit.*, p. 55.
6. *Strategic Task Force on Alcohol Second Report*, p. 20.
7. Department of Health (1996) *National Alcohol Policy*, Dublin: Stationery Office, p. 26.
8. For example, *The National Health Promotion Strategy, 2000–2005* (published 2000); *The National Children's Strategy* (2000); *Quality and Fairness: Health Strategy* (2001).
9. This change occurred following representations by the drinks industry. See *The Irish Times*, 12 December 2005.
10. Government of Ireland (2006) *Towards 2016: Ten-Year Framework for Social Partnership Agreement 2006–2015*, Dublin: Stationery Office.
11. See, for example, the survey findings published in: Alcohol Action Ireland (2006) *Alcohol in Ireland: Time for Action – A Survey of Irish Attitudes*, Dublin: Alcohol Action Ireland.
12. For example, Joint Committee on Health and Children (2004) *Report on Alcohol Misuse by Young People*, Dublin: Stationery Office; Oireachtas Joint Committee on Arts, Sport, Tourism, Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, *The Inclusion of Alcohol in a National Substance Misuse Strategy*, July 2006; *The Relationship between Alcohol Misuse and the Drinks Industry Sponsorship of Sporting Activities*, March 2007.
13. *The Relationship between Alcohol Misuse and the Drinks Industry Sponsorship of Sporting Activities*, p. 5.
14. In its July 2006 report, *The Inclusion of Alcohol in a National Substance Misuse Strategy*, the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Arts, Sport, Tourism, Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs unanimously recommended 'that alcohol should be included in a new national substance misuse strategy', p. 7.

# Climate Change

## Introduction

If the Dáil we elect at the forthcoming General Election lasts a full term, it will oversee the whole five-year period of Ireland's commitment under the Kyoto Protocol (2008–2012). It will also cover the period during which the international negotiations to agree new and more challenging commitments to reduce our climate-changing pollution will be conducted.

The story of the Irish public policy response to climate change is one of bad news and good news. The bad news is that our record so far is one of failure. The good news includes the fact that we have been warned in sufficient time to make a difference, the issue is now on the public agenda as never before, and the ideas we need to protect and enhance our quality of life are there, ready and waiting to be implemented. But the window of opportunity is closing: we have no more time to waste.

The science is clear: we have ten years to start bringing down global emissions if we are to stop climate change running out of control. The economics are clear: the Stern report concluded it is up to twenty times cheaper to prevent runaway climate change than it is to try cope with its impacts. All we need is the political will to act. And, in the words of Al Gore, political will is a renewable resource, particularly in an election year.

## Polluting Ireland

First, the bad news. Among rich countries, Ireland is the fifth most climate-polluting country per person. If everyone on Earth polluted as profligately as the Irish we would need the resources of three planets to survive. Ireland's commitment under Kyoto is to limit the growth of our greenhouse gas emissions to 13 per cent above 1990 levels by 2012. Ten years ago, the ESRI predicted that if we continued as we were

## Realities of Climate Change

*There is now unequivocal evidence of global warming and a 90 per cent level of confidence that human activities – namely, the loading of greenhouse gases on the atmosphere to concentrations not experienced for over 650,000 years – are the drivers of recent climate changes, according to almost all the world's leading atmospheric scientists.<sup>1</sup> Among the more significant findings on the quickening pace of climate change are the following:<sup>2</sup>*

- Acceleration in the rate of sea-level rise, melting of glaciers, and reductions in snow cover are now apparent. Summer sea ice extent is reducing by 7.4 per cent per decade and may well disappear in the Arctic by mid-century with serious consequences for ecosystems dependent on it.
- In the Northern Hemisphere, the second half of the twentieth century was the warmest in at least the last 1,300 years. Worldwide, temperature extremes have increased significantly, with oceans having warmed to a depth of 3 km.
- Hundreds of millions of people in the densely populated low-lying regions of the developing world will become more vulnerable to flooding and storms.
- While water availability is likely to increase in high latitude areas, and in some parts of the wet tropics, many of the currently water-stressed areas of Africa are likely to become more drought-prone, seriously compromising their development potential.
- While food production may increase globally in the medium term due to the fertilising effect of higher CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations, once temperature increases exceed about 3°C, yields are likely to start declining. In dry parts of Africa this will commence sooner, resulting in widespread hunger during drought.
- Adverse health effects will be apparent from heat waves, storms, floods, fire and drought as well as increasing water and tropical diseases. These will more than counterbalance any improvements due to warmer winters in high latitudes.
- 20–30 per cent of plant and animal species will face risk of extinction if global temperature increases above pre-industrial levels, that is, go beyond 2°C.
- Precipitation increases in many temperate regions are now occurring, while droughts have become more frequent and more intense in many parts of the tropics.



emissions would rise by 28 per cent by 2010. It was not surprising, therefore, that the *National Climate Change Strategy*, issued by the Government in 2000, stated that: 'business-as-usual is not an option'. But 'business-as-usual' is precisely what we got. The latest Government figures show that climate pollution has risen by 25 per cent, almost twice Ireland's Kyoto target, and exactly in line with the ESRI estimate of what would happen if we failed to take action.

Ireland's response so far to the threat of climate change can be characterised as 'never missing an opportunity to miss an opportunity'. The Government agreed to the 13 per cent Kyoto target on foot of independent expert advice on how it could be achieved while sustaining our economic development. This 1998 international consultancy report recommended a carbon tax to put a price on pollution, switching Moneypoint Power Station from dirty coal to cleaner gas, phasing out peat-fired power stations, tightening the building regulations to make homes much less wasteful of energy, and linking VRT and motor taxation to the amount of pollution a vehicle produces. So far, none of these policies has been implemented.

What explains this inaction? Quite possibly our political leaders have felt that we, the people, were busy enjoying Ireland's new-found prosperity and to disturb us with talk of storm clouds on the horizon would not bring political rewards. Better to let sleeping dogs lie. More generally, this is an explanation for the keep-the-good-times-rolling feel of the 2002 General Election. But if the last five years have taught us anything it is that prosperity alone does not solve everything. We know prosperity alone doesn't solve health care, child care, or elder care. And now we are finding that it doesn't solve 'planet care'. Indeed, it makes some things worse. Just think of the impact of longer commutes and increasing gridlock on family and community life. It is no coincidence that the fastest growing source of Ireland's climate pollution is carbon emissions from road transport, which have risen by 160 per cent since 1990.

### **Still Time to Act**

The good news is that we still have time to rise to the challenge presented by the climate crisis. Like all crises, it is an opportunity as well as a threat.

*An economic opportunity:* Ireland is rich in the natural resources of the new low-carbon era – wind, wave, tide, and biomass. Even solar energy has significant potential in this country. Investment and R&D will pay dividends for private entrepreneurs and public policy. In addition, cutting energy waste will save money in a time of rising fuel prices and declining oil production.

*A social opportunity:* Better planning, housing and public transport solutions bring multiple benefits. The consequent reduction in our car dependency, which is among the highest in the world, would not only reduce pollution and improve the quality of life for cash-rich, time-poor commuters, but it would also reduce inequality and promote social inclusion in a society where a quarter of all households do not own a car.

*A political opportunity:* The political leaders who show the vision to understand and respond to the crisis will be rewarded and remembered – as we remember those who struggled a hundred years ago, whether for female suffrage or national independence; as we remember Whitaker and Lemass for transforming the economic outlook fifty years ago; as we remember those who put aside political and sectoral interests to respond to Ireland's economic crisis twenty years ago.

Indeed the parallels with 1987 are striking. In 1987, after a decade of profligacy, procrastination and tinkering, Ireland's national debt stood at 125 per cent of GNP. Today, our climate pollution stands at 125 per cent of 1990 levels, the baseline for international comparisons. In 1987, cross-party consensus and a new model of social partnership were required to take the tough decisions needed to pull Ireland out of that crisis. Those decisions were not without costs – costs which could and should have been spread more fairly. But nobody now doubts the benefits of the transformation those policies brought about. Indeed, everyone now claims a share of the credit for the resulting prosperity. And our national debt today stands at just 28 per cent of GNP.

But now our reckless pollution is incurring a new national debt. Buying pollution permits overseas, which is the Government's principal response to Kyoto, is a form of foreign borrowing. It merely puts off the day when we have to reduce our pollution at home. As China, India and the rest of the developing world grow their economies in order to lift their people out of poverty they will pollute more, until they are using their fair share of the atmosphere's absorptive capacity. Then they will have no spare permits to sell to us and by then we must not be polluting any more than our fair share. Our politicians know this. Indeed, they have put a figure on it: at the EU Summit in March 2007 they agreed that Europe and other rich developed countries will have to cut climate pollution by 60 to 80 per cent by 2050.

### **The Sooner the Better**

The kind of transformation required cannot happen overnight, and it certainly cannot be achieved at the

last minute. There are no quick-fixes or short-cuts to climate security. The notion that technology alone can 'fix' climate change is not realistic. There is a need to move from the anthropocentric idea that human beings are the centre of the universe and the subduers of the earth, to an ideology that values and cherishes the environment. Climate is the latest facet of nature to show vulnerability to human action. Now, confronted by what Sir David King has labelled 'the biggest challenge our civilisation has ever had to face up to', it is clear that only a reorientation of how we view nature offers a viable solution to the problem of global climate change.

Just as in the case of the treatment for many diseases, the sooner we do something about climate change, the easier it will be and the greater our chances of success. The longer we leave it the more traumatic it will be and the more difficult it will be to stop climate change running out of control. The climate crisis and oil peak mean change is coming whether we welcome it or not. Our choice is what kind of change and whether we manage it ourselves by making the shift to sustainability in a planned step-by-step way, starting now, or whether we wait and let change happen to us by way of shocks, disruption and upheaval down the line.

We know that long-term targets present difficulties for politicians. This is one of the reasons Ireland is failing to meet its Kyoto commitment. The Kyoto target was agreed in 1997 but only falls due in 2008–2012. That was too far over the horizon, given that political life is dominated by the twenty-four hour news cycle and the five-year electoral cycle. When Ireland signed the Kyoto agreement in 1997, the political parties which made up the Government of that time hardly expected to be still in power in 2007, never mind to be strong contenders for a return to office and therefore in charge for the full period covered by Kyoto. The new targets set by the EU are for 2050 but the tough decisions need to be made *now*.

### **An Annual Carbon Budget**

If we are to have any hope of success, we need to shorten the gap between action – or inaction – and accountability. Organisations such as Friends of the Earth are now proposing a Climate Protection Act which would provide for 3 per cent year-on-year reductions in greenhouse gas emissions.

Enshrining the long-term targets in law, and requiring that an annual 'carbon budget' be presented to the Dáil alongside the existing fiscal budget, would mean that the struggle against climate change would become part of the mainstream of the political system. Any pollution overshoot would be expected to evoke

immediate corrective measures – just as it can be expected that signs of inflation will give rise to a change in interest rates and rising public debt result in adjustments to public spending.

