Key messages to the Social Inclusion Forum 2018

Community Work Ireland

EAPN Ireland
European Anti-Poverty Network Ireland

Community Work Ireland (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 there were six local meetings in Castleblayney, Ennis, Letterkenny, Tipperary, Kilcoole in Wicklow, and Cork City. The main themes emerging from the workshops are presented below. Text boxes contain the words of participants.

Understanding and addressing poverty

Poverty levels continue to be unacceptably high. There is a *consistency of inequality* across the groups and communities that continuously have the highest rates of poverty – including children, lone parents and those who are unemployed. In parallel, there is a lack of visibility of some issues and groups including for example, Travellers, migrants, people in direct provision and low-income farmers in the data used to measure poverty with a consequent absence of poverty reduction targets for these communities. Concern was expressed at the poverty enforced on people living in direct provision and there was a call to end the system and to provide for real opportunities for asylum seekers to work.

There is little analysis of the intersectional nature of poverty and of how poverty impacts on people who are at risk for multiple reasons. This analysis deficit needs to be addressed and a greater emphasis placed on those who are currently invisible ensuring that their voices and experiences are clearly represented at the centre of policy and programme design and implementation. The data collected by local organisations needs to be acknowledged and used more effectively at national level to give a more detailed and inclusive picture.

Many groups and individuals, including those who are working in low paid sectors do not have enough income to live with dignity, with many living on incomes below the poverty line. Social Welfare payments and other benefits continue to force people below the poverty line. When an older person is widowed, for example, their household income is greatly reduced but many bills are not. The workshop in Donegal highlighted that it has the lowest average income in the country.

Delivering an Action Plan for Social Inclusion

'Let's be very clear – high level goals need to be balanced with the real community work that happens in marginalised communities. Unless the two are seen as equally important, the new National Action Plan will see little progress'.

The commitment in the Programme for Government to produce a new National Action Plan for Social Inclusion was acknowledged but the delay in doing so was highlighted as a major concern. There was consensus that strong political will to significantly address current poverty levels in Ireland is required including a genuine commitment to implementation.

There was significant agreement that community development as an integral part of the new National Action Plan for Social Inclusion is a pre-requisite for meaningful progress to be made in addressing the ongoing and persistent poverty and social exclusion experienced by so many in our society. There was consensus too that genuine engagement should be able to move from quality consultations to clear and transparent outcomes. There has to be oversight and sanctions.

Implementation

If the Action Plan on Social Inclusion is to achieve anything real, it needs robust implementation structures and processes nationally that are reflected locally. To have any credibility and to ensure accountability, oversight needs to be independent of the state.

'Robust structures to ensure real progress to address poverty and social exclusion need to be mirrored at local level. If we are stuck with LCDCs and LECPs, they need to be far stronger'

The need for greater joined up thinking and cooperation by local agencies continues to be highlighted. There is a need for County Action Plans for Social Inclusion to mirror the National Plan. The Local and Community Development Committees and Local Economic and Community Plans have a role to play in supporting the monitoring and co-ordinating of social inclusion plans at local level, but these, it was stated are nowhere near as effective as they need to be if they are to become a real tool in the struggle to address poverty.

Community Work

> 'Community work is not sufficiently valued – it's not seen as a real partnership and the contribution that it makes is not sufficiently acknowledged.'

The complex nature of the issues that community work seeks to address was highlighted. There was consensus that funding should be enabling and empowering of communities but currently involves control by Government Departments and there is a disconnect between local needs and what is being funded. There was agreement that there is a need to return to a partnership way of working where community organisations identify their own needs and the strategies required to address them with the state support this work.

> 'One size does not fit all. When programmes are designed at national level without reference to local needs there will always be a disconnect.''

The issues of resourcing and recognising community development was raised and there was agreement that the sector continues to be very under-resourced, particularly in relation to core funding, with a serious deterioration since the ending of the Community Development Programme. More recognition is needed for outreach to support the engagement of communities as well as their access to services. There is a lack of joined up thinking and holistic working. Departments need designated people with experience of core community development work.

> 'This trend towards commissioning is having a hugely detrimental effect on community work but also on the communities we work with – we can't respond to the issues they raise as we are tied into targets. While there was been an improvement, there needs to be a different relationship with the state.

There was consensus that the policy focus on labour market activation (LMA) needs to change to understand social inclusion in broader terms, with a greater focus on real community work to address social exclusion.

