



Ireland

Trends, Recent Developments, “Feeding in” and “Feeding out”

A Study of National Policies

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1. Overview and Assessment of Report

I draw two major conclusions about this year's NRP. First, there appears to me to be real progress in terms of the extent to which social inclusion-related issues are integrated into this year's report (as compared with that of last year). This is not just a surface phenomenon – there is depth of integration here as well and real reason to believe that economic growth and social cohesion are seen to be complementary in Ireland. The report particularly give evidence of significant 'feeding in'. Secondly, one can say that there is policy innovation in Ireland, with this report containing quite a number of significant policy developments. Among the areas relevant to social inclusion on which one can see progress are: integrating those furthest from the labour market, childcare provision in general and as regards targeting it on the low income sectors, migration, improving the income and skills' situation of workers on low incomes, lifelong learning, enforcement of workers' rights.

There are proposals in the NRP which are likely to be positive from a social inclusion perspective, especially if one sees social inclusion in terms of inclusion in the labour market (which is the dominant orientation of the NRP). First, the general aim of fostering continued expansion of the labour market has some general spin-offs for social inclusion. Secondly, the intention to (continue to) target vulnerable groups for activation is also likely to contribute to the social inclusion objectives as set out in the NRSSPSI and the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion (which of the two is the primary point of reference). In addition, the very strong focus in the NRP on lifelong learning and activation programmes - both of which constitute a considerable strength - is notable in the context of greater social cohesion and how growth-related objectives intersect with those on social cohesion. Furthermore, the measures on integrating migrants and the emergence of this as a policy domain in its own right is an important step towards greater social inclusion.

In general when it comes to social inclusion there is arguably more feeding in than feeding out. The existence this year of the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion is one reason why the NRP is better informed by social exclusion. The more circumscribed progress on 'feeding out' is partly attributable to the strong supply-side orientation of Irish economic and social policy and also to the fact that, historically, economic policy in Ireland has primarily been conceived in terms of the functioning of the economy (rather than taking an integrated view of economic and social functioning). In relation to the particular challenges identified by last year's Progress Report and also the 2007 Joint Report, the NRP addresses some of them centrally but others (such as the development of quality services and progress towards pension reform) receive little systematic attention.

The NRP is evidence of the co-ordinated planning process being undertaken in Ireland in which there is a growing interface between economic policy and social policy and between the EU objectives and national priorities. The 'division of labour' is such that the NRP is primarily about jobs and growth based on the integrated guidelines whereas social exclusion has its own dedicated plan. My overall judgement would be along the following lines: 'evidence of considerable progress but more integration between the economic and the social is a continuing challenge'.

1.1. How the Report addresses the Lisbon objectives

In general the report addresses the Lisbon objectives well and is tightly organised around the guidelines. Notably, the report this year fails to outline progress in relation to specific guidelines sequentially, as it did last year. Instead, it bunches guidelines together and offers a combined overview. This can be seen in a positive light – it lends greater coherence to actions and also increases the tendency to use a transversal approach. In any case, the reporting this year is more detailed than last year, in general and in relation to social inclusion.

The report sticks very closely to the framework and sets of policy goals provided by the ten-year agreement from the social partnership process, *Towards 2016* (and its 'offspring, in particular the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion) and the National Development Plan. It is clear that there is a high degree of congruence between the national and Lisbon processes. That said however, the national processes are the primary point of reference for the IRNRP, which overall gives the impression of a tightly-coordinated planning process in Ireland which closely links economic and social factors.

On the basis of the IRNRP, the policy priorities in Ireland relate to continued close management of economic growth with particular attention to supply-side factors, especially education and skills development, and continued efforts to modernise the social security system (with particular attention to activation, child-wellbeing, childcare, and pensions). The Report, and more importantly national level reform, does address many of the issues raised in the feedback on last year's report, *viz* speeding up progress in formulating concrete measures to reform pensions (not much progress); accelerating progress in increasing labour market participation (good progress), further developing a cohesive policy towards inward migration (some progress). The Report also addresses itself specifically to reporting on the 2006 Spring Council priorities, considering in turn greater investment in knowledge and innovation, unlocking business potential, greater adaptability of labour markets based on flexicurity, energy and climate change. While it does not always offer evidence of the claims of progress made, the report is focused and quite comprehensive in terms of the issues it covers.