This approach is already emerging as international best practice. California has enshrined in law an 80 per cent reduction by 2050, with an interim target for 2020. Three bills to provide for similar legislation are now being proposed in the US Senate, including one that is co-sponsored by John McCain and Barack Obama, leading Republican and Democratic contenders for the Presidency. Now, the UK Government has published a bill with five-year targets and carbon budgets, while the Conservative and Liberal Democrat opposition parties support annual targets.

### **Conclusion**

Today, climate and energy cast a shadow over public life in Ireland in the same way that unemployment and emigration did twenty years ago. We need a similar sea-change now to the one we engineered at that time. Then, the 'Tallaght Strategy' and social partnership provided a framework for national recovery. Today, a climate law can provide the framework for pollution reduction. It will give an impetus for private enterprise and public policy innovation to respond to the challenges and grasp the opportunities on the pathway to a low-carbon future. And everyone will be able to claim a share of the credit for the resulting sustainability.

### **Notes**

1. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (2007) *Climate Change 2007: The Physical Science Basis*, Contribution of Working Group I to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
2. These facts are extrapolated from the IPCC Fourth Assessment Report, which synthesised research output from across the peer-reviewed literature over the past seven years. (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2007) *Climate Change 2007: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability*, Contribution of Working Group II to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.)

# Crime and Prisons

## **Tough on Crime or Tough on Criminals?**

While it may be difficult to predict the outcome of the forthcoming General Election, it is somewhat easier to make accurate predictions about the issues that will surface as the election campaign unfolds. Crime will almost certainly feature prominently and we can safely expect that the political parties will compete with one another to prove to the voters that it is they who will be the toughest on crime.

Yet in truth there is little reason to believe that any party claiming to be tough on crime is serious. If previous experience is anything to go by, the proposals in relation to crime will almost certainly *not* include the kinds of policies that evidence-based research tells us would actually reduce the incidence of crime. Instead, the political parties will put forward proposals that are framed to appear tough on crime when in reality they are only *tough on criminals*. But being *tough on crime* is an entirely different matter. In fact, being tough on criminals can often mean being soft on crime.

## **Breaking the Cycle of Illogical Policy Formulation**

Most strategies favoured by politicians seeking votes are actually either ineffective or counterproductive in the effort to control crime. Since they do not address the causes of offender behaviour, they invariably fail, and so new measures towards 'control' are constantly invoked. In the last ten years, we have seen more power and resources for the Gardaí (a doubling of resources to €1.25 billion), tougher legislation, restrictions on the right to bail, mandatory sentences, legislation to reduce the rights of the offender, and increased prison places. Regrettably, each new measure has had little effect on the behaviour it was intended to control, and so there are new calls and new promises for yet further control measures. For example, the Public Order Act, 1994 was introduced to deal with behaviour in public places which caused offence and annoyance to members of the public. It didn't achieve the aim of making our streets safer, so the Public Order Act 2003 was introduced. That didn't work either, so in 2007 legislation providing for Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) became operative, despite much evidence that such measures have had limited effect in other jurisdictions.

## **Prison Doesn't Work**

Characteristic of the Irish policy response to crime is an enthusiasm for rushing ahead with measures without considering the available evidence on the likely

outcomes and cost-effectiveness of such proposals. In short, policy is not evidence-led. Furthermore, there appears to be an unwillingness to abandon policy directions when these are manifestly not working. The central example of this tendency working itself out is the continuing emphasis on choosing, from among the range of possible responses, prison as the penalty for crime. Between 1996 and 2006, the prison population increased by 1,000. For many years, studies and anecdotal evidence have suggested that prison does not work. In December 2006, the report of the first large-scale study in Ireland on released prisoners was published by the Institute of Criminology, UCD. Based on a survey of almost 20,000 people released from prison, the study revealed that more than one in four was back behind bars within twelve months, and almost half within four years.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the evidence of prison's limited value in addressing crime, the deeply-rooted bias in favour of imprisonment continues – even in the face of the colossal €90,900 annual cost of keeping a person in custody. The scale of the distortion in the response to crime can be seen in the expenditure on prisons relative to other options. To take just one example: in 2003, the total budget for the Probation Service was €40 million; the budget for prison officers' overtime was €60 million. On their stretched budget, the Probation Service staff, numbering around 400, supervise about 6,000 offenders. In comparison, 3,200 Prison Service personnel are employed to oversee the 3,200 prisoners held at any one time (or the approximately 9,000 people held in prison over the course of a year).<sup>2</sup>

Contrary to public opinion, prison is not reserved for the most serious or violent offenders. In fact, 85 per cent of those sent to prison in 2005 were convicted of non-violent offences; 39 per cent of those incarcerated were imprisoned for three months or less. In spite of the enormous cost of imprisonment and the evidence that it is of limited effect, current policy proposals include expanding the number of prison places by around 1,000, bringing the total close to 4,500. Yet few questions have been asked about the need for these extra places. Moreover, few questions have been asked about the appropriateness or desirability of using prisons to detain up to 900 people annually as part of administering immigration controls.

But perhaps the central question that politicians and the public need to ask is: 'What do we want prisoners to be like when they leave prison?' Most reasonable answers to this question will cluster around a view that people ought to leave prison less likely to commit crime than they were when they entered prison. But beyond this objective, we need to question if sending people to prison is the correct course of action in the first place. In considering the use of custodial punishment, we need to give much more weight to the likelihood that the prison system will not be best placed to address the problems in the offender's life that contribute to a criminal lifestyle. Perhaps we need to broaden the question and ask: 'What do we want offenders to be like after they come into contact with the criminal justice system?' If the answer here is also that they be less likely to commit crime, then we need to look at how the system takes account of the personal and social characteristics of offenders. In short, the punishment needs not only to fit the crime but to fit the criminal.

### **Underlying Problems – Towards More Effective Solutions**

Consider that most offenders are young males, addicted to drugs, with little or no record of employment, and low levels of literacy, that most have had traumatic childhoods, and that many are homeless. Consider also that most of the crime they commit (80 per cent) is against property – either burglary or thefts – and that most of this is linked to drug addiction.

If offending is linked to such a complex array of problems, how best are these problems addressed? Up to 80 per cent of those committed to prison have enduring addiction problems, with most being users of illegal drugs. A number of studies have shown that among the benefits of methadone treatment in the community is a substantial reduction in criminality. Yet as another article in this issue of *Working Notes* makes clear, one of the major deficiencies in our response to the drugs problem is the length of waiting times for methadone treatment.

Adequate attention to the needs of drug addicts in the community could substantially reduce crime and lessen the need for expensive prison places. For instance, during the two years which some drug users have to wait to get onto a methadone treatment programme, a person could conceivably commit almost 1,500 crimes – if we calculate that he or she is likely to commit, on average, two crimes per day to feed their habit. Given that there were 14,500 known heroin users in 2002 and that it is estimated that up to 40 per cent of users are not receiving treatment, in some part due to insufficient resources, that adds up to a lot of crime, much of it avoidable.

It is not surprising that Mountjoy Prison and Cloverhill Prison are the biggest drug treatment centres in Ireland – and for some the quickest route into treatment! Outside Dublin, in many areas there are no treatment services available and drug users caught robbing to feed their habit automatically go to jail (at a cost considerably in excess of treatment).

There is also a need to question the impact that punitive measures will have on curbing the incidence of crimes involving violence resulting in serious injury and death – crimes which have increased in recent years. Understandably, such crimes, especially murder and manslaughter, give rise to great public concern. Yet longer imprisonment is unlikely in itself to act as a deterrent, halting or reversing the growing incidence of these crimes. To have any hope of doing so we need to address broader social factors and the patterns of behaviour linked to violence.

For instance, there is considerable evidence to suggest that the increase in public disorder and violence is linked to high levels of consumption of alcohol in pubs, nightclubs and homes, with the consequence that interpersonal confrontations flare into assaults. Moreover, a Department of Justice study has shown that in about half of homicide cases, the victim, or perpetrator or both were intoxicated. More attention therefore to policies that control the abuse of alcohol – and a serious effort to effectively implement such policies – might be far more effective in reducing crime and promoting public safety than the supposed deterrent effect of imprisonment.

### **Putting Prison in its Place – The Choice We Face**

It is not the case that there is no role for imprisonment but its role needs to be firmly located among an array of possible responses, all of which should have the objective of moving offenders away from crime. These responses need to be focused on assisting the offender address the issues underlying his or her offending behaviour, such as addiction, effects of trauma, poor education, mental ill-health and lack of suitable accommodation.

Where imprisonment is the appropriate punishment, prisons must have the facilities and services to try to deal with these underlying issues. In Ireland, there are just a few models of how this can be done – the physical layout of the Dóchas Centre (Women's Prison) and the rehabilitative regime in the Training Unit at Mountjoy show the type of facilities and services that are needed. However, as successive reports, such as those of the Inspector of Prisons and the Prison Chaplains, make clear, most of our prisons are ill-equipped in terms of physical environment, layout, and rehabilitative regimes and resources to

take on the task of addressing the multiple problems that prisoners may have.<sup>3</sup> In fact, there is some evidence to suggest that the experience of prison compounds these difficulties.

Perhaps the key choice to be made in Irish policy in relation to crime is whether to maintain the pivotal role of prison or to develop an extensive range of community responses and penalties. Instead of speaking of ‘alternatives to imprisonment’, we might look to *prison* becoming the alternative form of punishment, used only for the most serious of crimes or, in the case of less serious crime, only after all the other possible options had been tried and had failed.

There are a number of key factors which suggest that there may now be a more favourable context for choosing this different approach.

Firstly, while punitive rhetoric and ‘sound bite’ solutions feature regularly in public debate on crime, especially at election time, punitive approaches do not appear to be particularly deeply ingrained in our social or political culture. Most politicians have supported the modest developments that seek to expand the range of non-custodial options for dealing with crime – such as the Drugs Court, exploring the potential of Restorative Justice and various initiatives to divert young offenders away from prison.

Secondly, there is also evidence that these policies find considerable support among the public. Almost a decade ago, following extensive consultation, the Report of the National Crime Forum noted that: ‘The public is not calling for draconian action’.<sup>4</sup> More recently, in April 2007, the findings from a nationwide survey commissioned by the Irish Penal Reform Trust showed that among the people questioned:

- 81 per cent believe that offenders who have a drug addiction should be placed in drug recovery programmes instead of serving a prison sentence;
- 91 per cent believe that offenders with mental illness should be treated in a mental health facility instead of being sent to prison;
- 74 per cent are in favour of using alternatives to prison when dealing with young offenders;
- 54 per cent disagree with the proposition that: ‘increasing prison numbers will reduce crime’.

