



**Speech by Minister Martin Cullen TD,
Minister for Social and Family Affairs at the launch of the Combat Poverty
Agency Annual Report for 2006**

Tuesday 4 September 2007. Alexander Hotel, Dublin

Chairperson, Mr Brian Duncan, Acting Director, Mr Kevin O'Kelly, invited guests,
ladies and gentlemen:

I welcome this opportunity to launch the Annual Report of the Combat Poverty Agency for 2006. In this my first official engagement with Combat Poverty, as Minister for Social and Family Affairs, I wish to say that I look forward to working with the Board and the Agency in our efforts to combat poverty and social exclusion in Ireland.

Today also provides me with an opportunity to pay my own tribute to the major contribution made by the Combat Poverty Agency in tackling poverty, as it marks twenty years in existence. The Annual Report sets out how, with funding of €4 million from my Department, it has been making this contribution through researching and highlighting the issues associated with poverty and social exclusion and advising on the solutions required.

Over the last 20 years, since the Combat Poverty Agency was established, Ireland has changed dramatically from a country with high unemployment, high emigration and relatively poor living standards for many of our citizens to a country with a thriving economy, employment levels at an all-time high and immigration replacing emigration.



Just 10 years ago, the number of people in employment was 1.4 million. Today that figure is more than 2 million. This represents an increase of over 600,000, or 41%, in less than a decade. Between 1997 and 2007, basic social welfare rates have increased by over 123%. That is three times ahead of the 41% increase in the Consumer Price Index, and double the 61% increase in gross average industrial earnings. It represents an increase in real terms of over 58%. Improvements in social welfare rates are reflected in substantially increased spending on social protection, from €5.7 billion in 1997 to €15.3 billion in 2007.

In 2002 the Government set a number of key targets for social welfare rates as part of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy. These included increasing the lowest adult social welfare rate to €150, in 2002 terms, and maintaining the appropriate combined value of child income supports at 33 to 35% of the lowest adult social welfare rate. Another important target was to increase the basic State Pension to €200 a week. It is a significant achievement, not only for those who have benefited, but for the integrity of the strategic process, that these commitments for combating poverty have been met, and in some cases surpassed.

Much of the remarkable economic success in recent years has been harnessed to reach out to those who had been left behind or marginalised. As part of this process, National Action Plans on social inclusion were developed and put in place, in consultation with the social partners and the other relevant stakeholders, not least the Combat Poverty Agency. Through the Cabinet Committee and Senior Officials Group on Social Inclusion - right across the spectrum of Government - tackling poverty and social exclusion at national and local levels is being



mainstreamed, under the Plans, using a more integrated, multi-policy approach. Through appropriate implementation plans and monitoring mechanisms, we are now making significant progress in tackling the multi-dimensional nature of poverty through co-ordinated action across Government.

The recent National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007 to 2016, has reiterated its commitment to continue to reduce consistent poverty to between 2% and 4% by 2012 and finally eliminate it by 2016. In this and the National Development Plan, the Government has set a number of high level goals which we see as essential in making a decisive impact on poverty. These goals, based on the lifecycle approach, set out in the Towards 2016 social partnership agreement, focus on:

- **ensuring children reach their true potential;**
- **supporting working age people and people with disabilities**
- **providing supports that enable older people to maintain a comfortable and high-quality standard of living; and**
- **building viable and sustainable communities, by improving the lives of people living in disadvantaged areas.**



I wish to reiterate the Government's commitment to achieving these goals, and to delivering on the over 150 other targets and actions which are set out in the NAPinclusion. I believe our track record in delivering on commitments in the previous plan (National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2003-2005) demonstrates our seriousness of purpose in meeting our commitments under the latest plan.

This Annual Report also addresses some of the major strategic policy issues we face today in deciding on how best to tackle poverty. It recognises that, while income support and community supports are important, the effective provision of public services is also critical. I strongly agree with this view. The model of the 'life cycle approach', which is the main framework for Towards 2016, the NDP and the NAPinclusion, places a strong emphasis on services, as crucial for child development, activation and employment for those in the working age group, including those with disabilities, and greater autonomy and a better quality of life for older people and people with disabilities.

During my time as Minister for Social and Family Affairs, my priority aim is to use the opportunities provided by one of the most successful economies in Europe to work towards making a decisive impact on poverty. The problems we face are known and understood, the solutions are clear, the challenge now is to effectively implement the policies and apply the huge resources made available in the NAPinclusion and the National Development Plan. I am determined to work to ensure that effective implementation will be achieved in the coming years, resulting in major improvements in the living standards and quality of life of the most vulnerable groups in our society. In pursuing this aim, I know that I can rely on the quality analysis and advice which the Agency provides.



In conclusion then, I would like to congratulate you on your Annual Report and acknowledge the professional and high quality of work reflected in it. I would like to pay tribute to the Chairperson, Brian Duncan, all of the Board members, both past and present, the Acting Director, Kevin O’Kelly and staff of the Agency for all their efforts and achievements. I would also like to acknowledge the major contribution to the work of the Agency of the former Director and Head of Research, Helen Johnston, who moved to a new post in the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) in recent months.

Thank you all very much.

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