6. Implementation of European Pillar of Social Rights.

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In this short paper, I wish to address the subject of The European Pillar of Social Rights using three perspectives.

1.0 Our approach to the financial recession in Europe
2.0 Our approach to the Pandemic of Covid-19
3.0 The role of Civil society, linked to the Conference of the future of Europe.

I do this as a way of exploring the approach to problem solving demonstrated by the actions of the European Union (EU) and national governments. I also come from the perspective that the EU as a union of European states can only affect change when it has the full permission of the union states and as we are seeing in the EU, states such as Poland, Hungary and others are asserting their rights under the subsidiarity principle to implement their own laws, even though those laws are contrary to many rights based international agreements. In Ireland we also have a record in delaying the implementation of directives through the seeking of derogations as was the case in the special areas of conservation directive. In the last decade, there was a concerted attempt by the EU to eradicate poverty by 2021. While progress was made the actual figures using Eurostat still point to around 118 million people in Europe are categorised as poor; which is almost the same as it was throughout the decade.

As an introduction, it is important to note that The European Pillar of Social Rights is a laudable and important document. It contains many, if not all, of the values and objectives that are well published by organisations such as *Social Justice Ireland*. These values as set out in the pillar seek to advance a historically documented drive to integrate principles of fairness, equality and justice in all parts of our governance. More importantly the pillar sets out a way in which each EU government can devise policy which systematically refer to each chapter contained in the pillar.

In economic terms, it should seriously establish a roadmap that will illustrate initiatives that eradicate poverty. Such initiatives are and should be more than simply increasing social welfare budgets, as if that is the only answer. Instead, they should be targeted in building a new infrastructure that will tackle deficits in education, in terms of lifelong learning; in health, in terms of equal access as well as lifelong supports. Also it should tackle weaknesses caused by poor mental wellbeing, especially since they relate to the overall quality of our health systems. In employment, the challenges start with the need for a proper living wage structure and the flexibility to adapt to the hugely changing landscapes affected by technology, digitalisation, climate change, age, disability and of course catering for wide range of diversity of people who are now part of the EU.

The action plan marks the following headline statements as attainable.

- At least 78% of the population aged 20 to 64 should be in employment by 2030
- At least 60% of adults should be participating in training every year by 2030
- A reduction of at least 15 million in the number of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

Certainly, many of us would cheer loudly if these basic actions would be achieved. However, given the failure to make any significant dent in the poverty numbers in the last decade, it is at least pertinent to question the feasibility of such plans.

When the financial recession struck the world starting in 2008 and becoming progressively worse as we entered the last decade, a number of countries, starting with Ireland were directly affected. Suddenly Ireland were now doing the unthinkable of nationalising the whole of the Irish Banking system. In doing that we assumed the full set of banking losses estimated at the time at €60 billion, with €30 billion lost in the Anglo Irish debacle. Immediately we were characterised as completely insolvent in European terms and found ourselves being governed by the famous troika. The resulting recovery plan was completely based on a series of budgets designed to impose the severest austerity measures in the history of the state. The result transferred millions of euros of debt directly to the household of ordinary people. Thousands of jobs were lost, many for good. Thousands of new house owners found themselves in negative equity and are still dealing with the consequences of that trauma. Wages were frozen and in many sectors they still are, with younger teachers and other low income earners having to take a cut in their starting pay, a legacy which still exists. The building industry, a previous source of massive employment collapsed, with the result that the resultant collapse of training has meant that there is now a serious shortage of skilled employees necessary for what remains to be an industry under stress. This legacy in terms of homelessness still remains.

Having accepted one of the most stringent set of austerity measures imposed upon us by the troika, we then had to stand aside and watch other EU members accept an easier recovery programme. Portugal, Greece and Spain, while still suffering from this crisis were allowed greater flexibility and although they still are recovering, they at least were not penalised in the same way. It needs to be said, that in Ireland's case, budgets did in large part preserve the various social welfare payments and while this was welcome, the massive cuts in services hit disproportionately people on lower incomes, thus denying them access to necessary services. These cuts affecting people in health, education and many other areas, impoverished people on lower incomes because they did not have alternative means of seeking necessary assistance. The real consequences for people meant that they were forced to go on lengthening waiting lists, thereby putting themselves at serious risk.

It also must be noted that the massive public debt was in effect transferred to individual households. Coupled with a dramatic decline in employment and inability to meet high mortgages, household were forced into greater levels of poverty. Meanwhile, all of the commitments made in EU directives to reduce poverty, increase training and achieve higher outcomes in terms of eradicating poverty were completely left aside. Since then we have congratulated ourselves in the way that we have managed the financial recession; yet have failed to explain why commitments made on inclusion and fairness still remain unmade. The fact remains that when looking at the EU itself there is a clear poverty divide between certain regions such as North /South and East /West. While there has been some improvement in overall incomes, due to the many programmes designed to transfer wealth. It has to be noted that much of the equality and rights dimension is bogged down in the member's assertion of their own laws and the widely respected subsidiarity principle, which governs much of EU directives. This principle as defined in Article 5 means that the EU doesn't take action (except in areas that fall within its exclusive competence), unless it is more effective than the action taken at national, regional or local level. However, in reality it means that unless countries actively sign up to agreements on directives, it is almost impossible to have these directives implemented and sadly when it comes to many progressive rights based directives, many members will seek derogations.