When asked which initiative they would most like to see implemented to tackle crime, given a budget of €10 million, only 5 per cent chose ‘building additional prison places’ as their preferred response.<sup>5</sup>

The combination of political and public support for the further development of non-custodial sanctions and

responses to crime offers the potential to reassess the traditional emphasis on imprisonment and may allow adoption of more enlightened and potentially more effective approaches.

If we are to relocate the place of imprisonment within our responses to crime, a good starting point would be a thorough reassessment of the plans to relocate Mountjoy Prison to a new super-prison complex at Thornton Hall, outside Dublin. Such a reassessment must include reviewing the location, size and design of this proposed development.

Few dispute the need to replace unacceptable and outdated prison buildings such as Cork Prison and the main prison at Mountjoy. Provision of new prison accommodation is, in many cases, long overdue. However, it is important that the proposed programme of prison building should be seen as an opportunity to lower rather than increase the overall number of prison places. In the future, we all might be grateful if the next Government reduced our dependence on prison as a response crime.

**Notes**

1. *A Study of Offender Recidivism in Ireland*. This three-year project began in October 2003 and was funded by a grant from the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences. It involved collaboration between criminologists at University College Dublin, the University of Missouri–St Louis and Cambridge University. It was widely reported in the media in December 2006; see, for example, *The Irish Times*, 6 December 2006.
2. See *Irish Prison Service Report 2005*. (Available [www.irishprisons.ie](http://www.irishprisons.ie)); *The Probation Service Annual Report 2005*. (Available [www.probation.ie](http://www.probation.ie)).
3. Annual reports of the Inspector of Prisons can be downloaded from [www.justice.ie](http://www.justice.ie)
4. *National Crime Forum Report* (1998) Dublin: Institute of Public Administration.
5. The findings of this survey are available on the website of the Irish Penal Reform Trust. ([www.iprt.ie](http://www.iprt.ie))

# Migration

## Introduction

In its report, *Migration in an Interconnected World*, the Global Commission on International Migration noted:

*International migration has risen to the top of the global policy agenda. As the scale, scope and complexity of the issue has grown, states and other stakeholders have become aware of the challenges and opportunities presented by international migration.*<sup>1</sup>

Ireland has well and truly shared in this international experience – at first, and for centuries, as a country of emigration and, more recently and at a quite rapid pace, as a country of immigration.

Being relatively recent and rapid, the magnitude of Ireland's new experience of migration is well publicised even if, at times, somewhat exaggerated. However, the diverse forms which migration takes are, on the whole, rarely acknowledged, much less understood. Even the broad categories, *asylum* and *immigration*, so critical when it comes to understanding the relevant rights and responsibilities arising under each, are often merged.

## Asylum

In Ireland, with the increase in numbers of people arriving for work or study, there is a growing tendency not to give due recognition to those who, *albeit* in decreasing numbers, come here to seek asylum. Even more serious than this is the not uncommon relegation of people seeking asylum to the category of irregular – so-called 'illegal' – immigrant. A clear and comprehensive understanding of the *right to seek asylum* is a cornerstone of any discussion of migration.

As a signatory to the Geneva Convention on Refugees (1951) and the New York Protocol (1967), Ireland has accepted clearly-defined international legal obligations towards people seeking asylum. Central to this commitment is an undertaking to admit to the country any person who arrives at the borders and asks for asylum. As the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has pointed out, for a person to have the right to be admitted to a state that is party to the Geneva Convention and facilitated in making an application for asylum, it is sufficient that she or he simply intimates their request, without necessarily being able to express it in clear or accurate words. Statistics from the Garda National

Immigration Bureau show that, in 2004, some 10 per cent of the 4,844 people refused permission to enter this country were categorised as people seeking asylum. That this breach of obligations is not confined to Ireland is obvious from the recent call by a range of non-governmental organisations to European States to develop 'a regime of border controls that is ...in compliance with these States' international obligations'.<sup>2</sup>

Once in the State, persons seeking asylum have a right to adequate legal and interpretative supports while completing the initial application form and during all the further stages of the asylum process with which they have to engage before a decision is reached on their application. During this process, regardless of its duration, applicants have the right to be provided with accommodation, food and other basic necessities. To meet this requirement, Ireland has put in place a system of 'Direct Provision'.<sup>3</sup> From many viewpoints, this is an unsatisfactory arrangement since, in reality, the vast majority of people in this situation would much prefer to support themselves – as they have been accustomed to doing – but cannot, because, unlike most other EU countries, a Government regulation here prohibits them from taking up employment.

Of critical importance, but generally not understood, is the fact that those who apply for asylum are legally in the country while their case is being examined and up to and until a decision is made on their application – when either the person is recognised as a refugee (or given *leave to remain* in the State) or, in the event of their application being unsuccessful, must depart 'voluntarily' or be removed from the State.

While there was a brief but sharp rise in the numbers of new asylum applications in the first years of the new millennium, figures for each of the past two years, 2005 and 2006, are just over 4,300. Given that some 10 to 13 per cent of applicants are eventually recognised as refugees, and with an annual average over the past seven years of 110 people being granted leave to remain in the country, we get a picture of the limited scale of 'successful' asylum applications in Ireland. For the most part, neither public opinion, nor media reporting nor information from official sources accurately reflects this picture.

Neither is it generally realised that upwards of 85 per

cent of refugees in the developing world find a safe haven in neighbouring countries, putting huge strains on these countries' already limited resources. Of the remainder who apply for asylum in the industrialised world, only 1.5 per cent come to Ireland.<sup>4</sup> While the overall number of 'people of concern' to UNHCR has remained more or less stable in recent years, the proportion of international refugees has decreased and that of people displaced within the borders of their own countries has increased. Few voices are heard asking why this change has occurred. Are there not serious humanitarian and moral questions to be asked about a fortress mentality in the EU and beyond?

### Migrant Workers

Ireland's unprecedented and sustained economic growth since the early 1990s has resulted in a dramatic increase in employment opportunities and a continuous demand for migrant workers to fill labour and skills shortages across a range of occupations.

Between the 2002 Census and the 2006 Census, the number of foreign nationals normally resident in the country increased from 224,000 to 420,000 (a rise of 87 per cent), so that foreign nationals now represent some 10 per cent of Ireland's population.<sup>5</sup>

Relatively speaking, nationals of the European Economic Area (EEA)<sup>6</sup> are the people for whom it is easiest to come to Ireland. Immigrants from those EEA countries with access not only to the State but also to the labour market have a distinct advantage. Because no transparent, sustainable, rights-based, coherent immigration and employment policies, procedures and practices are in place, people who are from outside the EEA, and therefore require one or other type of permit to live and/or to work in Ireland, are faced with an administrative maze. Among the serious obstacles to putting in place comprehensive and just systems is the lack of detailed statistics. While some global figures are available, basic information such as, for example, the number of foreign nationals from the various countries of the EEA working and residing in Ireland is unknown.

A further factor militating against the formulation of a cohesive plan is the assignment of responsibility for immigration in its different aspects to a range of government departments. With no one body having a coordinating role, what results is a range of measures which, for the most part, are unclear, disjointed and inconsistent. As a consequence, potential immigrants are left confused and frustrated by a system for which, without counting the human cost, they pay dearly in terms of both time and money. It is likely that, if not in the short-term, at least in the

medium to long-term, there will be a cost to Ireland also that is both material and human.

The Global Commission on International Migration pointed out: 'In every part of the world there is now an understanding that the economic, social and cultural benefits of international migration must be more effectively realised ...'.<sup>7</sup>

While the *economic benefits* are, by far, those most effectively realised in countries of in-migration, the inadequacies of this uni-dimensional focus are becoming much more evident and much less easy to ignore. Even Ireland, in this context a relatively new player on the world stage, is slowly and somewhat reluctantly coming to recognise that when we look for workers it is human beings who come.<sup>8</sup> The human person who comes to fill a job vacancy is not just a work-unit – he or she is a person whose needs are not just economic but also social, political, spiritual and psychological. He or she is a member of a family, an immediate and extended family, and belongs to various social networks, is rooted in a culture and a tradition, is a person with ties to home and homeland.

Over the past decade, there have been alarming examples of how employers in Ireland have exploited migrant workers' vulnerability – which can arise because of their position of being here on a work permit, or because they lack a knowledge of the language and of their rights and entitlements. This country faces a continuing challenge to ensure that legislation governing migrants' rights in the workplace – for example, in relation to pay, working conditions and holiday entitlements – are effectively monitored and enforced.

Ireland has been slow also to respond to the reality that many migrant workers do not see their presence here as a short interval during which they earn money to send home, but rather see themselves having a long-term future in this country and wish to be joined by family members. The recognition of the right to family reunification and the need to ensure that processes to enable it are fair and transparent, as well as procedurally prompt and efficient, are critical issues of justice for a country that has come to depend on migrant workers for its continued economic development.

Increasingly, there is a realisation that participation of immigrants and their families in all aspects of life in Ireland must be promoted and enabled. Here, a one-size-fits-all approach is not adequate. To guard, insofar as possible, against discrimination, racism and exclusion, the various societal structures, institutions and services must be re-imagined, re-designed and

resourced in creative ways which respond to the new heterogeneity that characterises Ireland's population today. Above all, if integration is to be a two-way,<sup>9</sup> dynamic, positive and constructive process, there must be a guiding vision. This vision can be realised only if there are just and transparent policies and procedures in place, with accompanying resources, wholehearted political will and committed leadership to ensure their implementation. All concerned – long-time resident and newcomer alike – must be enabled to be involved, to participate and to contribute to the creation of a society in which the full spectrum of human rights of all persons – persons of great diversity but equal dignity – are respected and are vindicated.

### Policy Priorities

With international migration, its challenges and its opportunities, at the top of the global policy agenda, which are the most urgent and important issues to be addressed if Ireland is to have asylum and immigration policies which are rights-based and in accordance with our international legal obligations? Priorities must include:

- Upholding, in full compliance with Ireland's obligations under the Geneva Convention, the right to seek asylum, in the face of the widespread erosion, nationally and internationally, of many aspects of this right.
- Changing the regulation which prohibits people seeking asylum from taking up employment at any stage in the asylum process.
- Regularising the status of people who have been in the asylum system for two years or more without receiving a decision on their application.
- Revising the system for collection of data on migration flows – in a format which would inform policymaking and service provision.
- Signing and ratifying the *UN Convention on the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families*.
- Abolishing the Habitual Residency Condition for entitlement to Child Benefit and ensuring that there is an adequate and flexible safety net for migrant workers who find themselves out of work.
- Following up the recent signing of the *Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings* with ratification and putting in place appropriate legislation and services in this area.
- Appointing a Minister of State to have special responsibility for migration and establishing a Government Office to deal in a unified, coherent and consistent way with all aspects of migration policy, procedures and practice.
- Developing a comprehensive policy on integration, founded on a defined set of core values and setting

out the rights and responsibilities of Irish people and of people who have come here as migrants in the creation of a truly intercultural Ireland.

