



**Launch of
“Mainstreaming Social Inclusion”**

by

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1. While ‘Mainstreaming Social Inclusion’ might be a new term for many, the concept underlying it is not new. It is essentially about seeking to ensure that poverty and social inclusion objectives are integrated into all areas of policy making.
2. The exchange of experience and best practice between countries is one of the key benefits of cooperation at EU level as part of the overall Lisbon social inclusion process. This cooperation and sharing

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I would like to thank the Combat Poverty Agency for inviting me to open this conference to consider the results of the EU Transnational Exchange Project on Mainstreaming Social Inclusion.

The exchange of experience and best practice between countries is one of the key benefits of cooperation at EU level as part of the overall Lisbon social inclusion process. This cooperation and sharing of best practices will help to make a real contribution to meeting the EU goal of making a decisive impact on poverty by 2010.

I would also like to acknowledge other project partners who are here today: the National Economic and Social Forum; the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, Northern Ireland; the European Anti-Poverty Network; and the Office for Social Inclusion which is based in my Department. I'm also glad to see that the European Commission, which coordinates and funds much of the EU Social Exclusion Programme, is represented. My own Department has also provided funding for the project.

While 'Mainstreaming Social Inclusion' might be a new term for many, the concept underlying it is not new. It is essentially about seeking to ensure that poverty and social inclusion objectives are integrated into all areas of policy making. I agree strongly with this approach.

As I have said before, income supports alone, no matter how generous, will not eradicate real poverty. Anti-poverty actions are required across all areas of government policy if we are to make a real and lasting impact.

The mainstreaming concept underlines the basic approach, which has been adopted by Ireland and other EU Member States in developing their National Action Plans to combat Poverty and Social Exclusion. This approach recognises the multidimensional nature of poverty and social exclusion, and of the need for multi-layered policy responses if we are to make the decisive impact on poverty, which we all desire.

There have been two main outputs from this phase of the project – a book, titled "Better Policies, Better Outcomes", and a new European website on mainstreaming



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social inclusion. Both of these will be very useful in aiding an understanding of how social inclusion can be mainstreamed into policy making at all levels.

In addition to setting out the different approaches to mainstreaming in various Member States, they also deal with the issue of how to measure and evaluate the extent to which policies successfully incorporate a social inclusion focus. Accurate and sensible measurement is particularly important so that we can determine how much progress has been made towards meeting the Lisbon goal.

Today's conference will hear contributions from several of the project partners, including information on the approaches to mainstreaming taken in Ireland and in Northern Ireland.

I hope that these will provide practical guidance on how mainstreaming can be effectively achieved, and on what elements need to be in place for this to occur.

This conference is especially timely for my Department as the Office for Social Inclusion is currently in the process of introducing new guidelines for Poverty Impact Assessment, or poverty proofing, as it was previously known. In many ways Poverty Impact Assessment is the key tool for mainstreaming in the Irish public policy context.

The new guidelines will, I am confident, assist in the design of better policies - policies which take proper and full account of poverty and social inclusion issues and assist in the creation of a fair and socially inclusive society.

Elements, which the project has identified as being necessary for effective mainstreaming, include the need for high-level political commitment and the allocation of adequate resources to tackle poverty.

I can assure you that this government remains totally committed to reducing poverty and social exclusion as has been repeatedly demonstrated. Funding for welfare entitlements, supports and services has risen dramatically and has more than doubled to almost €14 billion since 2000. What this means in real terms is that for



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every €3 the State will spend this year, €1 will go directly into assisting those on welfare.

The Government's commitment to tackling poverty strategically across all the relevant Department's and agencies, and to safeguarding and enhancing the living standards of the most vulnerable in our society, will be fully reflected later this year in the next National Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion.

While that plan will chart the way forward in policy and strategic terms, the reality is that on the ground we are fighting poverty every day using all the measures available.

The road we have to travel to finally eradicate real poverty from our midst still stretches ahead some distance. And we, the Government, the many agencies and voluntary organisations, are making progress. We are making substantial inroads into real poverty levels and it is important that we acknowledge that.

Through the efforts of all involved it is now estimated that more than 250,000 men, women and children have been lifted out of deprivation and hardship within the last decade. That means that whole generations have been taken out of the consistent poverty trap and set on the road to greater security and dignity.

Yesterday, I launched a report from the ESRI that recommends adopting an updated method of measuring poverty that would more accurately reflect the impact on society of Ireland's remarkable economic growth of recent years. I see a lot of merit in having one sensible and accurate measurement that clearly identifies the areas of real and consistent poverty.

As things currently stand, and depending on which survey results you use, the number of people who remain caught in the consistent poverty trap is somewhere



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between 80,000 and 220,000. Whatever the number, the urgent task at hand is clear.

If our combined efforts can lift more than a quarter of a million people out of real poverty in less than a decade then together we can go that extra mile. That extra mile means delivering a society in which nobody is denied the chance to live decent and secure lives, free from the clutches of poverty. It means ensuring that economic prosperity and social justice advance together to benefit all of our citizens.

As part of social policy reform agenda I am targeting the areas where we know real poverty exists. Tackling poverty head on means implementing practical and targeted measures that reach those most vulnerable.

Poverty levels are especially high amongst the 80,000 lone parents on welfare supports and their children. I am currently considering radical reforms in this area that are designed to deliver more enlightened social policies that would directly target and benefit tens of thousands of single parents and their children.

Child poverty cannot be tolerated in the Ireland of the 21st century. More and more resources are being targeted at alleviating and finally eliminating it. This year we will spend €2 billion of taxpayer's money in directly supporting the welfare of children through Child Benefit. In the Budget a €150 million package, on top of Child Benefit and the new Early Childcare Supplement, was dedicated to measures to tackle child poverty. The earnings ceiling for Family Income Supplement was significantly increased so that thousands of families on low incomes would benefit. In a range of other targeted measures, Back to School student financial supports were doubled and increased investment in the vitally important School Meals scheme will allow for considerable expansion.

People in their later years are entitled to lives that have dignity and security. That is why pensioner poverty is being addressed through across the board increases in pension that will deliver soon a State pension of over €200 a week, a greatly



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enhanced State non-contributory pension, and by allowing pensioners earn up to €100 a week without losing any of their pension.

As all of you here today know all too well, the best route out of poverty is through employment. Part of the social reform agenda is dedicated to a range of new and enhanced support schemes that promote activation and offer opportunities and choices to welfare customers, especially those out of work. For example, the qualifying period for the Back to Work Allowance has been shortened greatly. A gradual, tapered withdrawal of welfare supports has been introduced in several schemes to financially cushion a return to work for those on welfare. These and other employment support measures have one clear intention and that is to ensure that the potential and contribution of no single individual is neglected or overlooked.

Through these reforms, and the record investment in welfare supports, I am confident that we can create the changes and opportunities that will bring thousands more from welfare dependency, to financial independence.

Welfare is not about just about making the payments and hoping the problems will go away. It is about providing the stepping-stones that will take people to a better standard of living and income.

Finally, all of us here today have in different ways a 'brief' to work towards the elimination of poverty in society. We have a lot to learn – both from each other and from the experiences of other Member States, who are faced with similar challenges. I hope that the learning coming from this mainstreaming project, including the debates and discussions, which will take place today, can help all our efforts in this regard.

ENDS