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Securing Fairness and Wellbeing in a Land of Plenty - A Community and Voluntary Perspective

“Balancing the Scales”

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“If we are to achieve a richer culture, rich in contrasting values, we must recognise the whole gamut of human potentialities, and so weave a less arbitrary social fabric, one in which each diverse human gift will find a fitting place” (Mead, 1935)

Introduction

In their agreed Programme for Government following the 2002 General Election, the re-elected Government stated:

“It is the opportunity to build a fair society of equal opportunity and of sustained prosperity on an island at peace with itself. We aim to be an inclusive society but there are those who still remain left out”. (2002:3)

This “opportunity”, has not however been realised, and Ireland’s growing prosperity has certainly not produced a fairer society in which every person’s well being is secured. Despite the substantial resources which have been available to the Exchequer in recent years, this country is one of growing socio-economic divides. Many people who have not benefited from the exceptional developments of recent years, continue to slide further and further into the poverty trap.

Ireland is now one of the wealthiest countries in the world. We

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acknowledge the positive impact this has had on the lives of many of those who are the most marginalised in society. In recent years much has been achieved on issues such as economic growth, employment, public finances, inflation and growth in house building. It is true to say that some serious steps have been taken to consciously address the social inclusion agenda.

However, in 2005 we are no closer to enabling our less well off citizens to obtain a fair share of the economic success. There is a significant range of work to be done to support carers, children and families, disabled people, elderly people, those who are homeless, unemployed, lone parents and travellers. There are pressing needs within our rural communities, similarly for non-nationals, and poverty levels amongst women. Many have been left behind and the Minister for Social and Family Affairs, Séamus Brennan T.D., speaking at the National Anti-Poverty Strategy's Social Inclusion Forum in January 2005 acknowledged this. "We must confront the fact that the rising tide of economic progress in Ireland has not lifted all boats."

It appeared that, in 2000, the importance and indeed benefits of tackling social exclusion were recognised.

"Social exclusion is one of the major challenges currently facing Irish society. To minimise or ignore this challenge would not only result in an increase in social polarisation, which is in itself unacceptable, but also an increase in all the attendant problems such as poor health, crime, drug abuse and alienation, which impose huge social and economic costs on our society."
Partnership 2000 (1997:4.3)

The overall aim of this paper will be to highlight the importance of balancing economic and social development. To secure fairness and wellbeing on our island, it is crucial that Ireland re-balances the priorities of economic and social development so as to ensure that infrastructure and social provision deficits are addressed, now and in the years ahead. Investing in our most vulnerable citizens makes both

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social and economic sense and will result in a better society for *all* our citizens. I will focus on a number of examples of how this can be done. These examples are by no means exhaustive and are:

- Increasing the levels of social spending to deliver quality public services;
- Enabling the community and voluntary sector;
- Using Social Partnership as a mechanism for ensuring fairness and wellbeing
- Developing an infrastructure of care.

Before I look at these examples, I will outline the current fiscal situation in Ireland and the high 'risk of poverty levels' in our society at present.

Current Fiscal Situation in Ireland

The most recent economic forecasts from a number of Government and independent sources indicate that the Irish economy is continuing to grow strongly. This economic growth provides government with the capacity and considerable resources to address the many deficits in our social services.

It is important to highlight the most pertinent statistics:

- Ireland records the third highest GDP per capita in the world. (OECD: 2003)
- In 2002, Ireland's tax take was the lowest in Europe. Ireland's tax take stands at just 28% of GDP and 35% of GNP (OECD: 2003).
- The Dept of Finance, the ESRI and the Central Bank predict that Irish GNP will grow by between 4.7% and 5.4% in 2005. (2005: August, 3 Department of Finance Monthly Bulletin).

High 'risk of poverty' levels

Despite massive advances in our economy, the fact remains that in Ireland, there remain many for whom the risk of poverty remains extremely high.