### Conclusion

The many difficulties inherent in creating just and appropriate policies and services in the areas of migration and integration should not blind us to the opportunities presented by the evolution of a more diverse and intercultural Ireland. President Mary McAleese has reminded us of the rich possibilities that inward migration brings:

*Today's emigrants to Ireland whether they come from Poland or Nigeria, China or Latvia are helping to replenish the wells from which tomorrow's Ireland will draw its inspiration for the arts, politics, commercial and social entrepreneurship, community building, cuisine, education and much more. Our human links of family and friendship, with parts of the world from which we were historically and geographically removed, are being strengthened day by day, helping us to build global networks of shared memories, shared children, common endeavour and mutual understanding, things which build up rather than diminish our world.*<sup>10</sup>

### Notes

1. Global Commission on International Migration (2005) *Migration in an Interconnected World: New Directions for Action*, Geneva: Global Commission on International Migration, p. vii. The Global Commission (2003–2005) was made up of nineteen members from all over the world and included Mrs Mary Robinson, former President of Ireland. ([www.gcim.org](http://www.gcim.org))
2. Address of ECRE Information Officer to UNHCR Executive/Standing Committee, 6–9 March 2007. (Available: [www.unhcr.org/excom](http://www.unhcr.org/excom))
3. Under 'Direct Provision', people seeking asylum are assigned to a hostel where food and accommodation are provided, with a weekly cash allowance (unchanged since introduced in 2001) of €19.10 per adult and € 9.60 per child. Many regulations attach to residence in such hostels and standards vary greatly between hostels.
4. For additional statistics, see 'Asylum Levels and Trends in Industrialised Countries, 2006', on the UNHCR website at [www.unhcr.org](http://www.unhcr.org).
5. Central Statistics Office (2007) *Census 2006: Principal Demographic Results*, Dublin: Stationery Office, p. 25.
6. Countries of the European Union, plus Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein.
7. *Migration in an Interconnected World*, Preface #1, p. vii.
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# Educational Disadvantage

## Introduction

If you are a child or young person attending school in a disadvantaged area of Dublin, there is a 30 per cent chance that you will leave primary school with a serious literacy problem;<sup>1</sup> only a 50:50 chance that you will sit your Leaving Certificate,<sup>2</sup> and a 90 per cent probability that you will not go to college.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, if you are a child or young person whose parents are from a professional background and you live in a prosperous part of Dublin, you have only a 10 per cent chance of leaving primary school with a serious literacy problem, you will almost certainly complete your Leaving Certificate and be part of the 86 per cent of young people in your area who go to college.

This snapshot highlights how, in prosperous Ireland, children living in economically and socially deprived communities do not derive the same benefit from the education system as do their peers, and how educational disadvantage is manifested in both *lower participation* and *lower achievement* in the formal education system.

## Participation

Statistics for Leaving Certificate completion rates vary, depending on the source of information. The Department of Education in its *Annual Report* for 2004 puts the completion rate at 85.3 per cent.<sup>4</sup> A national survey by the Central Statistic Office in 2006 showed that 88.1 per cent of young people then aged between 20 and 24 had completed the Leaving Certificate.<sup>5</sup> However, the 2004 *Annual School Leavers' Survey* indicates that 18 per cent leave before completing second level.<sup>6</sup> By any reckoning, the level of non-completion is significant and Ireland ranks only fifteenth in the EU in the percentage of its young people completing second level education.

Of even greater concern than the non-completion of secondary education, is the fact that approximately 4 per cent of children leave school without *any* formal qualification – i.e. without a Junior Certificate. These children are amongst the most vulnerable in our society. A further sub-group of around 1,000 children do not make the transition from primary to secondary school.<sup>7</sup> Beyond the fact that about 10 per cent are from the Travelling Community,<sup>8</sup> little information is available about these children.

*Sustaining Progress*, the Social Partnership Agreement for 2003–2005, included a commitment that, by

2006, 90 per cent of children would finish secondary school.<sup>9</sup> This was not achieved and a revised date for meeting the target – 2013 – has now been set in the *National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007–2016*, which was published in February 2007.<sup>10</sup> Apart from the question of a seven-year extension for reaching the target, it might be asked: does acceptance that 10 per cent of young people will not complete school constitute a sufficient 'vision' for a society which subscribes to the right of all children to education and prides itself on the role that education has played in creating its recent prosperity?

## Effects of Early School Leaving

An extremely high proportion of young people (43 per cent) who leave school early are either unemployed or economically inactive.<sup>11</sup> Later in life, early school leavers have an unemployment rate that is three times higher than that for their age-cohort as a whole.<sup>12</sup> Most children leave school due to 'school factors' – under-achievement, alienation, and poor relationship with the school.<sup>13</sup> High proportions of early leavers have literacy problems and a history of poor attendance. The Education (Welfare) Act, 2000 assigns responsibility to the National Educational Welfare Board for providing continuing education for young people aged sixteen or seventeen who have left school. So far, however, the Board has not had the resources to fulfil this role.

## Absenteeism

Missing school is linked to educational under-achievement and early drop-out from school. Of primary pupils, 10 per cent miss more than 20 days in a school year; for secondary school pupils the figure is significantly higher: 19 per cent. In the most disadvantaged areas, the average missed days for each child is 17 for primary and 21 for secondary pupils. An analysis by the National Education and Welfare Board of the absences of those children who had missed more than 20 school days in 2004/05 showed that one-third had missed more than 40 days.<sup>14</sup>

Since absenteeism in primary school is often an indicator that a pupil will have difficulties later in their schooling, intervention to address the problem is vital. The National Education and Welfare Board, which has statutory responsibility for ensuring that all children receive an education, has indicated that it needs over 300 education welfare officers to cope

with the demand for its services. At present, however, there are just 109 officers. In 2005, 84,000 children were referred to the service, but lack of resources meant that only 8,500 referrals were followed up.<sup>15</sup> The fact that the service was able to respond to only around one in ten of the children referred is alarming and indicates the scale of additional provision that is needed to respond to the problem of absenteeism.

Preventive measures to address early school leaving include the Home, School, Community Liaison Scheme and the School Completion Programme.<sup>16</sup> The Home, School, Community Scheme sees parental involvement in the child's educational development and with the school as of paramount importance and aims to build solid relationships between parents, school and the community.<sup>17</sup> The School Completion Programme links primary schools with local secondary schools to make the transition to secondary more fluid. The Programme also provides for extra-curricular activity and learning supports.

### Literacy

Reading ability and achievement are closely linked. Yet in disadvantaged areas as many as one primary school child in three has severe reading difficulties. This is in sharp contrast to the national average of 10 per cent. Only 3 to 4 per cent of children in these areas are 'very high' achievers in reading, in contrast to 10 per cent nationally. Worryingly, there has been no overall improvement in literacy since 1980.<sup>18</sup>

The Government's Action Plan, *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS)*, published in 2005, includes a commitment to target literacy problems. The *National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007–2016* sets the goal of halving the incidence of serious literacy difficulties in disadvantaged communities by 2016. Funding and resources will need to reflect the scale of the task of meeting this target, given that literacy has not shown any overall improvement in the last 27 years. Attempts to address literacy problems have focused on providing more support on a one-to-one basis outside ordinary classes. The role of literacy support *within* the classroom environment also needs to be examined. The Government's commitment to tackling literacy problems is welcome, yet the reality is that even if the 2016 target were to be achieved, this would still mean 15 per cent of children from disadvantaged communities having serious literacy problems.

### Pre-school Provision

A 2005 report by the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) sets out a framework for the development of early childhood care and education, including provision to address the needs of children who are

disadvantaged.<sup>19</sup> A key recommendation of the NESF is that free pre-school education should be available for all children in the year prior to starting primary school, and that this should be rolled out on a phased basis, starting with the most disadvantaged children. Despite the fact that the Forum's report followed widespread consultation and that its development involved representatives of the Social Partners, the Government has made no commitment to implement its recommendations, including the key proposal of one year of free pre-school education.

### Pupil–Teacher Ratio

The average class size in Ireland for primary school pupils is 24 (the second highest in the EU after the UK).<sup>20</sup> A Dáil Debate in March 2007 revealed that as many as 100,000 primary school children are in classes of 30 or more and that 35,000 pupils in secondary schools are in classes of this size. This means that 25 per cent of all pupils in Ireland are in classes of 30 or more.<sup>21</sup>

Under the *DEIS* framework, increased provision has been made for children in disadvantaged communities with the goal of reducing class sizes to a maximum of 20:1 (junior infant to second class) and 24:1 (third to sixth class).<sup>22</sup> This is a welcome move, but it might be noted that in their 2002 *Programme for Government* the coalition parties that make up the current Government promised that for children under nine the average class size in the country as a whole, not just in disadvantaged areas, would be 20.<sup>23</sup>

### Assigning Teachers

Besides the issue of pupil–teacher ratio, attention needs to be given to the question of which teachers are assigned to teach which age-groups of pupils. A study published in 2005 highlighted that while 14 per cent of all pupils in first class are taught by a non-permanent teacher, for children in disadvantaged schools the figure rises to 30 per cent. The authors of the study point out that there is a commonly held view 'that experienced teachers should be placed in Senior classes because they are able to deal with more widespread incidence of challenging behaviour in these classes. Thus, Junior classes (where teacher characteristics are most strongly related to achievement) are assigned the least experienced teachers, despite this being counter to what research recommends.'<sup>24</sup>

### Expenditure on Education

While expenditure on education has increased in real terms, it has actually fallen as a percentage of GDP from 5.3 per cent in 1995 to a projected 4.5 per cent in 2007.<sup>25</sup> Ireland spends less on education than other developed countries: in 2003, for example, its

expenditure represented 4.4 per cent of GDP compared with an OECD average of 6.3 per cent.<sup>26</sup> Figures for spending on education have to take account of the fact that in Ireland the age cohort 0–24 stands at 35.3 per cent of the total population, which is higher than in any other EU country.<sup>27</sup>

Some of the shortfall in public spending on education is reflected in the charges for extra-curricular activities and the 'voluntary donations' which characterise Ireland's 'free' education system. These costs and others associated with schooling, such as school clothing, books, equipment, stationary, and transport, obviously bear most heavily on families with limited incomes. In many other European countries, families are not burdened with such extra expenses.

### Conclusion

Investment in education is widely regarded as having played a key role in laying the foundations for Ireland's economic success over the past decade. Educational opportunities have widened enormously – for instance, higher education, once the preserve of a small percentage of the population, is now availed of by 55 per cent of 17 to 19 year olds.

However, alongside the success story of Irish education there is the reality that too many young people leave school early and with either poor or no qualifications. In an employment market that is characterised by constant change and by demand for high levels of skills such young people are at serious risk of experiencing long-term disadvantage.