> 'A focus on Labour Market Activation assumes that everyone is starting from the same point and this is not the case at all. For many coming to an interview is huge progress – this needs greater acknowledgement.'

Within the focus on LMA, it was highlighted that the focus is exclusively on the individual accessing employment, any employment. There is no focus on the 'market' to respond with decent jobs.

There needs to be more investment in community services and some areas need greater community spaces

> 'People are already at a low ebb because they are unemployed and then they are forced to look at a computer for 30 minutes – that's the support they get. Or they are forced into low-paid employment. The contradictions are startling.'

for providing information (including in different languages), run local programmes etc. Some people are also far from the existing centres. It was proposed that local councils should own and run these centres as many communities experience difficulties in running them.

Regulation & Compliance Requirements

The increasing burden of regulation and compliance was much discussed. There was consensus that it can be a struggle for community organisations to meet the requirements of regulation and compliance. This is particularly the case for smaller organisations with few resources. While there is still strong volunteerism it is not recognised or valued. The increasing governance burden is creating problems with getting and retaining volunteers and is particularly problematic for smaller groups.

Housing and Accommodation

There was consensus that housing and homelessness is possibly the greatest issue currently facing the country.

> 'We need rights-based approach to the provision of housing. The Finnish model is worth looking at. In Ireland we pay way too much to private landlords.'

Policies to address homelessness need to be holistic and look at the far-reaching impacts.

The lack of housing, including social and affordable housing, temporary accommodation and refuges for women experiencing domestic abuse is a significant issue. There is sub-standard accommodation as well as overcrowding and hidden homelessness, including for Travellers. This impacts on mental health. There is no real access to the housing list once you are defined as having a roof over your head.

The dependence on the private rented sector is a problem, particularly as rents increase. Rent caps are needed, especially for private rented accommodation. There should be controlled rent related to income, living costs and vastly improved security of tenure. The Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) as a whole needs to be reassessed. Some landlords are still not allowing access to Housing Assistance Payment and Rental Accommodation Scheme tenants.

Local Authorities need to build housing and there needs to be planning for sustainable communities to include community facilities, youth services, schools, etc,

There is an ongoing lack of provision of appropriate Traveller specific accommodation, including halting sites and an increase in the number of Travellers living in mobile homes on the roadside with no access to housing. At the same time unspent funding by local authorities is being returned to the Department of Housing annually.

Local authority staff need training to give them the expertise to work with the issues presented to them and sanctions are needed where plans and policies are not being adhered to. In general, the Government needs to implement the plans that are already in place.

Issues in rural areas

Geographical disadvantage is an issue and isolation for rural areas where people feel excluded socially and economically ignored by Government. There is a fear that Brexit will have a detrimental impact. There needs to be more investment and 'rural proofing' of all plans. Technology could be used to support people in more remote areas to participate national forums and discussions.

Discrimination

Many groups in society experience high levels of discrimination and inequality. This is experienced across all areas of society including access to jobs and accommodation. Some also experience it from frontline staff in services. Among those groups mentioned were people from ethnic minority backgrounds such as Travellers and migrants, people with disabilities (including invisible disabilities) and others. It is also experienced because of a person's socio-economic status.

Transport

The lack of public transport is some areas, particularly rural areas was highlighted. Many see transport as being urban focused and linking major urban centres but not

'There can be no discussion on social inclusion with a discussion on transport – accessible, affordable transport for rural areas and others such as people with disabilities. It is key to enabling participation and

linking many areas people where people need to access for services or work. The cost of transport is an issue, both public and private e.g. the cost of a private car and taxis. In rural areas people need a car resulting in additional difficulties and costs.

Early Childhood Care & Education

'Our model of child care is driven by economics. It's about getting both parents out to work. Staff are underpaid and under-valued. There is an onus on them to achieve qualifications, but they have to pay for these themselves on low incomes. In addition, there is now no end to the paperwork they have to fill out.'

There is a need to look at the new policies and potential (unintended) consequences. Some childcare providers are leaving the market because of compliance issues – there is no emphasis on support for them, the sanction comes first. The new affordable childcare system was seen by some as a flawed system – there will be a new onus on parents to identify what they are entitled to and this will be restrictive for many.