The contrast of policy in terms of Covid-19, could not be greater. Faced with a pandemic, which looked like it could kill millions of people, completely disrupt the various health systems across the EU and completely undermine the member states economies, the EU acted quickly. With the aid of the European Central Bank, it could now finance the massive tasks of researching, developing and distribution of vaccine, providing guarantees to member states to finance necessary supports for people who had lost jobs, people who were forced to isolate and for vulnerable people. At the same time, protection was arranged to support countries whose economies were seriously damaged as a result of adopting the necessary health measures to combat Covid-19. Even now governments are still dealing with the consequences of the pandemic. They continue to finance the measures in a manner that at least allows families to avoid the kind of poverty traps they fell into as a consequence of the recession. However, all of this has meant that the delivery of the action plan on social rights has halted and despite the fanfare, we continue to live with huge inequalities in our society. While governments put in place a wide range of economic supports, they also froze or change the conditions that underline some basic rights and freedoms. In large part the public accepted these curtailments. However, it is worrying that there is a temptation shown by governments across Europe to maintain some of these curtailments.

As a means of looking at some of the reasons why we are not delivering the action plan of the Pillar of Social Rights, it is necessary to look at the role of the community sector or in European language, the civil society in all of these crises. There is uniform acceptance that in times of crisis, civil society organisations are at the coal face of delivering assistance to families affected. Whether it is supplying basic food supplies, transport, medical supplies, financial advice and advocacy, community based organisations have a long history in adapting in a flexible manner to ensure that no one is left behind. Often they are made up of volunteers or, if they are lucky, are assisted by trained community organisers who ensure that all work is compliant to a range of regulations. For example, many families who had to isolate needed basic supplies in terms of food and medicine. These were often delivered by newly formed meals on wheels' groups or other delivery type groups. In many cases the needs were urgent and yet meeting them required proper discipline with regard to safety and health.

In itself, this means that the delivery of such services needs the assurance of regulation and in turn that has implications in terms of cost and training. Yet many voluntary organisations, some set up to meet an immediate need, needed to respond immediately and in doing that were often the main contacts available to people who were in immediate need of services.

The community and voluntary sector have traditionally been at the forefront of recognising rights violations. Indeed, it would be argued by many that the highlighting of rights violations has been primarily led by the voluntary sector. A cursory look at the chapters, almost 90% of its content originated in the learning of volunteers and activists, who are at the coalface and because of that can contribute enormously to the establishment of solutions.

And yet this sector is usually omitted from the policy making area. Across Europe, there is a well-established mechanism based on the social partnership model. Largely that refers to the structures set up by individual governments and the EU itself. These structures are based on the involvement of two main sectors; the trade unions and the employers.

In Ireland, we added for a brief period the community and voluntary pillar although it should be noted that the involvement was limited, confined to strictly social matters or issues seen by many as emanating on the margins of our society. The reluctance to involve civil society in areas of finance is unfortunate. Their omission weakens their effectiveness and allows the more traditional approach to funding and wealth creation to dominate. Yet this approach to wealth distribution has failed in the financial crisis and been largely abandoned in dealing with the pandemic.

As has been the case, many community and voluntary organisations, *Social Justice Ireland* being a prime example, do put forward solid economic analysis. The tragedy is often that they are only heard when it's too late. If we look at how the pandemic was financed, we find that the dreaded universal payment made to people who were no longer able to continue in their jobs was finally accepted as a principle and implemented. For a brief period, there was a union of the private and public health systems. On a macro scale the necessary economic tools to pay for these supports as well as the research needed to bring vaccines to all of Europe were deployed. In the financial crash, we breathed deeply and accepted the nationalisation of banks. Unfortunately, we did not use the crisis to reform our banking system meaning that we are one of the few countries who have not developed a public banking system. Yet it was a type of public banking system that served us well, i.e. the original Agricultural Credit Corporation and the Industrial corporation. Both of these were instrumental in funding the huge development of agriculture and small industries.

Any examination of these developments will quickly lead to the many policy proposals made mainly by the community and voluntary sector, but rejected on the basis that they did not fit the rigid austerity based economic systems that we have adopted. The current Conference on the future of Europe is a classic example of excluding the organisations in civil society. The concentration on citizen's panels, while welcome, fails to consider ways and means, which allow civil society organisations to participate in policy formation on a structured basis.

In conclusion, it is necessary to note that despite the action plan's promise that the Pillar of Social Rights will be delivered, the facts still demonstrate that we have in Europe around 20% living below the poverty line. We are struggling with delivering on a range of social rights and thereby leaving behind large minorities who are both economically and socially excluded in our society. Again using Eurostat, in 2016, 39.2% of non EU born population in the EU are assessed to be at risk of poverty or social exclusion, a risk significantly higher than the 22.8% of what's classified as the native population. The consequences leading from that figure leads inevitably to the fact that the exclusion means that the Pillar of Social Rights has a long way to go.

And when you consider the difficulties within the EU concerning member states such as Poland and Hungary, it becomes clear that the Pillar of Social Rights will not be implemented in full.

The European Pillar of Social Rights remains a valuable document. However, it has been bedevilled by world events for example Covid-19, the legacy of the recession, climate change, Brexit and a range of other issues that demand priority. It has also been affected by the growing ultra-right nationalist groups, whose pronouncements on social rights are more likely to exclude than include. It suffers also from the lack of a better targeted and more focused system of accountability. In particular, it could do with a stronger measurement system, both of outcomes and affects. Properly implemented it could bring the EU back to some of the principles that were part of the foundation. To be successful, it needs to be embedded in the wider macro-economic policy deliberation and crucially needs to include in a real way all relevant civil society organisations at the same level as social partnership. For many citizens, particularly people who live on the margins, the European Pillar of Social Rights is their only hope and represents a huge opportunity for the EU and its member states to demonstrate the uniqueness of the European Union.