

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 Waterford, Tralee, Dundalk, Dublin and Castlerea, Co. Roscommon and a focus group with community workers. The workshops were attended by a total of 110 participants including individuals who experience poverty, inequality and social exclusion and others working in and with marginalised communities. The main themes emerging from the workshops are presented below. Text boxes contain the words of participants.

Poverty Levels, Strategy & Measurement

Progress on addressing poverty is regarded as unacceptably slow and participants expressed frustration at what is seen as lack of seriousness and commitment to addressing poverty, particularly at a structural level.

The extremely high cost of living, in particular, the cost of housing, was highlighted as a key area of concern. This leads to people not having an adequate income even to afford the basics. It includes many people in work who are living in poverty and experiencing ongoing deprivation.

Fuel poverty and the high cost of oil and fuel is a big issue especially for those on low incomes

The €5 social welfare increase in Budget 2019 was seen as positive but rent increases for those in social housing e.g. in Dublin, including increases in differential rents, almost completely eroded the 2019 increase. The need to ensure that people on social welfare have an adequate income was emphasised while also putting in place supports to incentivise and motivate those who can to access work.

Poverty is hidden and dispersed – because people and families are getting HAP, they often live in areas that are not included in SICAP or other target areas

Many who are working are in poverty and participants highlighted the hidden taxes for those in low income work with many also having no medical card and facing difficulty paying for medicines. Many need a car and have to pay car tax and insurance in instalments which increases the cost. It was proposed that there should be no additional costs if someone gets car tax for 3 or 12 months.

Measures of poverty are focused on the symptoms rather than the causes of poverty and social exclusion. Addressing poverty at a structural level will involve examining wealth and its redistribution, and investing in quality and affordable services and can only be addressed

How many years are we waiting for the new National Action Plan? Is it really going to be presented without any real consultation? The lack of consultation flies in the face of national and international requirements to consult stakeholders, including the requirements contained in the Sustainable Development Goals

by a whole-of-government Government approach. In that context, participants noted that the new **National Social Inclusion Strategy** is not yet published and further noted the lack of consultation during the development phase of the strategy, which goes against national and international requirements to consult with stakeholders. There was consensus that, while it is too late now for consultation on the new Strategy, which participants felt was a *fait accompli*, there is a need for a commitment from the highest levels that robust review processes will include processes that go beyond consultation to stakeholder participation.

Consultation is not rocket science. There is a myriad of guidelines available. What is essential is commitment to consultation and an understanding that consultation makes for better policy-making. It is too late now for consultation on the National Strategy so what we need is a clear commitment to robust processes built into the implementation of the Strategy.

Participants felt that the elements that make up the material deprivation measure of poverty need to be expanded to include being able to afford transport, housing and health, essential to a basic quality of life. It was also stated that the measure needs to take account of the unavailability of services, particularly in rural areas but generally in areas outside of the main cities.

Not being able to afford something is one thing but what if you can't access it in the first place? The measurements really needs to be updated.

The discussion on measuring poverty extended to the Affluence and Deprivation Index used by a range of government departments to allocate resources. A

number of issues were raised here, including the extent of hidden poverty and the dispersal of poverty throughout areas considered to be affluent, largely because they are in receipt of the Housing Assistance Payment and in private rented accommodation. Participants drew attention to the fact that the Resource Allocation Model is based on this Index and used to decide the level of resources to each area. While there was agreement that some type of RAM is required, the current one does not take into account this dispersal of poverty or the nature of poverty in rural areas where access to services is a real challenge and can often be far more expensive than in urban areas.

People are really struggling but it is not always visible. The RAM and the targets that are set preclude us from working with people that really need it. There are a large number of refugees living in [name of area] but the Index indicates this is an affluent area – work we do there is not counted by the system

The targets set by the Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme (SICAP) was also raised. There was consensus amongst those engaged with SICAP that the targets often do not take account for local circumstances and the hidden nature of poverty.

Implementation & Accountability

There was consensus that there are issues with accountability and implementation of actions and strategies to address poverty and social exclusion. It was noted that there are a number of useful strategies but there are gaps in their implementation and further gaps in seeing real progress/change at local and national levels.

It was felt that the monitoring mechanisms for progress on poverty and social inclusion need to be reviewed and given additional status. The efforts to re-establish the network of social inclusion officers in each government department was welcomed and these efforts need to be improved if the objective to achieve a collaborative approach is to be achieved.

