Background

Between March and May 2022, the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) Ireland carried out four workshops under the theme 'Creating a social and inclusive Europe'. These workshops were organised as part of the Foundations for Futures Europe (FFE) project. The FFE project is funded by EU's Europe for Citizens programme.

The overall aim of the FFE project is to develop a network of Higher Education and Civil Society (NGOs) Partners to engage citizens in debates and discussion groups around the future direction of the European project. It involved six partners including the Universities of Maynooth in Ireland, Novi-Sad in Serbia and Pécs in Hungary and the three NGOs of Urkraft in Sweden, the Hellenic Anti-Poverty Network in Greece and EAPN Ireland.

The timing of the FFE project implementation, and the EAPN Ireland workshops coincided with a time of great upheaval and challenge across all of Europe, experienced more or less acutely depending on the personal and national social, economic context and geographical location. This upheaval began with the Covid-19 pandemic, merged into a mounting energy driven cost-of living crisis which was then greatly exacerbated by the horrific Russian invasion of Ukraine and its economic and human impact, including the mass exodus of Ukrainian refugees who are fleeing to other European countries to escape the ensuing war.

During the period of the FFE project the EU has been going through the Conference on the Future of Europe process which engaged European citizens in proposing and debating proposals for how the EU can move forward.

Within this context the FFE partners to set the achievement of EU values as the basis for the debates that were to be held across the partner organisation's events and joint work.

> *The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.*
>
> (Ref: Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union)

Workshop Report

A total of fifty participants from different communities took part in the four 'Creating a social and inclusive Europe' workshops. The workshops aimed to increase participants understand of the role of the EU, particularly in relation to its social dimension and to discuss and debate their views and proposals for bringing about a more social Europe. The workshops which were all organised with support from the Communiversity office in the Department of Adult and Community Education in Maynooth University so the majority of participants were adults who were interested in formally or informally returning to learning and education. The age range covered adults of all ages. The details of the four workshops are as follows:

Date	Location	Workshop Partner
4th March	St Bernadette's Parish Hall, Crumlin	Dublin South City Partnership Communiversity
22nd March	Coolock Library, Dublin	Dublin Northside Partnership Communiversity
12th May	Online	County Kildare LEADER Partnership
24th May	North Clondalkin Library	South Dublin County Partnership

1. Words to describe the European Union

When participants were introducing themselves at the opening of each of the workshops they were asked to also use one or two words to summarise their view of the European Union. The following is a word cloud of the words participants used.

In general, participants had a positive outlook on the European Union and Europe more widely, but others had mixed views, and some were more negative. The most common words used were unity, justice and various words to capture both the potential for peace that they see comes from being within the EU and the connection and opportunity to travel and make connections with people from different countries. A large number of participants focused on the EU as being about politics and the making of rules and laws with some seeing this as positive and creating progress towards a more open and social EU but many viewed the rules and regulations as being about increasing control and centralising power, sometimes for the benefits of particular interests and sometimes corrupt interests.

Something that was clear in doing this exercise was that many of the participants in all the workshops has at least some knowledge of the EU and Europe more widely, with some having a detailed knowledge.

2. Debate on the EU

The main part of the workshop involved a discussion and debate with participants on the EU and particularly its role in addressing social issues and improving people's lives. Every effort was made to draw on the participant's existing knowledge and understanding of the EU, which in some cases was substantial.

In order to provide context EAPN Ireland made a presentation on the background to the EU, its values, current priorities and how it has approached the creation of a more social Europe through a variation of hard and soft law. The presentation also looked at the current reality of poverty in Europe and in Ireland.

EAPN Ireland carried out a participative activity in two of the workshops asking participants to get up and depending on their view on the statement '*The EU plays a positive role in improving lives for people'* to physically take a stand along an imaginary line between signs hanging on opposite walls of the room with 'Agree' and 'Disagree'.

Benefits of being in the EU

The majority of participants were positive about the benefits of the EU and felt that as a country we had made social and economic progress as a result, including in our standard of living. We have also become more outward looking with the EU seen as a platform for progress and knowledge.

The importance of the peace that the EU had brought and the building of relationships across Europe was highlighted. The was supported by the freedom of movement and opportunity to travel and connect with people across Europe and broaden horizons. These issues became particularly relevant for participants

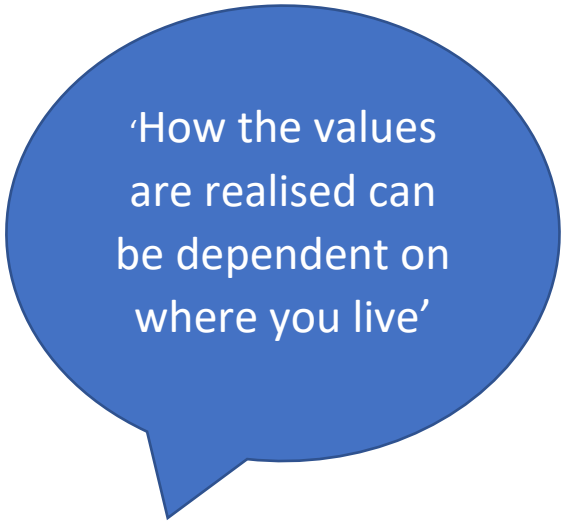
as the workshops took place while the Russian invasion of Ukraine began and the horrors became increasing apparent to all. It was also felt that the challenge of finding solutions in Northern Ireland as a result of Brexit and the fears of a hard border either on land or sea have helped to re-emphasise the importance of multilateral political and respecting cultural diversity in the Europe. There was also a view by a few participants that we did not need to be in the EU to build good relations with neighbouring countries.

