

Community Work Ireland¹ (CWI) and the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) Ireland collaborate annually to organise a series of workshops to support participation at the Social Inclusion Forum and to identify issues of concern to people affected by poverty and the organisations working with them. This year, three workshops and a focus group were held in Athlone, Mayo (including Clare Island) and Dublin. The main themes emerging from the workshops are presented below. Text boxes contain the words of participants

1. Implementation, Progress & Feedback

As in previous years, the gap between policy in relation to poverty reduction and social inclusion on the one hand and policy implementation and actual visible positive change on the other was highlighted as a key issue. While the annual Social Inclusion Forum was welcomed as one of the very few opportunities to engage with government and senior civil servants, but there were doubts about whether it actually makes any difference.

'Government cannot say it doesn't know what the issues are – they have been well documented and researched'

There were also general concerns about the Budget process and the contradictory nature of policies being implemented by the Government. For example, there are established goals to lift people out of poverty but in practice the last number of budgets have had a hugely detrimental impact on lone parents and children. Funding cuts have also been hugely damaging to organisations that work at grass-roots level to address child and other types of poverty.

2. In Work Poverty/Equality of Work

There was much discussion at all the workshops about unemployment, employment, in-work poverty, the quality of work and labour market activation.

Employment Opportunities

The lack of employment opportunities was noted throughout. In rural areas, it is extremely difficult to identify any job, not to mind jobs that pay well. While there may be a perception that it is easier in urban areas, many stated that this was not the case. The situation is even more difficult for Travellers, migrants and people parenting alone.

There was much discussion about the nature of labour market schemes such as Community Employment and Tús. A number of participants had direct experience of

the schemes. The Rural Social Scheme was highlighted as a scheme that works for the participants and the communities in which they operate. Many reported that they valued the experience of being on CE, RSS and Tús and felt that it was really useful to get them into the mindset of working.

'Unemployment leads you into a rut. At least a scheme gets you out of the house and gets you physically and mentally ready for work. What a pity they are only for a year'

However, there was consensus that the additional social welfare payment, while welcome, does not go nearly far enough to defray the cost of working, including childcare, transport, food and other costs. This is sufficient to preclude many from participating in schemes, even though they are seen as a means of returning to the labour market.

The lack of support available to assist individuals to identify suitable schemes was criticised in some areas. In these places, there is little support to find a suitable scheme despite the fact that there are Intreo services in the areas.

The lack of continuity in schemes was also criticised. A number of participants stated that they had participated in schemes and gained valuable experience only to have to leave after a year and to be 'back at square one'.

A number of participants raised concerns about the increasing precariousness of entry/re-entry level jobs. Participants stated that while work may be of reasonable quality the pay may be poor or uncertain. This raised questions about the unsustainability of available work.

Labour Market Activation

There was a significant discussion about the current labour market activation policy. Concern was expressed at the quality of jobs that many are being required to take to avoid financial sanction. Those that had experience of labour market activation were particularly critical of what they see as being forced to take any job

¹ Community Work Ireland was formally the Community Workers' Co-operative

to get them off the live-register. A number of participants found the Department of Social Protection's aggressive focus on 'work first' unhelpful.

A number of participants had experience of JobPath and were highly critical of the service that had been provided to them.

'I was called into JobPath and I just sat down and trawled through job sites. There was no substance and no support provided'

There was an understanding that JobPath works on a commission basis and participants felt that the concerns to get the commission, outweighed concerns to ensure the client is supported into meaningful work.

A number of people also had experience of JobBridge and stated that jobs at the end of the internship are rare. Abuses on JobBridge were also related and there are concerns that employers are not being held to account.

'Employers are using internships instead of real jobs. It's not fair on people, particularly young people'

JobPlus was also an issue of discussion and people raised concerns at the State subsidising low pay jobs.

There was a suggestion that the State establish an employment agency that brings people in at entry-level wages, creates a structured career path for them and facilitate them to engage with the wider labour market. The need to improve long term supports was also highlighted.

While mental health was a theme cutting across many issues, participants felt that those with mental health issues really need to be supported by the Department of Social Protection and be exempt from many of the labour market activation activities.