To highlight the most relevant statistics:

- Of the 17 industrialised countries examined, Ireland was ranked 16th on the poverty index. Simultaneously, the report identified Ireland as the 3rd richest country in the world as measured in GDP per capita terms (2003 UN Development Report: 237, 248)
- The first results from the new EU survey on Income and Living Conditions (EU – SILC) for 2003, indicate that almost 23% of the population were at risk of poverty. The predictions appear to indicate that this figure is set to increase.
- The risk of poverty indicator in terms of the EU, places Ireland at the top of the EU range. (CSO: 2004)

When we look at the groups which are most affected and most vulnerable, amongst those who stand out are children, older people, people with disabilities, women and non-nationals. It is true to state that the National Anti Poverty Strategy has coincided with a period when, for many people, poverty has become more persistent and the disparity between the poor and non poor has widened. If policy initiatives were poverty and equality proofed, this would be a start in addressing the poverty problem that exists in Ireland.

I will now go on to highlight some of the ways in which fairness and wellbeing can be secured in Ireland, by going into some detail on the examples I mentioned earlier.

Increase social expenditure

While we pride ourselves on being a leading European economy, using GDP or GNP Ireland's social expenditure stands out as the lowest in Europe. Ireland's social provision deficit is not being bridged at the pace that could be achieved because Government is not prepared to give it the priority it requires.

Some of the most telling statistics are as follows:

- Ireland spends just 14% of GDP on social protection expenditure, whereas Sweden pays 32%. Therefore, Sweden can provide universal, high-quality public childcare, whereas in Ireland, it is rationed by the ability to pay. (CSO: 2005)
- Social expenditure in Ireland in 2001 was half the rate of Sweden and the lowest of the EU15 countries.
- The proportion of GDP spent on healthcare (public) by the Irish government is 4.9%. This compares with 6.2% in the US, 8.1% in Germany, 7.5% in Sweden, (CSO, 2004: 139, 156)

There is a need to focus on outcomes rather than on input. The relationship between competitiveness and social inclusion must be recognised, where competitiveness helps to generate the resources to enhance social inclusion. Similarly, increased social inclusion enhances competitiveness. Economic and social development must be seen as being equal aspects of development and a trade off between one and the other is neither healthy, nor desirable. The EU countries with the highest expenditure and the highest total tax-take are also Europe's most competitive economies.

Government must fully honour its commitments so that those who are outside the labour force and those who are unemployed are provided with income supports which are sufficient to live life with dignity. This includes meeting the agreed targets for social welfare rates. There is still a great

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distance to be travelled. One of the steps which could be taken to decrease the poverty levels would be the implementation of the NAPS commitment. 'To achieve a rate of €150 per week in 2002 terms for the lowest rates of social welfare to be met by 2007'.

We have seen in Ireland that poverty can persist despite unprecedented economic growth and full employment. The recently published NESC Report, *'The Developmental Welfare State'* (2005), shows that Ireland uses a low to moderate proportion of national resources in providing services. It examines the structure of Ireland's welfare state and the principal strategies advanced for reforming it; a switch to universalism, a stronger insurance system and more targeting. The central argument of the report is that the welfare state should be seen as consisting of three overlapping spheres of activity; service, income supports and activist measures. These should be integrated as part of the formation of a developmental welfare state. It argues that a radical development of services is the single most important route to improving social protection.

The European Social Agenda seemed to have grasped the concept well. There has however recently been a re-focussing of the Lisbon Strategy and the new Social Agenda at the expense of the social side of the Strategy. We must not overlook those from outside the labour market who are socially excluded, such as those who are homeless, those dependent on care, or who because of age or disability, are unable to access employment. We must continue in our commitment to develop specific social reforms to ensure social provision for those who are not provided for through their employment status.

Delivery of Quality Public Services

Ireland's public services are undeniably underdeveloped. Because poorer people rely on public services more than those who are better off, it is they who are most acutely affected. *"Sustaining Progress"* stated that the reason for building a fair and inclusive society is:

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“...to ensure that people have the resources and opportunities to live life with dignity and have access to the quality public services that underpin life chances and experiences.” (2003:56)

Public service planning must begin with the premise that the public is not ‘one size’, but that people have a wide range of circumstances and inter related needs. Public service would then appropriately be designed, reaching all users. For example, reform of health structures must have within the brief to its architects, that it must be fully and easily accessible, reaching out to all those who need it, not simply to be accessed by those who are best equipped to engage with it.