While there was a feeling by one or two participants that joining the EU had led to some loss of identity the stronger feeling was that cultural differences are recognised within the EU with the example of Irish being recognised as an official language.

Some participants felt strongly that the EU was a failure, making life more difficult for many, particularly in making the cost of housing and other serviced unaffordable, while benefitting certain interests.

EU Values

Only a handful of participants had been aware of the EU stated values before the workshop, but all thought they were positive and an important level of ambition to strive for. However, a large number felt that while some progress had been made, the EU was failing to live up to its ambition and the values were something still being worked towards. The extent of this failure was felt more strongly by some more than others and it was highlighted that your views on how the values are realised will dependent on your experience and where you live, but are also directly contradicted by how some issues such as how housing and homelessness are being addressed.



Respect, inequality/equality came up as key values while acknowledging that gender and pluralism were two big topics/values that have seen positive changes and show what the EU is as an entity.

It was also stated by one participant that while the values are about people the focus of the EU seems to be mainly about institutions.

Social Rights

Many participants highlighted that the EU had played a part in improving social rights in Ireland. Improving gender equality was named by many with the ending of the ‘marriage bar’ when Ireland joined the EU, which had meant that women employed in the public service had to leave their job, being highlighted as a key initial moment. Participants supported the need to include socio-economic status as a ground in equality law to protect people from this type of discrimination.

However, it was also highlighted that the rights of some have not been well protected in the EU or Ireland with Travellers and asylum seekers named specifically. The question was asked ‘*Are we differentiating when it comes to people’s rights?*’

There was a lot of concern at the growth of food banks and the increased demand for them due to rising poverty, much of which was seen as hidden. Social welfare levels, including pensions were not seen as adequate, and the rising cost of living was making this worse.

Policy making and implementation

Some participants noted that both Irish and EU politicians are making decisions at a remove from the reality of people resulting in bad policies while one observed that the fact that EU policy makers have to agree policy across different countries in a way that tries to benefit the lives of people across Europe, makes it very effective. There was a strong view however that even where policies could potentially have a positive impact on peoples’ lives that implementation and accountability were a problem.

Some participants believed there was a lack of connect between the Irish Dáil and EU institutions and that Ireland is still somewhat careless in terms of how we treat politics and law, particularly at election time, unlike much of the rest of Europe. However, being in the EU was seen by some as having helped Ireland to improve its decision making and its policing of the law.

Participants had observed that ‘deserving’ and ‘underserving’ judgements inform a lot of decisions with the blame for people’s circumstances being put on the individual and not looking at the structures that impact on them.

There was a recognition that while some ‘soft law’ EU policies, such as on income and health, have been important in Ireland, relying on this approach is uncertain so that more ‘hard law’ policies are needed at EU level if we are to make sure any benefits are more guaranteed is needed to improve people’s lives.

3. Proposals for a more social and inclusive Europe

Towards the end of the workshop participants were asked what the EU need to do if it wants to achieve its values and create a more inclusive and social Europe? Where numbers allowed in two workshops, participants broke into smaller groups to have this discussion. The following were the proposals from participants.

Improving how the EU works

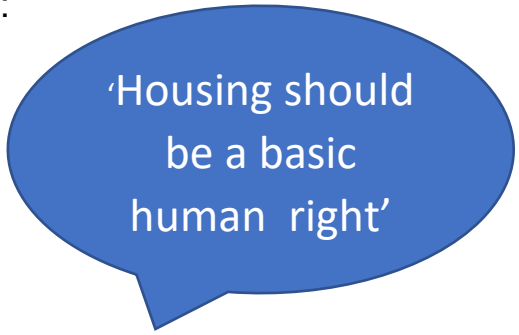
1. The EU needs to make its policies in line with its stated values.
2. We have to ensure that EU policy on social areas is implemented and put sanctions in place if countries don't conform. Part of this includes making ruling bodies more transparent.
3. Decision makers need to listen to representations from different areas and to the voices of the people so that we have the best decisions for people.

4. We need to learn better from countries where there are good approaches and policies, such as how Sweden addresses childcare.
5. There needs to be educating on social issues across the EU so people better understand their rights and the role and responsibility of the EU and countries.
6. The gravy train has to end.

7. We should look at how wealth is distributed in Member States. This includes looking at Government salaries.
8. Important that the EU continues to recognise the identities of different EU members so to enrich the EU and so that we do not lose our identity.
9. We need less criteria for new countries to enter the EU and also support them to meet this criteria.

Ensuring better social standards and rights

10. We need to improve and raise the social standard of people in the EU and put social rights and social standards more at the centre in informing the EU. Many examples of this were highlighted including:
    a. Everyone should have access to an adequate income. Social welfare levels, including pensions need to be adequate so people can afford the cost of living.
    b. People need to be able to afford housing and housing should be a right.
    c. Access to Education is crucial and should be guaranteed for everyone.
    d. We must improve transport.
    e. Facilities and support for children must be improved.



11. The EU and the Irish Government need to put more resources into education, health and social services.
12. The huge issues with supports and services need to be addressed to make them more available and accessible, especially to vulnerable people who cannot afford to go private. These include mental health, addiction and community services. Cutting the red tape is part of the solution.
13. The Irish Government must not rely the way it does on voluntary organisations to do its job.

14. We need more hard laws on social areas in the EU than soft ones. However, where there are soft law approaches these need to be improved.
15. We need a greater focus on equality. This should include legalising same sex marriage across the EU.

Funded with the support of the European Union under the programme "Europe for Citizens"

Europe for Citizens

The European Commission's support for the production of this report does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of EAPN Ireland, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information it contains.