In recent years, there has been much rhetoric about the importance of tackling educational disadvantage. Additional funding and specific initiatives have been provided. But the reality is that targets for class sizes, literacy and educational attainment have not been achieved. In the future, the focus on providing extra resources for schools that are designated as disadvantaged must obviously continue. Alongside this, however, there needs to be a commitment to ensuring that all of the significant number of children elsewhere who, for one reason or another, experience educational disadvantage are provided with the additional supports that they require.

Educational disadvantage is both a consequence and a cause of economic and social deprivation and its persistence undermines the notion of equality of opportunity. Matching the rhetoric about tackling educational disadvantage with a level of investment in the facilities and supports necessary to effectively address the problem should be one of the key priorities of the next Government.

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# Health

## **The Health of the Nation**

Everyone agrees that 'health' will be one of the major issues in the coming General Election. In reality, however, it is not health but health services that will be the focus of debate. But the state of the nation's health ought to merit some serious attention, and some promises of action, by those who would aspire to form the next government.

Ireland may be one of the wealthiest countries in Europe but it is not one of the healthiest. While there have been improvements in life expectancy for both men and women in the past decade, the rate of mortality for a range of illnesses is significantly worse than is the case in the best-performing EU countries. Studies in Ireland on some of the lifestyle factors that influence health status – smoking, harmful alcohol consumption, amount and regularity of exercise, incidence of obesity – do not provide a reassuring picture. While the incidence of smoking in the overall population has fallen, it remains high among teenagers and young people (around a third of whom smoke); the Irish incidence of binge drinking is the worst in Europe; 39 per cent of the adult population is overweight and 18 per cent obese, and it has been estimated that as many as 300,000 Irish children are overweight or obese.<sup>1</sup> There are even concerns that if the present trends in health endangering behaviours continue, today's children will have a shorter life expectancy than their parents.

## **Unhealthy divisions**

There are, furthermore, significant social class differences in mortality rates and health status. Premature deaths, accidents, heart disease, some cancers, for instance, are more common in the lowest income groups of the population, which also have the highest incidence of low birth-weight babies and perinatal and infant mortality. Little wonder that nearly every Irish study that looks at social class health inequalities resorts to employing the phrase: 'Poor people are sick more often and die younger'.

It is widely recognised that responding to health inequalities requires addressing not just the high incidence of health endangering behaviours, such as smoking, among people who are poor. It also requires responding to poverty itself, and its related problems of poor housing, poor diet, educational deprivation, and stress. What is not generally appreciated is that

addressing inequality would improve the health not only of poorer people but of the population generally: international studies show that inequality in itself poses a threat to the overall health status of a country's population. Among developed countries, it is those with the highest levels of inequality which have the worst health profiles and lower life expectancy, and conversely it is those which are least unequal that are the healthiest. If Irish society as a whole is to become more healthy, it must become less unequal.

## **Is there a Black Hole?**

It is frequently alleged that there is a 'black hole' in the Irish health care system, into which a substantial part of the increased health expenditure of recent years has vanished, with the result, it is claimed, that all the extra spending has brought no improvements in services. A more accurate and fair representation of what has happened would be to say that, while we cannot be sure that all of the money spent has been used efficiently, extra spending has brought some improvements in services and enabled the upgrading of buildings and facilities – but not to anywhere near meeting the scale of need.

## **Spending on health**

At first sight, the increase in Irish health expenditure is impressive. Current expenditure on health has risen three-fold since 1997, and for 2007 is budgeted at 13.4 billion, with capital expenditure projected at 4.3 billion. However, Irish health spending needs to be seen in the context of at least three important factors: the need to make up for the deficits which arose during a prolonged period, from the late 1980s onwards, when public expenditure on health was severely curtailed; the need to provide for a growing population (which increased by 8 per cent in the period 2002 to 2006 alone and which includes a increasing proportion of people over 65, the age group most susceptible to acute and long-term illness); and the need to be able to provide treatments now possible as a result of medical advances. When, as frequently happens, Irish public spending on health is represented as comparing favourably with the EU average, the importance of these factors in putting the Irish performance into perspective is usually ignored. What needs to be taken into account also is the fact that Irish health expenditure figures include the costs of social support services, which in many other countries come under a separate budget.

### **Scale of improvements needed**

Every analysis of the Irish health care whether by official sources or by independent bodies, lays out clearly how each part of the system – whether it be primary care, acute hospital services, rehabilitation, continuing care, therapies and social supports – needs additional investment to provide improved and expanded services. In addition, there is need for changes in the way professionals work together, and better co-ordination between sectors. For example, it is widely accepted, including by the Government itself, that primary care in Ireland is underdeveloped and in most parts of the country is not in a position to provide the medical procedures that should be feasible at this level. Neither is it currently able to provide local communities with access to a full range of services, such as social work, counselling, health education, social supports, in an integrated manner.

In the context of the debate about whether the system is characterised by wastefulness, it is instructive to consider the findings of an independent review of one part of it – namely, mental health care. The Review Group on the Mental Health Services, whose report was published in early 2006, noted how some areas provided better and more coordinated services than did others with similar levels of funding.<sup>2</sup> The Review Group was clear about the importance of monitoring expenditure and ensuring efficiency. But this was far from being its key finding: its overall conclusion was that the system lacked the capacity to meet appropriately the needs of patients and their families through a range of services. It put forward a long list of recommendations which it calculated would necessitate 1,800 additional posts to implement and would require that non-capital investment would be €151 million greater than that in 2005.

It is likely that independent reviews of other parts of the system would reach similar conclusions – that while there is every need for mechanisms to avoid waste and ensure efficiency, the underlying capacity problems of Irish health care can only be dealt with by a continuous commitment of substantial funding. This was, in effect, acknowledged by the Government itself in the 2001 Health Strategy, published six months before the last General Election.<sup>3</sup> It outlined a programme of reform, involving substantial additional funding, over a ten-year period. Half-way through that timescale, the failure to provide the kind of sustained investment its implementation required means that many of the deficiencies identified remain and that Ireland has merely postponed facing up to the costs which addressing them will involve.

### **Equity**

The 2001 Health Strategy, and indeed its 1994

predecessor, stated that equity was to be a core value underlying Irish health care provision. Equity implies that care should be provided on the basis of need, not income. In reality, the health system is structured toward inequity: speed of access to care, and the type of care received, often depend on whether one is a public or a private patient. The implications of this are all the more serious given that it is those most likely to be reliant on public care who are also most likely to have the poorest health.

### **Acute hospital services**

The most frequently cited, but by no means the only, example of inequity in the system occurs in acute hospital care. Surveys of patients' experiences of waiting for outpatient, day care and inpatient hospital services have consistently shown that public patients can wait significantly longer for treatment than private patients. The Patient Treatment Register (as the waiting list for public hospital services is now called) shows that in December 2006 there were 15,096 adults and 2,300 children waiting for surgical procedures and 4,425 adults and 402 children awaiting a medical admission; around 30 per cent of both adults and children had been waiting for longer than a year.<sup>4</sup> These statistics do not adequately reflect the full scale of delay in accessing services since they include only people who have been waiting for more than three months. Neither do they reveal the extent to which patients have been waiting for a first appointment at an outpatient clinic in a public hospital.

The lack of equity in hospital care is evident also in the quality of care received: private patients have their medical care delivered by consultants; public patients receive 'consultant led' treatment, with their care provided mainly by doctors who are still in training, whose working hours are unacceptably long and who may be inexperienced, and inadequately supervised.

Key elements facilitating the present inequity in hospital care are the 'common contract' for hospital consultants, and the allocation of beds in public hospitals for the treatment of private patients. These features of the system provide the means, as well as giving important financial incentives, to allow consultants accord priority to private patients. It is obvious that reform of the consultants' contract and a significant increase in the number of consultants are fundamental changes needed if some reduction in the level of inequity in the system is to be achieved. However, more radical reform is required if the promise that the system would be based on equity is to be fulfilled. More than thirty years ago, Irish society found it possible to eliminate the distinctions in the way public and private patients accessed GP care; it is now time to start a process towards achieving the

same goal in the delivery of hospital care. A 2006 report, commissioned by the Adelaide Hospital Society, has shown that a system of social health insurance that would provide for equity of access *is* a realistic option for Ireland.<sup>5</sup>

### **Medical card eligibility**

Issues of equity also arise in relation to entitlement to medical cards. Apart from those over seventy, who automatically qualify on the grounds of age, eligibility for a medical card is determined on the basis of a strict means test. Individuals and families whose incomes are modest but still too high for entitlement to a medical card may face health-related costs that constitute a disproportionate share of their income. The Health Strategy 2001 promised that 'significant improvements' would be made in regard to the entitlement criteria, thereby increasing the number of people eligible. However, it was not until late 2005 that eligibility was extended and meanwhile the percentage of the population with a medical card had fallen to the lowest level recorded since the system was introduced in the early 1970s.

In November 2004, the Government announced the introduction of a new form of entitlement – the GP-only medical card. While this meets one element of the costs of medical care for lower income people, it excludes significant other benefits of a full medical card – for example, coverage of the cost of prescriptions, public hospital charges, and other health related services. The introduction of the GP-only card was not among the proposals in the Health Strategy, and was not preceded by any published analysis of why this was considered an appropriate means of addressing the expense and anxiety faced by those on low incomes who failed to qualify for the full medical card.

### **Conclusion**

Improving the public's health will not be achieved by the actions and services of the health system alone. Indeed, it might be suggested that the first item on the 'to do' list of the next Minister for Health should be to write 'to do' lists for his or her fellow Ministers who have responsibility for the distribution of those resources – income, housing, education, transport, opportunities for play, recreation, and sport – that have such an important influence on the nation's capacity to maintain good health and on the level of inequality in health status between different social groups.

Addressing these wider questions does not, of course, diminish the role which the health services themselves must play. Both the public and politicians have to be honest in facing up to the scale of the challenge of building a better health service – given

the legacy of a long period of under-investment and the rise in population, especially in older age groups.

In recent years, there has been increasing reliance on the private sector to provide the additional services required, with this being promoted as being a quicker means of achieving progress. But the implications of this trend in terms of reinforcing unfairness in an already inequitable system have not been fully acknowledged by those who support this approach. The question also arises: do we as a society wish to turn away from a long tradition where health care was provided not just out of public funds but through the voluntary work of religious orders and non-profit bodies to one where increasingly profit-making is the ultimate motive of involvement in health care provision. A 'better' health system can only be one which truly has fairness at its core and is based on a recognition that health care is a service, not a commercial product.

In light of how deeply entrenched are the shortfalls and the inequitable features of the present system, and of the many vested interests involved, the task of developing an adequate and fair system will be a long and difficult one. However, the election of a new Dáil provides an opportune time for Irish society and its elected representatives to make a commitment towards achieving significant progress in this area.