It was noted that SIF2018 focused on the SIF itself and re-establishing it as a robust accountability mechanism. Many participations felt that SIF had lost direction and needed to be re-established as a real mechanism for accountability on progress.

How do we get the words on the pages of the National Report into action? Do these forums work? Does anything change?

Collaborative Working at Local & National Levels

It was noted that collaborative approaches to the implementation of policy is gaining traction in a number of areas. There was consensus that this approach to achieving shared outcomes is to be welcomed. The implementation of Healthy Ireland initiatives was mentioned as a good example of what can be achieved if a collaborative approach is taken.

SICAP is seen as the only social inclusion programme but the other LCDC partners have far bigger budgets. The LCDC mechanism has failed to get them to use their resources collaboratively

There were mixed opinions on the new infrastructure at local level such as the Local Community Development Committees and the Public Participation Networks. Some felt that, while they were not perfect, the LCDCs were some attempt to foster collaboration at local level. Others felt that the LCDCs were merely an added layer in an already bureaucratic system and they have largely failed in ensuring that LCDC members from government departments and agencies collaborate on locally shared targets.

In most areas, PPNs are just another part of local government. Since when have local authorities been able to foster participation and engagement? They need to be independent of local authorities. But there is a huge PR machine behind them and criticism of them is not taken well

Public Participation Networks (PPNs) were not seen as bottom-up structures or mechanisms for participation of those who are most marginalised. Many PPNs lack an understanding of how to support participation. It was highlighted that many community groups join the PPN because it is a criterion for accessing funding in some areas. This gives the illusion of support for PPNs when this is not the reality in many areas.

The funding mechanisms divides people. The competition has eroded relationships. And then they expect people to work together?

Community Development

It was highlighted that if the voices of marginalised communities are to be heard, there needs to be a strengthening of participation and the voice of representative groups. This is the work of community development but there was consensus that the infrastructure for supporting participation and collaboration at local level has been eroded. Community development structures have been decimated by political and policy design, and community development has been reduced to one strand of the SICAP programme. Local groups have had their funding cut and some have had to close without any consultation. Many existing

organisations now have to focus on providing services and find themselves competing with each other for resources to carry out programmes. There was agreement that, to be effective, community development needs to be autonomous and enabled to identify responses to poverty and social exclusion that are suitable to the area in which it is working.

Community development has been decimated – we really need autonomous infrastructure and programmes if we are serious about collaboration and making a real impact on poverty and social exclusion

There was strong agreement across the workshops that marginalised communities have been disempowered and have become the recipients of services rather than supported to be active participants in their own communities and in decisions that affect them. There was consensus that to bring about change and seriously address poverty and exclusion it is crucial to (re)build this voice and the relationship with and between marginalised communities.

Getting more from data

Participants believed that the data and information sources currently used is problematic for a number of reasons:

- The main sources of data, such as SILC, fail to capture minorities, including Travellers;
- The over-reliance on quantitative data completely fails to reflect the lived experience and the impact of poverty on people and communities;
- The over-reliance on income as a measure of poverty fails to reflect more comprehensive notions of wellbeing;
- There is a myriad of data being collected at local, regional and national levels by community organisations and government agencies but there are few attempts to collate the information being gathered.

There was consensus that while there needs to be much more qualitative data used to understand and address poverty, informed by the people and communities who experience and understand it best. There also needs to be far better joined-up-thinking on how to combine, share and collate data across agencies and organisations.

Social inclusion and people with disabilities

The signing of the Irish Sign Language Act 2017 into law in early 2018 was seen as a very positive development. However, there was consensus that people with disabilities still face many barriers to full participation. The added cost of disability was highlighted and a

number of participants with disabilities indicated that the cost of their disability is significant, particularly in relation to healthcare needs. Access to accessible services was also highlighted, particularly transport services.

There was consensus that there needs to be a clamp-down on behaviour that inhibits people with disabilities such as parking on footpaths, bins and other items being left on walkways and cyclists on footpaths. Participants highlighted that access to employment is still very difficult and the 'reasonable' accommodation requirement on employers does not go far enough to ensure that people with disabilities can access decent employment. There also needs to be far greater measures to support entrepreneurship for people with disabilities as well as creating greater awareness of disabilities amongst employers. It was proposed that projects like the three-year Ability Project should be mainstreamed in the community.