Barriers to work

'If the government is serious about getting people out to work it has to provide the necessary services to allow people to do this. Many people do not have access to a car and relying on public transport is not a runner – it's too expensive and the buses are not frequent enough. Childcare is also a huge issue – how are people supposed to take up work when there is nobody to mind the kids or if there is a service, it is too expensive'

Participants felt very strongly that the barriers to work needed to be highlighted. The main barriers identified throughout were the lack of affordable, accessible, childcare and transport services. These are acting as significant deterrents to many people taking-up employment. They affect all areas but are particular barriers in rural areas.

'The DSP are more focused on sanctions now. Individuals have to follow instructions exactly or they face payments being reduced'

It was suggested that Ireland needs a National Employment and Career Development Strategy that would take the needs of the person seeking work or seeking improved employment into account.

3. Poverty and Rural Communities, Rural Isolation and Social Exclusion

Many of the participants from rural areas felt that the general issues and challenges being faced by Irish society are exacerbated in rural areas. They reported significant effects of the recession on towns and villages and said that the so called recovery is non-existent in rural areas.

The participants from rural areas wanted it noted that there are significantly higher costs of living in rural than urban areas.

Transport issues are significant in rural areas. Many stated that public transport services are wholly inadequate and are precluding many from participating in economic and social activities. Missing hospital appointments is a big issue in rural areas and participants stated that this is mainly due to the lack of transport available to many people and the failure of the health service to take into account the distances that have to be travelled and the lack of public transport.

It was acknowledged that public services are in crisis all over the country but there was particular mention of services in rural areas that are, in many areas, non-existent. Participants felt that the 'efficiency model' for the delivery of services is population based, but argued that people in rural areas should have the right to access the same level of services as in all other areas.

Older people, particularly in rural and island communities, are facing extreme isolation. Cutbacks to services mean that there are few supports available. Community supports have been significantly impacted by budget reductions.

Crime, and the fear of crime, are significant issues in rural areas. Older people are particularly affected. The closure of rural Garda stations has meant that there is a much reduced level of policing in rural areas.

People from island communities face even more barriers as there are few if any job opportunities. There are also very human issues associated with children having to leave island communities at very young ages to attend

'We do get a grant to offset the costs [of the child attending school and having to live on the mainland] but it's terrible watching him having to leave on a Sunday night'

schools on the mainland and there is little dialogue between parents and host families, which could be improved.

4. Poverty and Urban Communities/Contributing Social Issues

The challenges in urban areas were highlighted including intergenerational unemployment and low education. While people in urban areas might be thought to have better access to facilities and services, these are often not available. Health and mental health services are generally not available at weekends and access to community facilities are also being curtailed. It was felt that some particularly disadvantaged communities are 'left to their own devices' by the state and not adequately resourced.

While not solely an issue in urban areas, the issue of drugs was mentioned as being significant and growing in urban areas.

5. Joblessness and Families in Poverty

There was consensus that the issues of in-work poverty and quality of work were intrinsically linked to joblessness and families in poverty.

The issue of joblessness was considered to be a significant issue in both urban and rural areas. It was suggested that it particularly affects women where they have a male partner as they are generally regarded as a qualified adults and not entitled to the same supports.

There was consensus that there needs to be greater supports for people who are jobless but not necessarily on the live register. It was agreed that work generates self-confidence and independence. However, it was emphasised that all engagement with services needs to be voluntary in nature and there should be no coercion or threat of sanction on people.

There were suggestions that there needs to be far greater emphasis on creative ways to encourage people back to work such as social enterprises, community enterprises and apprenticeships.

People called for the system to develop its capacity to provide more flexible supports to support a wide range of people to participate and engage in their community and in the labour market and for the system to develop a broad understanding of work and the importance of participation on people's health and wellbeing and their sense of themselves.

6. Cross-cutting Themes

Migrants and Asylum Seekers

It was noted that all of the issues mentioned have an even greater impact on migrants, particularly those that have become undocumented.

Those living in direct provision are living in real and deep poverty. The fact that people awaiting the outcome of asylum applications are now allowed to work was regarded as being inhumane.

The difficulties associated with leaving the direct provision system were also discussed. There are no supports for people leaving – they are responsible for securing their own accommodation at a time when this is very difficult and expensive. There are enormous difficulties for people associated with trying to save sufficient money for a deposit. The HAP (Housing

'Nobody, not the Department of Social Protection, nobody is taking responsibility for supporting people to move from direct provision'

Assistance Payment) is not based on realistic rent levels and people are often forced to source accommodation in rural areas where they are far from support systems.