In the past, Irish people commonly used the phrase: 'Your health is your wealth'; perhaps prosperous Ireland needs to remind itself of this truth and shape its policies accordingly.

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# Housing and Homelessness

## Introduction

If, as predicted, the number of new houses built during 2007 shows a decline on the 2006 figure, this will represent a notable break with the significant upward trend in housing construction that has been such a feature of the past decade. Whereas 26,500 houses and apartments were built in 1995, the number rose to 49,812 in 2000 and to 93,419 in 2006. In other words, housing output in 2006 was more than 250 per cent higher than in 1995.

Findings of the 2006 Census published in March 2007 revealed that 266,400 properties were vacant on Census night (that is, other than the 30,000 households where the usual residents were temporarily absent), giving a vacancy rate of over 15 per cent.<sup>1</sup> It is widely agreed that the vacancy rate for houses built in the last few years is much higher than the overall rate. Meanwhile, the waiting list for social housing stands at 43,684, that is, 70 per cent higher than in 1996.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, in modern-day Ireland, increases in the number of houses built is not to be equated with providing homes for people.

## The Affordability of Housing

Recent indications of a slow-down in prices have given rise to much debate about the future of Irish house prices. Whatever the future trend, what must not be lost sight of is how astronomical has been the increase in prices over the past decade and how those on incomes which previously would have allowed them to buy a house on the open market have found this increasingly difficult.

Between 1994 and 2004, when the Consumer Price Index rose by 35 per cent, the average new house price rose by 243 per cent (seven times the Consumer Price Index) and the average second-hand house price rose by 322 per cent. Even more telling is the comparison of house prices with the average industrial wage: in 1984, the average price of a new home was 4.3 times the average industrial wage; in 1994, it had dropped slightly to 4.2 times; in 2005, it was 9.1 times (and 11.5 times in Dublin).<sup>3</sup>

It is evident that people trying to buy a first home have adapted to the rise in house prices by resorting to a variety of strategies – purchasing homes further and further away from their workplaces; relying on parental or third party assistance to gain entry to

home ownership; sharing ownership with a friend or sibling; resorting to mortgages which are of longer duration and represent a high proportion, or the total, of the cost of the house, and requiring high repayments relative to income. Many have given up on the prospect of becoming a homeowner and resigned themselves to continuing to rent in the private sector. Some assert that this sector now includes many who see renting as a desirable and flexible option; it equally includes many who are trapped into renting, and are all too aware that they have little long-term security, despite improvements in the rights of tenants, and no opportunity to acquire the capital asset that owning a home represents. It is of note that the 2006 Census shows that home ownership in Ireland dropped from a peak of 80.2 per cent in 1991 to 77.4 in 2002 and 74.7 in 2006.

The Government's response to the rise in prices has been to increase the provision of 'affordable housing', under a variety of schemes. What has not been evident in the face of the house price inflation of the past decade is an acceptance by the Government or Irish society as a whole that it might be any part of policy to try to curtail the rise in prices.

The Bacon Reports on housing recommended both the elimination of tax relief for the interest on mortgages for second homes or for housing bought by investors, and the introduction of a punitive tax to deter land speculation. The recommendation regarding mortgage interest relief was followed by the abolition of this relief in one Budget – but then its re-introduction in the next. No move was ever made to act on the recommendation for a tax on speculation.

The availability and cost of land for development are key influences on the cost of housing. More than thirty years ago, the Kenny Report recommended that local authorities should be empowered to acquire land needed for development at existing use value plus 25 per cent. Doubts about whether such a measure would be Constitutional were repeatedly invoked as reason not to proceed with legislation to give effect to this proposal. In its Report on Private Property, published in April 2004, the Oireachtas Committee on the Constitution, which included members of all the main political parties, concluded that there was no Constitutional barrier to implementing the Kenny recommendation.<sup>4</sup> Despite the fact that the Commit-

tee's report was prepared in response to a specific request by the Taoiseach, little further has been heard of its key recommendation in the past three years.

### Social Housing

During the core years of the economic boom, when market forces were driving the price of housing out of reach of many, social housing waiting lists grew from 27,427 households in 1996 to 48,400 in 2002. (These households had an estimated 140,000 persons, including 50,000 children.) The most recent figures on waiting lists, from the 2005 Local Authority Assessments of Housing Need, show a reduction of 4,800 on the 2002 figure, down to 43,684. This rate of reduction would eliminate the current waiting lists (provided no new entrants were allowed to join) – *in 2033!* Many argue that the real number in need of social housing is, in fact, much higher. For example, over 40,000 households dependent on rent supplement under the supplementary welfare allowance scheme were not included in 2005 Local Authority Assessment of Need.

In 1975, the number of local authority houses completed was 8,794 (representing 32.7 per cent of all completions); in 1985, in the midst of the recession, the number was 6,523 (27.2 per cent of completions). From 1995 to 2004, ten years characterised by impressive economic growth and increasingly healthy Exchequer returns, an average of only 4,275 social housing units were provided each year. If the sale of local authority houses to sitting tenants is taken into account, that figure falls to 3,300 *net* new social houses per year.

The NESC report on housing recommended that 83,000 new social housing units should be provided in the eight-year period 2005–2012, a yearly average of 10,450; allowing for continued sales of local authority houses this would mean an average yearly net increase of over 9,000.<sup>5</sup> In the two years since the NESC report, social housing provision has been much lower than this – with 6,477 units built or purchased in 2005, and 6,361 in 2006. However, as the sales of local authority housing was well over 1,000 in both years, the net increase was much lower than these figures suggest.

The National Development Plan, published in January 2007, includes a commitment to provide 8,600 gross new social housing units each year over the next seven years (amounting to an estimated 7,400 net new social housing units over that period). This is far lower than the NESC recommendations – but more than has been achieved over the seven years just gone by. It remains to be seen whether this target will actually be met, given how previous projections for increased provision remained unrealised.

### Homelessness

Homelessness is the most serious example of failure in housing provision and related social supports. The 2005 Local Authority Assessments of Housing Need found the number of homeless *households* to be 2,399. However, voluntary organisations in the area of homelessness consider that the assessments do not include all those who are homeless and they suggest that at least 5,000 individuals are homeless.

In many respects, there have been improvements in the quality and range of services for homeless people in the period since the publication of the *Homelessness – An Integrated Strategy* in 2000. There has been a marked increase in the use of B&Bs to provide accommodation for homeless people, additional hostel places have been provided and there has been modernisation of some hostel provision.

Despite these improvements, some homeless people are told each night that they will have to sleep rough, as all the emergency accommodation is full; others are placed in totally inappropriate accommodation – in dormitories, where drug users sleep next to drug-free young people, where vulnerable homeless people sleep next to career criminals, where homeless people sleep (or do not sleep) with their runners under their pillow for fear that they will be stolen during the night. Too often, the emergency services for homeless people still infringe their dignity, fuel their frustration and anger, and make them wonder why Ireland's prosperity has passed them by.

The lack of a sufficient supply of appropriate move-on accommodation results in many homeless people finding themselves trapped in their homelessness. Traditionally, one of the routes out of homelessness has been private rented accommodation. However, as the cost of housing escalated over the past ten years, so also did the cost of renting accommodation.

Homeless people are entitled to a rent supplement from the State towards the cost of renting private accommodation. However, there is a limit to the amount which the State is willing to contribute: this stands at €130 per week in Dublin for a single person (less in other parts of the country). Today, €130 will barely cover the cost of a small bed-sit in Dublin, which may be in very poor condition. The State may not agree to pay the four weeks deposit which is always required in advance. Moreover, it can be extremely difficult to find landlords willing to accept tenants reliant on welfare payments. Private rented accommodation therefore provides a limited escape route for some homeless people who have the patience and the bus fares to persevere for weeks, or months, to acquire sub-standard accommodation.



The other route out of homelessness is social housing. Homeless people's access to local authority provided accommodation has been affected by the growth in waiting lists. Single homeless men, who constitute 75 per cent of homeless people, are at the bottom of that housing waiting list, as priority is naturally given to families with children. The supply of both transitional and permanent social housing for homeless people provided by voluntary organisations has increased over the past decade but the scale of demand can mean that waiting lists often apply.

### **Conclusion**

The Framework Document for the Review of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy in 2001 pointed out the importance of ensuring that developments in the housing system 'would not deepen or reinforce social inequalities or division'.<sup>6</sup>

However, this is precisely what has happened in Ireland over the past decade. It has happened through the lack of any serious effort to curb the rise in house prices, or to control the cost of land for development. It has happened too because the State has subsidised the huge growth in second and holiday home ownership through tax reliefs and by failing to ensure that the full cost of the public infrastructure for one-off second homes is met by the owners.

It has happened also because of the failure to implement the provisions of Section 4 of the Planning and Development Act 2000. The original Act provided that local authorities could require housing developers to set aside 20 per cent of their development area for social and affordable housing. This was potentially a radical mechanism which could have promoted some degree of integration in a highly divisive housing system, as well as increasing the supply of social and affordable housing. In the face of opposition from the construction industry, the requirement was changed by subsequent legislation to allow developers provide land elsewhere or pay a sum of money to the local authority.

At the root of the deepening division in Irish housing (and consequently in wealth) is the failure to recognise that housing is a fundamental need, which is just as essential for a dignified human existence as health, education and food, and to which each person, as a consequence, has a basic right. However, policy and provision over the past decade seem to be based largely on a contrary view, namely that housing is primarily a commodity to be made available to people through market forces. Market forces can often effectively regulate the availability and price of desirable goods, through the controlling mechanism of supply and demand. The supply adjusts to the

demand of those who are in a position to seek those goods. However, those who are too poor to even consider purchasing their own home are not part of the 'demand'. 'Need' and 'demand' are not the same thing if you are too poor to be able to pay.

The view of housing as primarily a commodity to be bought and sold was not always as dominant as it now is: between 1922 and 1966, 50 per cent of all houses built were for public housing, and were, therefore, outside market forces. By contrast, in recent years, well over 90 per cent of all houses built have been for sale through the market.

Housing in Ireland, then, has come to be viewed as a commodity, as a means of wealth creation, traded on the market like stocks and shares. Such a view of housing ensures strong opposition to any development, such as social housing or Traveller accommodation, which is seen to reduce the value of this asset. This view of housing has been promoted and reinforced by Government policy. A reduced capital gains tax, and the availability of mortgage interest tax relief to investors and those buying second homes, has encouraged many to enter the housing market as speculators, pushing up demand and putting the price of housing beyond the reach of many families and individuals.

There is a fundamental question regarding housing which must be faced by Irish society and its politicians: Is housing to be an asset, an investment, a means of speculative or capital gains for those who can afford it? Or, is housing to be concerned with the provision of affordable, secure, good-quality homes as a basic right of every citizen? Housing policy ultimately depends on which answer our society chooses.

