



Department of Social and Family Affairs

Address by

Séamus Brennan T.D.

Minister for Social Affairs

at the

Social Inclusion Forum

Royal Hospital Kilmainham

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I am very pleased to take part in this; the third meeting of the Social Inclusion Forum, at the end of what I believe has been a very productive day.

From what I have heard myself since my arrival, and from talking to Maureen Gaffney and Gerry Mangan, I think that the Forum has succeeded in providing the Government and myself with a clear picture of the priorities that should inform the development of our social inclusion strategy.

I can assure you that these views will be reflected in the next National Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion, for 2006 to 2008, to be produced later this year.

I would like to record my thanks to the National Economic and Social Forum and to the Office for Social Inclusion, based in my Department, for organising and funding this event.

In particular at this stage I would like to thank the Chairs, Rapporteurs and speakers for their valuable contribution and Sinead Riordan of the Policy Institute at Trinity College for compiling the report of the consultation process.



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A year ago when I came to the Forum it was as a Minister who was only a few weeks in the Department.

I came to listen and to absorb your concerns, your hopes and fears, and above all, your aspirations for a better society in which poverty and social exclusion are history.

Today, I have again come to listen.

But I have also come to chart the progress that has been made over the past 12 months and to share with you important social reforms that I am pressing ahead with in a number of key areas.

The Forum this year represents an important final stage of a very comprehensive consultation process that will help shape our next National Anti-Poverty Action Plan.

You will have received today the report of consultations carried out late last year by the Office for Social Inclusion, based in my Department, which pulls together the results of an extensive written consultation process and a series of 7 seminars held around the country that were attended by over 500 people.

Additional to this, the Combat Poverty Agency and other organisations have also organised a number of events.

So I think you will agree that, by the end of this process, we should



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have a fair idea of what should be the key elements of the next plan!

Ireland is now making steady progress in tackling the core issues that lead to poverty and leave people vulnerable and marginalised. Investment in welfare supports and entitlements are now at an all time high, with 1 Euro in every 3 Euro the State is spending this year going on welfare.

However, the significant social issues we face can be eased, but not solved, by welfare and support payments alone. The easy route is to salve our social conscience by signing the cheques and hoping the problems will go away.

The honest route, and the route I am determined to travel on, is to go behind the payments and confront the problems that make the payment necessary in the first place.

It is vitally important that we do not view welfare as permanent, but that we look at it as a means to achieving a better outcome - as a means of moving people to a better place.

That is why a one size fits all system will not provide the answers. Welfare support systems must be tailored to the specific needs of individuals and should be seen as stepping stones to achieving a better quality of life. To achieve the social change we need to in



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this country will call for courageous reforms and an anti-poverty strategy that aggressively tackles the core causes of poverty.

The window of opportunity is there and we are now shaping reforms that will introduce over the coming months and years enlightened social policies in a number of key areas. These reforms are about liberating, about empowering, about balancing rights and responsibilities, about activation and encouragement and, above all else, about striving to ensure that the potential of no single individual is overlooked or neglected.

I am talking about the 80,000 lone parents, caring for 130,000 children, who need help in escaping from welfare traps and encouragement on the paths to training, education and work. I am talking about the continued existence of child poverty in an Ireland of exceptional wealth. It is unacceptable and we must strive to banish it for good. I am talking about the impending pensions crisis that brings with it threats of pensioner poverty.

That issue must be confronted and addressed. These, and other reforms in the rent supplement and rent allowance schemes and in increased activation measures, will greatly intensify our efforts to eliminate poverty from the Ireland of the 21st century.

Side by side with these welfare reforms, the next National Anti-Poverty Action Plan can unite all sections of Government and the



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voluntary sector to make a decisive contribution to tackling poverty and social exclusion.

The plan should be ambitious and achievable, and should address the issues and shortcomings identified during the consultation process, including the issues raised here today.

We should set targets that can be reached but that at the same time will 'stretch' our capacity to deliver across the wide range of policy areas that impact on poverty and social exclusion.

I am anxious that the 'implementation gaps' that have been identified on the ground should be addressed.

It is important that service providers work closer together at local level to deliver their services in a more integrated manner.

It is encouraging that there is now clear evidence of the solid and steady progress being made to reduce poverty in its many guises, and to promote social inclusion.

The latest results of the EU-SILC survey on income and conditions in Ireland show that those at risk of consistent poverty has been reduced from 8.8 cent in 2003 to 6.8 per cent in 2004.

The EU-SILC results also showed that the upward trend in the numbers of persons regarded as being 'at risk of poverty' has been



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halted. The 'at risk of poverty' figure fell slightly from 19.7 per cent in 2003 to 19.4 per cent in 2004.

While this figure is still high, these latest results show that we are now at least moving in the right direction. It is encouraging to see the impact that the record spending on welfare supports in recent Budgets, and the determined implementation of anti-poverty measures, is having in confronting and tackling poverty.

Between 2000 and 2006 direct spending on welfare more than doubled from EUR6.7 billion to EUR13.6 billion. The average payment increase in Budget 2006 was 10.5 per cent, almost four times the projected rate of inflation. It reached out with an additional EUR800 million on significant increases in the weekly entitlement rates. For the first time funding targeted at social policy reforms was set aside-over EUR300 million.

The Budget also introduced a range of activation measures designed to ensure that the talents and potential of no individual would be neglected or overlooked. Also, the tapering of disregards and the increasing of thresholds for several schemes will contribute significantly to making the route from welfare to work as smooth and as seamless as it possible.

By any standards, over EUR13 billion is a serious investment of taxpayers' money, which should yield tangible results.



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However, I would be the first to agree that we still need to do more to tackle the scourge of poverty, and I am grateful to all who participated here today, who, by giving of their expertise and experience, are helping to develop responses to the problems that still remain.

All of us here, including those with responsibility for delivering services on the ground, should see the next plan as a mechanism in our efforts to create a poverty-free and socially inclusive society.

It should be a society of which this generation can be proud.

Today's proceedings will play an important part in moving us in this direction.

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