In general, there was consensus that expectations for people with disabilities need to be raised among the general public, agencies and among people with disabilities themselves who have been conditioned to have low expectations for themselves.

It was proposed that Government Departments incorporate Universal Design for Technology and that RTE mainstream signing across its schedule and not just for the few selected programmes it covers currently.

Housing & Accommodation and Social Inclusion

It was agreed that the crisis in housing and accommodation is the biggest issue facing people right now and that Government policy on housing and accommodation is not effective. There was an understanding of the complexity and the interlinked nature of the issue but there was consensus that government policy on this area is not working effectively.

The fact that women in refuge because of domestic violence are not counted in the homelessness figures was highlighted, as was the fact that there are a disproportionate number of Travellers presenting as homeless when many local authorities are failing to spend their allocations of funding for Traveller accommodation.

It was highlighted that many people are having to top up their Housing Assistance Payments and this is having a significant impact on their disposable income. Participants believed that rent caps are needed to help address the problem of unaffordable rents.

The role of employers in social inclusion

A number of participants, including those with disabilities and migrants, highlighted the negative attitude of many employers.

Participants highlighted the fact that many parents are working for low incomes just to exist and miss time with their child/children. Low income combined with not being around can impact on the children. It is not enough to have to work just to exist.

It was felt that the Government only supports part-time work rather than full-time positions.

There was a strong feeling that JobPath has been given priority and is undermining quality engagement with people and their lives that can happen through other programmes such as CE or Tus.

Traveller Health & Wellbeing

The issues facing Travellers have been well-rehearsed and participants felt that what is needed is action. It is critical that action to improve Traveller health and wellbeing is underpinned by the Social Determinants of Health that link the social, economic and cultural conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age. Traveller health and wellbeing cannot be addressed in isolation of the poor conditions that many Travellers still face, the ongoing crisis in Traveller accommodation, the discrimination that many still face in the education system and when seeking employment.

The importance of the Traveller voice was stressed, and participants felt that there should be an independent Traveller organisation in every area.

Quality Services

The importance of establishing principles to underpin quality services was highlighted, including access and affordability. The attitude and approach of some staff in services needs to be improved. Training was seen as being needed for frontline staff who are dealing directly with marginalised groups.

Participants believed that health issues, including mental health are very linked to poverty. The need for better access to Primary and Community Care was stressed as well as addressing the causes of bad health in communities.

Brexit

Brexit and its potential impact were issues of discussion in a number of the workshops, but a particular feature of the discussion in the Dundalk. It was highlighted that many communities in the Border area emerged from the Troubles in the 1960s and were left with many economic and social challenges. Brexit is already having an influence as many fear the return of the Border and there has been an erosion of relationships developed over a thirty-year period. Young people who have never known

a Border are anxious about the impact it will have on them.

We were involved in the development of a European project, but partners withdrew for fear of having to come to a Border area.

The impact of Brexit is already having a chilling effect and there is a hesitancy to invest in the area or even to engage in cross-border or international projects for fear of the introduction of a new regulatory environment. Supports under the Special Unit for EU Bodies are now even more difficult to access so groups that have traditionally accessed funding to provide essential supports are not in a position to apply and there is a consequent loss in cross-border work.

The Border and access to two jurisdictions has made the area conducive to smuggling and other criminal activity. Gang-land crime is not confined to Dublin and is having a serious impact on the wellbeing of communities. The development of a drugs culture is increasing exponentially and there are clever techniques used to get young people, who would otherwise have little access to money, involved.

Supports to offset the impacts of Brexit have been concentrated on the economic sector and participants highlighted the need to focus supports on the community sector to deal with the challenging social issues.

Issues for other marginalised groups

Rural isolation is a big issue for many. Lack of adequate transport adds to this isolation and to the existing problems of accessing education and employment.

Asylum seekers and refugees need to have the opportunity to participate in social activities, and for the children to be supported to participate in out of school activities. Access to education, housing and transport are other issues that were highlighted as well as the time taken to get status. Greater supports were called for to support the integration of new communities as well as measures to address racism.

It was recognised that practical things like car parking spaces, and seating need to be increased to ensure **older people** can better access and make use of public spaces, including parks. The fact that many older people face fuel poverty was highlighted.

Issues facing **Carers** were highlighted in a number of workshops. They are a forgotten group of people that provide services without which the State would struggle. They commit huge numbers of hours to the provision of care and they can often struggle financially and with poor physical and mental health as a result.