1.2 How the report addresses the challenges set out in the 2006 Progress Report

Of the three main challenges for Ireland identified in the 2006 Progress Report, two are 'social inclusion' oriented: speeding up progress in formulating concrete measures to reform pension arrangements; accelerating progress in increasing labour market participation, including by establishing a comprehensive childcare infrastructure, further developing a cohesive policy towards inward migration and placing a particular emphasis on support to older and low-skilled workers. The NRP indicates relatively little progress in 'speeding up' pension reform. There is really only one relevant development to report: the initiation of a consultation process and the production of a Green Paper on pensions for this purpose. The failure to set an agreed benchmark in relation to the target for the proportion of employed workers aged 30+ who should have an occupational or private pensions is a noteworthy weakness.

The NRP makes greater progress on, and gives greater attention to, the second challenge (on labour market participation). Pride of place here are a wide range of measures to, *inter alia*, improve the childcare infrastructure, achieve greater gender equality, improve flexicurity, better manage migration and the integration of migrants and put in place comprehensive lifelong

learning strategies. The National Workplace Strategy, which is quite broad-ranging in terms of the groups and aspects of work targeted is also likely to increase employment just as it and the renewed focus on the implementation of employment rights are noteworthy in a context of improving the quality of employment.

1.3 Whether any other major developments are reported on

Among the topics and noteworthy developments given more attention this year as compared with last year are: employment rights (in particular the establishment of the National Employment Rights Authority in 2007), flexicurity (on which a number of new initiatives are reported but not much in the way of work/life balance), the recent appointment of a Minister of State for Lifelong Learning, the launching of the National Skills Strategy (in March 2007), the new measures on migration and their integration and the publication of the National Women's Strategy (in April 2007).

1.4 Feeding out

In terms of the five 'feeding out' aspects in the terms of reference for this report, the one that is strongest in the Irish NRP is that of ensuring an adequate income from work. In particular, the plans to continue the policy of making work pay will be of benefit for those in low-paying jobs. This has received increased attention in the last year with a more progressive slant to tax changes and attention to both benefit disincentives and the level of the minimum wage. While there are no specific measures to target employment creation at vulnerable groups, there is an indirect policy in this regard. This is visible, first, in the attention given to the activation and participation of groups outside the workforce in the significant lifelong learning programme, which covers such matters as literacy and numeracy, second chance education, addressing access barriers and early school leavers. The second place in which the vulnerable groups are targeted is in the measures to heighten the effectiveness of the active labour market policies. Of particular relevance here are the preventive process which is being extended to lone parents among other groups (albeit against a backdrop of reduced success rates in the programme of late) and the setting up of a High Level Activation Group to progress the activation of lone parents, those with disabilities and other potential client groups. One can, in addition, make reference to developments in relation to work/family reconciliation (in particular the extension of paid and unpaid maternity leaves); the coming on stream of a dedicated subvention scheme to fund the provision of childcare in low-income areas and to assist such parents with their childcare costs (reported on in the second part of this report). All of this notwithstanding, one could still say that the prevailing logic of the policy approach followed in Ireland is to assume that the main benefits of job creation will 'trickle down', especially if those most marginalised from the labour market are 'assisted' to become economically active.

There is less evidence that the other three aspects of 'feeding out' mentioned in the terms of reference are being specifically attended to. In particular, territorial differences and regional gaps, apart from 'North/South island of Ireland' dimensions, are not mentioned either in their own right or as a potential barrier to social inclusion. While regional and local inequalities and inadequacies will be improved by greater targeting of childcare services on low income population sectors and indeed by other measures contained in the national social partnership agreement and also the National Development Plan, it would be much better if regional inequalities, and the paucity and generally low quality of service provision in low-income areas, were enunciated and developed in the NRP as explicit policy goals and the focus of actions in their own right. As regards the local

level, there is also little explicit mention of this but it must also be said that this is quite a strong axis of existing policy approaches in Ireland. There is a lot of targeting at the neighbourhood/locality level. But again reference to plans to improve targeting of services – like for example the commitment in the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion to develop 500 primary care teams to improve services in the community – is notable by its absence. It is hard to know whether such absences indicate a lack of ‘joined up’ thinking and planning or whether they indicate lack of progress in moving towards implementation of particular objectives. Neither is the impact on social welfare protection systems centrally considered. While there is quite a lot of reporting on developments in social protection, it tends to be from a ‘feeding in’ perspective rather than ‘feeding out’. While I believe it is true to say that the reform effort in Ireland is driven both by sustainability issues and income adequacy, of the two it is the former that has had the stronger hand in the NRP.