The service is not up to standard for a modern European economy. More investment is vital. There is a need for more places across all areas including drop-in childcare and places for those under 2 years of age. This would create opportunities for families, especially single parents, to get back to work. Affordability is a huge factor.

Childcare workers are low paid, and many cannot get benefits. There is a need for a funded programme to ensure that staff are adequately trained and paid in addition to getting proper holidays and sick leave. Low pay creates issues for the retention of staff. In professionalising childcare however, we need to also support those who have worked in the sector for a long time.

There are still issues for community childcare groups regarding funding and capacity building. Community based childcare service are dependent on Community Employment (CE), but there has been a problem in recruiting CE participants. There needs to be an enhanced capital grant to community-based childcare.

Governance, paperwork and reporting process are a big burden on services.

Work

In some areas, and particularly highlighted in Donegal, Clare and Tipperary, there is a lack of industry and jobs, especially quality jobs. There is a need for investment, development and use of locally grown produce and most importantly imagination in ensuring there are quality jobs available in more rural areas. There is need for a change of attitude to and in how people who are unemployed are treated, including the attitude of some department staff.

The un-paid work carried out by people on a voluntary basis is not adequately recognized, but volunteers are doing jobs that are the Government's responsibility. This includes schools and community groups which depend on the CE Scheme and other part-time workers.

Many agencies are happy to have CE Scheme workers instead of paid employees. The agencies benefit but there are no full-time employment opportunities.   Also, many receive no real training for their jobs and often have no progression plan. It was proposed to keep people on CE and TUS schemes for longer and with greater employment supports. There must be clear progression plans with training budgets to offer long-term employment opportunities to those participating. FETAC course and work experience are important to build participant's confidence as well as education and literacy skills.

Some expressed a fear of Government's view that we are 'near full employment'. This is not the case for many and in many areas where greater supports are needed.

There was significant criticism of JobPath which was seen as punitive and restrictive with some staff not adequately trained to support people.

People with Disabilities need long term specific interventions to move into employment but there is inadequate support. Companies need strategies to support disabled people coming into the workforce, including subsidies. For those working to support people with disabilities into employment the targets are too high to work meaningfully with people.

Unpaid carers are also not sufficiently recognized and need greater recognition and support.

The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection needs to be more flexible for micro businesses in disadvantaged area.

Education

There is a lack of resources to support Traveller and Roma children to progress and to challenge the structural and institutional obstacles they face. For many it results in mental health issues.   For those with disabilities it was felt that there is still a failure to adequately support those with special needs and it was highlighted that school autism units should be resourced and not just built. We also need a transfer plan from early years to schools to third level.

Health

Many communities, including Travellers, experience health inequalities. Traveller life expectancy is well below that of the rest of society. Many people don't access adequate dental care and some health services are not available in Donegal. Healthcare and reproductive health are not included in the definition of poverty. Many people with mental health issues, including young people, face long waiting lists to access services.

Migrants and integration

The needs of migrants are not being adequately met. There is only one-year support for the Resettlement Programme, which is not enough. Intercultural organisations in Donegal and other areas are completely un-funded. Migrant integration needs to be better funded including sponsorship from public and private sources to support more community involvement. Direct Provision needs to be ended and asylum seekers given right to work in quality jobs that they can realistically access. Asylum seekers leaving the system are often deskilled and face discrimination. There is a lack of courses for those in Direct Provision and other migrants. Measures need to be taken to regularise undocumented migrants. Changes are needed to allow greater opportunities for migrants to access employment, including addressing discrimination. There is need for better communications within and between government agencies responsible for dealing with migrant documentation and credentials to ensure consistency and the efficient provision of support. Also need data centralization.

Older people

There was consensus that there needs to be far greater planning for sustainable publicly funded pensions given that people are living longer so that older people do not find themselves living in poverty.

Comments on other Workshop Themes

Public Sector Duty – This may be a useful tool but there is no evidence of where it has been used to make a difference yet. The ability to enforce should be backed up by powers of investigation and sanction.

Role of the SIF – It should be to create a vision, to hear voices and to hold government to account for progress in relation to poverty and social inclusion. It needs to be truly independent and robust. This is not currently the case.

SDGs – Difficult to comment in the absence of the national action plan. To date they have been little but a branding exercise so it will be useful to see how they can be used as a tool for change.

Equality proofing public expenditure – This could be very useful if used to mitigate the worst impacts of public expenditure decisions.