The difference between the way that those living in direct provision are being treated compared to the level of supports being planned for programme refugees was noted. There was agreement that all refugees should be treated equally and a lot better than the current direct provision system.

It was strongly suggested that the length of time that people spend in direct provision should count towards their entitlement to services such as education.

Travellers

Similarly, it was noted that Travellers continue to experience high levels of discrimination and racism. This affects all areas of their lives including education and employment. Literacy and joblessness are huge issues for Travellers and there are few Travellers in third level education – this requires remedial supportive action by the State. Cuts to supports for Traveller education have had a very negative impact.

Young people

The reduced rate of social welfare for young people was discussed at a number of the workshops. It was stated that this is having a hugely detrimental effect on young people and their ability to develop independence.

Housing, Rent & Homelessness

The issues of housing, rent and homelessness were discussed in a number of the workshops. Participants from rural areas stated that the issue is presented as an urban problem. However, homelessness, particularly hidden homelessness, is also an issue in rural areas. It was acknowledged that the homelessness crisis in urban areas, particularly Dublin, Cork and Limerick is huge and efforts to address it have to redoubled.

The crisis in social housing was very well known to participants, some of whom are experiencing the effects of the crisis themselves and many of whom work with people experiencing or vulnerable to homelessness.

The crisis was acknowledged to be even more difficult for single people as it is difficult for them to be included on the housing lists. Participants also highlighted the plight of families at risk or in homelessness and the lack of suitable emergency accommodation in urban and rural areas.

The particular vulnerability of people living in rented accommodation was noted. As already mentioned, there was general consensus that the HAP and other rent supports, are unrealistic and not linked to the reality of rents.

With regard to Traveller accommodation it was stated that Traveller Accommodation Plans are still not being implemented and there are huge problems for young Traveller families accessing accommodation.

Debt

The increasing levels of debt being experienced by many was noted. Asylum seekers and others that need access to cash are vulnerable to money lenders that charge exorbitant rates. It was strongly felt that the State needs to bring tighter controls on the interest rates charged. The important work of MABS was again noted.

Participants stressed that the amount allowed for transport in a Debt Relief Notice is entirely insufficient, particularly in rural areas. The new credit union *It Makes Sense* facility to provide small loans at low interest rates was welcomed and it was stressed that this needs to be rolled-out throughout the country as soon as possible.

Mental Health

Mental health continues to be a significant issue in many communities at a time when services to assist people to maintain mental health and wellbeing and/or address their mental health concerns are cut.

Older people

The issue of older people being supported to remain in their homes for as long as possible was raised by participants who highlighted the expense associated with failing to provide cost-efficient community-based supports leading to older people being forced to remain unnecessarily in expensive hospital beds serving neither the older person nor the tax payer.

It was also noted that older people are now being increasingly asked to subsidise their children's mortgage applications and/or act as unpaid child minders.

Carers

The difficult situation of carers was also mentioned. Many are isolated and many are aging with few supports or respite.

Education

The importance of education was mentioned a number of times. Participants felt that education is an important route out of poverty but noted the prohibitive costs for many. There was consensus that education should be available free of charge to people, including at third level. Free third level education should also be available to the children of asylum seekers.

Community Organisations

The importance of community organisations was particularly highlighted. Many participants stated that since the demise of the Community Development Programme and cuts to other community projects, opportunities to address issues at an early stage had severely diminished.

Existing services such as Family Resource Centres and Money Advice and Budgeting Services were emphasised as being particularly important to individuals and communities facing a wide variety of difficulties. Many participants had direct experience of these organisations and noted that these services have been subjected to significant cuts at a time when the demand for services has increased exponentially.

The type of demands being made on services has also changed and organisations are dealing with the fall-out from the lack of public services, including social work, the lack of step-down facilities for older people and people experiencing mental health difficulties.

The impact of local government reform was highlighted and there was consensus that it has been a very challenging experience that was ill-thought out. The impact of this and the trend towards tendering for community supports and services is thought to be extremely detrimental to a community sector that needs to be independent to thrive.

The issue of 'red tape; and bureaucracy was mentioned as being detrimental to community supports. There were suggestions that funding streams could be made more user-friendly.

SICAP, FRC and other funding stream need to be improved. There was consensus that this funding needs to be maintained as grants as opposed to being contracted out.

Community Work Ireland
www.communityworkireland.ie

EAPN
www.eapn.ie