In our democracy, the way in which public services operate should be the clear expression of how a fair and inclusive society operates. Planning and delivery of public services should overtly operate around the equality initiative. The key actions at 5.1.2 of “*Sustaining Progress*”, (2003) where measures relating to travellers, gender / women, disability and participation in further education are outlined, are indicators of the distance we must travel to have quality public services.

Social Partnership as a mechanism for ensuring fairness and wellbeing

There is no doubt that the social partnership process is making a key contribution to the development of Irish society. Through the most recent social partnership agreements, Irish society has moved beyond the focus on growth and jobs. The inclusion of the community and voluntary pillar in the Social Partnership process has ensured that issues relating to equality and social exclusion have received greater attention in recent Social Partnership agreements. This is not the responsibility of any one of the Pillars in isolation. A common understanding across Pillars, of the issues must be faced. The unique role that Government plays in the process must also be recognised. Most of the issues relating to equality and social exclusion cross the

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various boundaries of Government and other sectors. This has underlined the need for better systems of joined-up Government, if we are to make inroads into our country's deep rooted problems.

In her speech to the Social Partners in July 2005, The Táiniste stated that:

“The partnership agreements have allowed us to balance moderation in pay increases with reductions in taxation and increases in services. It was recognised we would all benefit from the economic and social gain that would follow.”

The evidence has shown that this is not the case. What is required, as we move towards negotiating a new national agreement, is a commitment to building a future which would ensure that economic progress is maintained, but which would also ensure maintaining a balance between economic and social development.

Develop an Infrastructure of Care

One area in which fairness and well being could be secured for some of our most marginalised and vulnerable citizens would be to introduce an infrastructure of care in Ireland. This infrastructure must provide access to services, income supports and specific measures to secure the full participation of target groups. *“Sustaining Progress”* commits to developing a strategic approach to providing an infrastructure of care services. To date, there have been significant gaps in developing an infrastructure of care. The focus has been on physical infrastructure, while social infrastructure has not been given the priority it requires.

A key element of this infrastructure of care is to develop properly resourced community services. These are essential to enable people to live with dignity and independence in the community. However, community services are still underfunded and underdeveloped in Ireland. Properly resourced community services also facilitate people to

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lead healthier, more fulfilling lives and allow them to participate and contribute as full and equal citizens in society. A significant and sustained investment by the State in community services would not only provide long term benefits for the individual, but for community and society as a whole. Such an analysis is consistent with the Population Health concept, which is taking centre stage, internationally and nationally in the development of health and personal social services. The cost of investment in community services will be offset by the positive impact it will have on individuals, their families and society as a whole. It is vital that these services are enhanced and further improved and resourced, as they provide the means by which people can achieve a greater quality of life, leading to full inclusion and equality.

However, the rationale for investing in community services is not justified on moral or social grounds alone. It also makes economic sense. Too often, investment in supports and services are viewed as a cost to the Exchequer. This ignores the fact that investment in an infrastructure of care - whether for people with disabilities, older people or young people - not only benefits the individual recipient in the short term, but also benefits the state in the longer term. When the State provides the resources for better and more appropriate services, it allows people who otherwise would be excluded, to access further education, training and employment, and enables them to make a greater contribution to society. Properly resourced community services ensure that the challenges of providing care and support is lessened for families, freeing them to contribute to our community and society.

Case Study: Disability

For the purpose of illustration, I will use examples from within the disability sector to explain the importance of developing an infrastructure of care.

Accommodation for those who experience Mental Illness:

The percentage of overall health funding allocated to mental health services has declined steadily in recent years. Current funding lies at 7% compared to 9.2% in Northern Ireland and 11% in England and Wales.¹ The under investment in mental health services in Ireland was brought into sharp focus recently when the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children, Mary Harney T.D., discussed the facilities available to people at the Central Mental Hospital. She said that this hospital:

*“is not a facility of which any of us could be proud. It is appalling and worse than my worst nightmares”.*²

People who experience mental illness require a range of accommodation options including crisis, respite, and supported residential accommodation. Having access to a range of accommodation options would enable people who experience mental illness to live in the community and decrease their need to stay long-term in hospital or acute units. The most up to date figures³ indicate that there are over 1,857 people long stay in psychiatric hospitals and units. However, a detailed study into the housing needs of those with enduring mental illness is required to identify the true needs in this area. The lack of sufficient community-based services and accommodation means that significant numbers of people who experience mental illness are either living long-term in mental health hospitals or being forced to remain in the family home beyond a time of their choosing. This has consistently been highlighted in the Reports of the Inspector of Mental Health Services.