### **Notes**

1. Central Statistics Office (2007) *Census 2006: Principal Demographic Results*, Dublin: Stationery Office.
2. Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, *Local Authority Assessments of Social Housing Needs – 31 March 2005*, Dublin, 9 December 2005.
3. P.J. Drudy and Michael Punch (2005) *Out of Reach: Inequalities in the Irish Housing System*, Dublin: tasc at New Ireland.
4. The All-Party Oireachtas Committee on the Constitution (2004) *Ninth Progress Report: Private Property*, Dublin: Stationery Office.
5. National Economic and Social Council (2004) *Housing in Ireland: Performance and Policy*, Dublin: National Economic and Social Council (Report No. 112), p. 152.
6. Goodbody Economic Consultants (2001) *Review of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy: Framework Document*, Dublin.

# Poverty and Inequality

## Introduction

Ireland has seen a dramatic economic boom over the past decade, with unprecedented levels of growth in employment and living standards. Unemployment has fallen very sharply and substantial numbers of migrants have been attracted to Ireland to work. Despite this, the numbers 'at risk of poverty' have grown – the 'risk of poverty' being a key measure of poverty among the EU's indicators of social inclusion.<sup>1</sup> There has also been considerable concern expressed about rising inequality and about core features of the strategy adopted by the Government to combat poverty.

## Trends in Poverty and Inequality

### 'At risk of poverty'

The EU measure of the proportion of the population 'at risk of poverty' is based on the percentage of persons falling below income thresholds set at 50 per cent and 60 per cent of median equivalised income. Figure 1 shows the trends in the percentage of persons in Ireland falling below these income thresholds between 1994 and 2005. It reveals that the percentage 'at risk of poverty' has risen significantly since 1994. Between 1994 and 2001, the period covered by the European Community Household Panel (ECHP) surveys, the percentage below the 60 per cent line rose from 16 to 22 per cent;

when the 50 per cent line is used, a corresponding trend is evident. From 2003 onwards, the EU Survey on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) replaced the discontinued ECHP survey. EU-SILC shows that in the years 2003 to 2005, there was a lower percentage below

each of the income thresholds than in 2001. The extent to which this reflects differences between the two surveys rather than real changes is hard to assess. Even so, this still leaves the rates well above those seen in the mid-1990s.

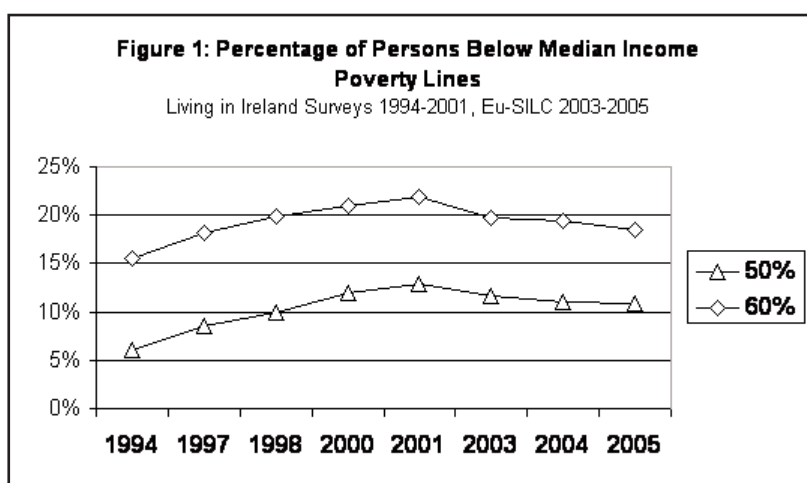
The trend shown in Table 1 reflects the pattern of increases in household incomes from 1994 onwards and the purely relative nature of the measure itself. From 1994 to 2005, median income, and thus the median-based income poverty thresholds, more than doubled in nominal terms. While social welfare support rates increased significantly in real terms (for example, means-tested support for the unemployed rose by over 20 per cent in real terms while state pensions for the elderly rose a good deal more rapidly) they lagged behind incomes from work and property, and thus behind average income. As a result, by the end of the period those relying primarily on social welfare for their income were more likely to fall below poverty lines linked to average income. The rapid increase in the number of married women in work over the period also contributed to the increase in median incomes, and some households with only one earner also failed to keep pace.

This has meant a major change in the type of households falling below the relative income thresholds. There has been a sharp decline in unemployed households but an increase in groups such as the ill and disabled, the retired and those in home duties; the proportion in work but on earnings below the thresholds also increased.

This overall trend would be very different if, instead of income thresholds linked to average income, a standard held constant in purchasing power terms was used. This can be illustrated by taking the 60 per cent of median income threshold in 1994 and indexing it to changes in the Consumer Price Index

rather than average incomes. Using such a 'constant in real terms' line, the overall percentage falling below that threshold would have fallen from about 16 per cent in 1994 to about 2 per cent in 2001, and even lower by 2004. This reflects the scale of real income

Table 1



growth at all income levels seen over this remarkable period in Ireland. On that basis, poverty would have virtually disappeared by 2004.

Non-monetary indicators are particularly valuable in capturing trends in exclusion due to lack of resources, which is the widely-accepted definition of poverty.<sup>2</sup> The 'consistent poverty' measure, combining both low income and 'basic' deprivation, which was developed at the ESRI, shows a marked decline over the period. In broad terms, using a fixed set of deprivation indicators, the percentage of the population living in consistent poverty appears to have fallen from 16 per cent to about 7 per cent.<sup>3</sup> If we use a revised set of basic deprivation indicators for 2004/05 to take into account changes in ordinary living standards, the overall level of consistent poverty is still substantially lower than it was ten years earlier. The general increase in living standards observed across all groups over the decade has had a major impact in reducing generalised deprivation. In framing targets in its anti-poverty strategy, the Government has focused on consistent poverty: for example, the revised consistent poverty measure is to be a key indicator for the *National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007–2016*, which was published in February 2007.<sup>4</sup>

### **Increasing Inequality?**

Turning from poverty to the distribution of income, it has been commonly assumed that Ireland's economic boom has been accompanied by a sharp rise in income inequality. However, the available data from household surveys do not reflect such a rise. There was little change in overall income inequality between the Household Budget Survey carried out by the Central Statistics Office in 1994–1995 and that carried out in 1999–2000.<sup>5</sup> The results from the EU-SILC survey initiated in 2003 show just a marginal increase in inequality by 2005.<sup>6</sup> The share of total income going to the bottom 10 or 20 per cent has declined, but the pattern of change elsewhere in the distribution has meant very limited increase in overall inequality. However, Ireland continues to have a high degree of income inequality compared with many other European states, though still falling well short of the level seen in the United States. In other words, Ireland has a high degree of economic inequality in comparative terms after the boom, just as it did beforehand and indeed as far back as the early 1970s when nationally representative household survey data first became available.

Survey data may not capture what is happening at the top of the distribution, and data from the Revenue Commissioners can be used to look at trends in that respect. These suggest that by the end of the 1990s

the share of the top 1 per cent was more than twice the level prevailing throughout the 1970s and 1980s. This seems to confirm the anecdotal assertions that those at the top did particularly well during the economic boom – though the data showing an increased share for the very top income earners may reflect the impact of changes in reporting behaviour *vis-à-vis* the tax authorities.

### **The Current Strategy**

From the late 1980s, the central plank of the Irish Government's strategy to combat poverty has been to get more people into work. This has been an unprecedented success in terms of the scale of employment growth and the reduction in unemployment achieved. The strategy has been a resounding success also in terms of improving living standards and reducing deprivation. This has had a positive impact on those in work throughout the period, and even more so on those moving from unemployment or inactivity into work. While those who remain outside the workforce have lagged behind in income terms, even they have seen significant improvements in living standards.

The level of social welfare payments remains the key determinant of the living standards of many households, notably older people, lone parents, and many of those affected by illness and disability. Government policy has paid particular attention to old age pensions, though as we have seen these have not kept pace with the very rapid rise in average incomes during the boom. Attention has also been paid to easing the transition from unemployment or inactivity into work for unemployed people and for lone parents, via a number of measures intended to reduce the 'unemployment trap' they can face on going into work as benefits are withdrawn.

The introduction of a National Minimum Wage in 2001 was intended to underpin the value of working as well as prevent the exploitation of workers. Its level has been increased since then, broadly in line with average earnings. In-work cash transfers complement the Minimum Wage, via the Family Income Supplement aimed at parents who are in work but on low household income. The problem of non-take-up of benefits is significant; options such as a refundable tax credit have been examined but no clear strategy for reform has emerged. Those on the Minimum Wage have also been lifted out of the income tax net, though disincentive effects can then be faced as people move up the earnings distribution.

Concern about disincentives also focused attention on the broader range of policies aimed at helping families with children. Particular attention has been

paid to universal cash transfers: for instance, Child Benefit has been very substantially increased in recent years, at significant Exchequer cost, and the system of cash support for children is now among the more generous in the EU.

Despite this, and the improvements in pensions, Ireland can be described as displaying a relatively low overall 'redistributive effort' and this is a key ingredient in its high level of income inequality compared with other rich countries. This again is not a new development; it is, rather, a long-standing characteristic of Ireland's welfare state, with its heavy reliance on means-tested programmes and on flat-rate rather than earnings-related transfers. Ireland in this respect has much in common with the UK, which also has a similar level of inequality in disposable incomes.

### Key Issues

There are important issues to be addressed if the current anti-poverty strategy is to be pursued to its logical conclusion. These issues include:

- How to ensure that the living standards of pensioners are linked more closely to those of people of working age, and the role which extending occupational pension coverage can play in achieving this.
- How to ensure that those in work are enabled to avoid poverty, through further reform of taxation and improved in-work benefits.
- How to ensure that more of those who have proved difficult to incorporate into the workforce, notably lone parents and those affected by disability, are provided with both incentives and assistance to enable them to take up paid work.
- How to ensure that those of working age who remain dependent on social welfare are brought up to relative poverty thresholds through improved levels of payments.

However, the overarching issue facing policy-makers and indeed Irish society is whether the current strategy will get us where we want to be. The level of unemployment is remarkably low, and the level of economic growth remarkably high. Improving social protection to a relatively modest degree within the current model – and assuming continued economic success, which cannot be taken for granted – will undoubtedly help those who rely on it, but will not alter the fundamental underlying structures. It is these structures, and the low-tax model that they reflect, that place Ireland among the countries with a relatively high level of income inequality and a high proportion of people 'at risk of poverty'. If it is believed that this is an essential ingredient in achieving the high economic growth – and the sharp reductions in deprivation and consistent poverty – which Ireland

has seen since the mid-1990s, this might be a trade-off worth making. However, evidence from other countries suggests that this is not a choice Ireland needs to make: growth and employment can be maintained while promoting greater equality, though the global environment for doing so is ever more challenging.