If Government provided a range of accommodation options including crisis, respite, and supported accommodation, people would be empowered towards rehabilitation and recovery.

¹ The National Review of Mental Health Services Report, 2004, Page 121.

² Ministerial Presentation to Joint Oireachtas Committee on Health and Children by Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children, Mary Harney, T.D. July 20th 2005.

³ The National Review of Mental Health Services Report, 2004, Page 32.

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Adults with Significant Disabilities

This is a cohort of people aged between eighteen and sixty five who have either been born with or acquired a significant disability. This group includes people with a progressive neurological condition and / or those who have an acquired brain injury. A significant disability can be characterised by a set of complex needs that are persistent or episodic and long-term in nature.

The lack of appropriate accommodation for this group in the community means that many of them end up in inappropriate settings, such as acute hospitals and nursing homes for older people. A substantial number of adults with significant disabilities living in the community are residing with their families, who experience enormous pressure due to the limited support available to them.

This group also require significant complementary services such as home support, specialist, respite and day services. In the National Health Strategy,²⁰ the Government committed itself to a “*Programme of Investment*” to enhance “*Home support services, respite care, day care places, residential care including additional places for people with chronic conditions, other multi-disciplinary support services and Aids and Appliances*”.

Providing services in the community to support people who experience mental illness and adults with significant disabilities would enable these people to achieve a greater quality of life and the knock on positive effect on their families.

²⁰ National Health Strategy, Quality and Fairness-A Health System for You, Department of Health and Children 2001.

The Community and Voluntary Sector as an enabler

One of the key ways in which Ireland can strive to become an equal society is to support its vibrant community and voluntary sector. Community and Voluntary organisations are currently delivering a wide range of public supports and services, ranging from carers, children's services, housing services, youth work, services for people with disabilities and services for older people. The C & V Sector represents extraordinary value for money for the State, given the high standard of professional delivery of a diversity of services and supports. Much of this work is done in partnership with the Statutory Sector.

However, community and voluntary organisations are about more than the provision of services and supports. They are key to building a more inclusive society and in providing sectors of society with a voice to articulate views and visions. The significance of the Sector in terms of fostering community engagement and participative democracy must be acknowledged. The recently publicised work of Robert Putman emphasises this by underlining the importance of social capital in our society. The community and voluntary sector plays an important role in reviving the 'social capital' which Putman (2000) has commented that Ireland is losing in recent years. Voluntary organisations are the key way in which the public participate at an organised level across a huge range of social services. Paragraph 1.5 of the White Paper on Supporting Voluntary Activity is of key importance here. This states that:

'The Government regards statutory support of the Community and Voluntary sector as having an importance to the well-being of our society that goes beyond utilitarian concerns to do with 'purchase' of services by this or that statutory agency.' (2000)

We need to see the full implementation of this White Paper. The Taoiseach has stated that there is no doubt that the Government can

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provide an enabling framework to develop the activity of the Sector. To date, we have seen little implementation of this 'enabling framework'.

Conclusion

In the context of Ireland's dramatic success over the past few years, it seems to be that the group which has benefited least is the excluded, whether young, old, people with disabilities, carers, travellers, women or non-nationals. Government has the resources to address the imbalance and minimise social exclusion. The challenge which Ireland faces, as one of the wealthiest countries in the world, is to ensure that people are designed in to the development of the economy and society. The healthiest societies are not the wealthiest in financial terms, but the most equal.

Any society is measured on how it treats its most vulnerable. Minister Cowen, in his Budget 2005 speech, stated that:

"Government has a responsibility to ensure that the benefits of our economic performance permeate society as a whole. Proper budgetary policy involves careful evaluation and our task is to put together an economic model that builds a society of which we can all be proud" (2005: 5)

It is about the choices we make as a society and about the re-distribution of resources. By balancing the economic and social scales, society as a whole will benefit. Investing in those who are most excluded will result in a better society for all of our citizens.

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