### Notes

1. The 'risk of poverty' is incorporated in the 'Laeken Indicators' – the EU's agreed set of comparable indicators of poverty and social exclusion, which are regularly produced for every EU Member State.
2. '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 other resources people may be excluded and marginalised from participating in activities, which are considered the norm for other people in society.' This definition of poverty was first adopted by the Irish Government in the National Anti-Poverty Strategy (1997) and underpinned the *National Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion 2003–2005*. It is again used in the *National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007–2016* (Dublin: Stationery Office, 2007).
3. The precise scale of that decline has to be treated with caution because the switch from ECHP to EU-SILC in itself appears to have had an impact on the measured extent of deprivation.
4. The overall poverty goal of the *National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007–2016* is: 'To reduce the number of those experiencing consistent poverty to between 2% and 4% by 2012, with the aim of eliminating consistent poverty by 2016, under the revised definition.' (p. 13)
5. The Gini coefficient – widely-used as a summary indicator of inequality – was 0.31 in the case of both the 1994–1995 Household Budget Survey and the 1999–2000 Survey.
6. The results from the EU-SILC survey show the Gini coefficient still at 0.31 in 2003, increasing marginally to 0.32 by 2005.

# Voting in Pursuit of Justice

## The Forthcoming Election

The imminence of the third General Election since the Irish economic boom began provides an opportunity to consider how far we as a people, residents of one of the wealthiest countries in the world, are concerned with eliminating poverty and injustice.

It is without question that high levels of economic growth, which have now lasted more than a decade, have enabled a vast and positive transformation in the lives of many. Growth has driven up incomes from work and enabled increases in social welfare payments; it has resulted in improvements in health and education services, and in the development of the country's physical infrastructure. Above all, it has provided an answer to the desperate want of jobs that so long blighted our country and resulted in a peak unemployment rate of 18 per cent and the forced emigration of thousands of young people.

Yet it is increasingly evident that economic growth and prosperity do not automatically mean the creation of a fair society, where all benefit and those in greatest need are given priority. In a prosperous Ireland, poverty and inequality remain important issues.

## Eliminating Poverty: Success and Failure

Over the last decade, poverty as we normally think of it has fallen significantly. Officially, this type of poverty is described as 'consistent poverty'. People are regarded as consistently poor if they fall below an income poverty line and also lack two or more items from an official index that includes, for example, being able to keep one's home adequately warm, being able to afford two pairs of strong shoes, having enough money to buy presents for family members at least once a year. Official figures show that 7 per cent of the population was in consistent poverty in 2005. It is likely that the numbers in consistent poverty will fall further while the economy is buoyant: indeed, in the *National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007–2016*, the Government has set the target of reducing the figure to between 2 and 4 per cent by 2012.

## Understanding Poverty

But there is another form of poverty – relative poverty. The reality of this kind of poverty is not generally appreciated, and its elimination is not on the political agenda. Governments do not like to talk about relative poverty, because economic growth does not, of itself, lead to its reduction.

It is notable that in the new *National Action Plan for Social Inclusion*, the Government has failed to set any target for reducing relative poverty. Even so, the definition of poverty cited in the *Action Plan* (which is the definition first adapted by the Irish Government in the original National Anti-Poverty Strategy in 1997) is one that, in fact, defines poverty in relative terms:

*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 other resources people may be excluded and marginalised from participating in activities, which are considered the norm for other people in society.*

Relative income poverty has persistently remained around 20 per cent throughout the economic boom of the past decade. (In 2007 terms, the poverty line – set at 60 per cent of median income – for a single person is €209.87 a week or €10,951 a year. For a household of four, it is €486.90 a week.) Officially, relative income poverty is referred to being 'at risk of poverty' – which almost suggests that it is a form of 'virtual' poverty and that it is somehow not real, at least not yet. However, relative poverty is still real poverty: as the Government's own definition implies, it is about lacking an adequate income to buy the goods and services needed to function socially in a society with ever-higher expectations.

## Equality – What are we Trying to Equalise?

Amartya Sen, the Nobel Prize winner in economics, asks a simple but fundamental question about inequality. *What are we trying to equalise?* He points out that if our answer is that we want to equalise income, then we must recognise that the same level of income can yield very different standards of living, depending on whether one is sick or healthy, old or young, living in a good area or a bad one, living in a rich society or in a poor one. The more fundamental issue, Sen argues, is equalising human capabilities to function. These are things such as capability to live, to be healthy, to develop one's understanding, to move freely, to have a family life, and to appear in public without shame.

Sen makes the point that different sets of goods are required to enable us to realise these capabilities depending on whether we are living in a poor country or a rich one. For example, clean clothes (even if they are old and worn) may be all that is required to appear in public without shame in some poor countries. In a rich country, however, more expensive and new clothing is frequently required if one is not to be shamed. Similar considerations apply to the level of education, health and housing that is considered acceptable.

### **The Poverty of Poor Public Services**

Applying Sen's thinking to modern Ireland, it is evident that the situation of people on low incomes – whether they are deemed to be in relative or in consistent poverty – is made immeasurably worse if the public services and social supports they need are inadequate, inaccessible, or not available at all. With limited incomes, it is not an option for them to buy their way out of waiting lists for medical procedures; neither can they afford to pay for additional tuition for their children facing examinations or access privately provided counselling, dental, physiotherapy, or psychological services for themselves or their children. It is they who suffer on housing waiting lists if the provision of social housing fails to keep up with need.

While Ireland has put in place a system to measure consistent poverty and relative income poverty on a regular basis, we have no system that routinely measures 'relative poverty' in terms of access to health, housing, education, social supports, and transport. But while the available data in these areas does not provide a comprehensive and integrated picture, we have enough information to know that many of the people who live on low incomes are also the people most affected by the deficiencies in the provision of these services. We know too that in many instances poverty is highly concentrated in specific communities and as a result, made worse.

Addressing inequality in Irish society, therefore, not only requires reducing income inequality: it necessitates improving the overall provision and standard of social services and ensuring that these include the targeted supports that are necessary to respond to those in particular need.

### **'The Election Issue'**

The articles that follow in this issue of *Working Notes* draw attention to a range of issues that illustrate the continuance, and in some cases the exacerbation, in the Ireland of today of some long-established forms of inequality in the vital areas of income, housing, health, and education. For example:

- The waiting list for social housing is now significantly higher than it was in 1996: 43,000 households were on waiting lists in March 2005, an increase of 70 per cent on the figure ten years earlier. Voluntary organisations within the homeless sector estimate that the number of homeless people is at least 5,000. The astronomical rise in house prices over the past decade has locked many out of the chance of becoming a home owner and locked others into ownership at a very high cost relative to their incomes. In effect, the housing boom has increased 'housing poverty' and significantly widened inequalities in wealth.
- The improvements brought about by large increases in health expenditure are over-shadowed by the shortages in provision across the spectrum of health services, including primary care, acute hospitals, long-term care, therapies and supports, and mental health care. Meanwhile, there has been increased privatisation of provision and the inherently two-tier nature of much of Irish health care has become more entrenched.
- More than 10 per cent of young people leave school without completing their Leaving Certificate and a further 4 per cent leave without attaining any qualification. Educational disadvantage is much more likely to be the experience of children from economically and socially deprived communities, who then face the risk of being unemployed or finding only poorly paid jobs in adulthood. In this sense, educational disadvantage is an important factor in children who are poor becoming adults who are poor.

The remaining articles in this issue seek to highlight other aspects of need and injustice that should also be a concern as we go into a General Election. For instance:

- The number of people being sent to prison continues to rise, despite the enormous cost of imprisonment. Irish prisons lack the facilities and services to deal with the addictions and other personal problems, and the educational and social disadvantage, that underlie much offender behaviour. As these go untreated, the likelihood of re-offending, and the risk of more people becoming victims of crime, increases.

- Both harmful alcohol consumption and drug abuse have risen sharply over the past decade. Irish society has shown itself to be reluctant to face up to these problems and to develop adequate policies, structures and services to tackle them effectively.
- While Ireland has welcomed migrant workers to fill the labour shortages consequent on its rapid growth, it has been slow in putting in place systems to protect the rights of these workers to just conditions of employment and to respect the right to family reunification and to long-term security of status for those who wish to remain in Ireland. Meanwhile, applicants for asylum must live in 'Direct Provision' accommodation and are debarred from working for the period (in many cases lengthy) during which their application is being processed.
- Over the past decade, Ireland's climate pollution has risen by 25 per cent, almost twice our Kyoto target, and per capita we are now the fifth most climate-polluting country in the world. To a large extent, we have been relying on buying carbon credits to make any progress towards meeting our Kyoto target.
- Ireland is on course to meet its commitment to devote 0.7 per cent of GNP to development aid. However, the commendable progress on aid has not been matched by an acknowledgment that much of the good it will achieve may be undone by our contribution to the climate change that will have devastating consequences for the world's poorest countries.

### **Self-Interest or the Common Good?**

In the election process, both people and politicians are engaged in an exercise of balancing self-interest with the interests of others, and balancing it also with the interest of the common good. In Ireland, as in many other modern democracies, the political focus is the battle for the 'middle ground' – for the support of that large section of the community which includes the people most likely to vote, the people most able to voice their demands, and the people most likely to be 'floating voters'. Inevitably, parties shape their policies with this in mind: thus, even before the election we witness promises of tax cuts. In such a situation, both people and politicians can overlook the concerns and needs of those who are most vulnerable, or who have little influence, or who for one reason or another do not use their voice or their vote.

The task of bringing such groups into the mainstream of political concern is a long-term one. An immediate challenge, however, is to find ways of ensuring that their interests are not, after all, overlooked in the election we now face. Voters' desire to protect and advance their interests and politicians' pragmatism and clever campaign tactics should not be the defining features of this election. Irish society needs to see a concern for social justice and for the common good in the demands of voters and in the promises of politicians.

Undoubtedly, taxation and public services will be core issues in the General Election. The two are, of course, inextricably linked – though this is not always evident as politicians promise, and voters expect, simultaneous reductions in the one and improvements in the other.

While there is widespread agreement that public services in Ireland need to be improved, there is also concern about efficiency and waste in publicly provided services; a reluctance to face up to the levels of taxation that may be required to effect improvements; an ongoing concern that too many are still able to evade paying the taxes for which they are liable, and that apart from this the taxation system contains many tax breaks that are, in reality, only usable to those who are already wealthy.

The improvement and reform of public services, the support of voluntary initiatives, and the development and implementation of fair systems of redistribution, are not simple tasks for any country but they are ones worth struggling with, for alongside wealth and job creation, these structures represent a significant element in the process of addressing 'need' in a modern, complex society. On the positive side, a country as prosperous as Ireland has been fortunate enough to become has at its disposal the resources to take on these challenges. In the forthcoming General Election, politicians and people have the chance to signal their commitment to realising the 'social dividend' of Irish economic growth and to creating a fairer and more inclusive society.