There is still considerable distance to go in regard to the extent to which economic objectives are being targeted towards social inclusion goals in Ireland. Taking some of the examples given in the Joint Report, there are no explicit planned actions to address labour market segmentation and precariousness and the attention devoted to helping poor households benefit from employment growth is not very systematic. As with last year, the main way in which the IRNRP will positively impact on social inclusion is through the employment activation and education measures.

Furthermore, and again as with last year, there is little attention devoted to health services or quality services in general as a way of both combating social exclusion and generating economic growth and improvements in the functioning of labour markets receive too little attention (again) this year. Health services are mainly targeted through the National Action Plan on Social Inclusion as well of course in sectoral documents. The absence of reference to housing and in particular the potential of social housing as a strategy to maintain employment levels in the construction sector – which is a major point of worry in relation to continued economic growth - is notable also. Greater attention to this and other quality social services would have given the NRP a stronger impact on ‘feeding out’ to social inclusion.

Gender is given specific consideration in the NRP. Reference is made to the recently-produced National Women’s Strategy, which is discussed in some detail in the second part of this report, and also to other measures, in particular the efforts towards gender mainstreaming and reducing the gender pay gap. In general, in regard to gender the NRP confines itself to reporting on measures that are already in place or have already been announced. For this and other reasons, the extent to which the NRP ‘feed out’ to gender equality is limited.

All in all, the reduction of social exclusion is not one of the core objectives of the NRP. Among other things this means that in the Irish case it is still difficult to talk about strong synergies between the two processes, although there is no doubt but that there is a considerably stronger degree of integration between the two this time around. One can use the NRP as evidence of the co-ordinated planning process being undertaken in Ireland in which there is a growing interface between the objectives in economic policy and social policy and between the EU objectives and national priorities and a growing sensitivity to social inclusion issues on the part of economic policy making.

1.5. Feeding in

This year the core links with the social protection and social inclusion process are made more explicit in the NRP and the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion is written much more explicitly into the NRP. I therefore draw the conclusion that, as compared with last year, social inclusion is more integrated as a consideration in this year's report. In particular: a) more of the report is oriented to topics and issues relevant to social inclusion (although not always explicitly framed from that perspective); b) there is more concern in what one might call the conventional economic policy issues about groups lacking in social cohesion (for example in sections 4.4 and 4.5 the less-advantaged sector of the population feature quite strongly). It would appear that the existence of a worked-out and legitimated national policy on social inclusion this time around (as in the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion which was produced in February this year and is briefly described in the second part of this report) has enabled/compelled greater account to be taken of social inclusion.

Some notable developments in relation to 'feeding in' include:

- the setting up of a High Level Group to progress the activation of groups such as lone parents and disabled people. The history here is of a series of measures being taken in the last years but of a 'softly softly' approach being followed by government, especially in regard to the activation of lone parents.
- the setting up of a new programme, included under the social protection measures, to promote the participation through early engagement of those of working age not in employment – this, announced in last year's NRP, has now been activated (although no details are made available other than the budget (€50 million)). The early intervention aspect is stressed and one could also assume that it is intended as a more intensive and tailored form of preparation for employment for a range of groups in receipt of welfare benefits. Among other things, this reflects a gradual change in the nature of social welfare services in Ireland from a sole focus on financial transfers to a more social service-oriented perspective.
- A much more substantial reporting on immigration policy. Looking at the diversity of measures reported on under this heading, it is clear that there is considerable action underway in Ireland in this domain. Notable developments here include the designation of integration of migrants as a specific domain of policy with a minister of state appointed in June 2007, the setting up of a cross-Departmental Group earlier this year to review existing integration policy and the plan to set up of a Task Force on Integration in 2008, the setting up of a specific fund for immigrant integration in 2006 (to the value of some €5 million). All of this suggests that: a) that migration is in the process of becoming a domain of policy in Ireland, b) specific focus is being given to integration, c) the view of migration as more or less a matter for economic policy is being superseded by an approach that recognises it as a challenge for social policy also. This is a very positive development, not least because migration was one of the weaknesses of the last NRP report. In addition, the treatment of migration in the NRP goes some way towards responding to one of the challenges identified in the 2007 Joint Report - to continue to promote active inclusion in the context of migration. This is an area that could be taken as an example of good practice.

It should be noted that there is no explicit reference made to the five challenges identified for Ireland in the 2007 Joint Report. However, this notwithstanding, two of these – promotion of active inclusion and the provision of adequate income support for pensioners – could be said to be addressed by the NRP. The three others – sustained and integrated investment in services, addressing the barriers in access to health and care services and achieving efficiency gains in service delivery whilst improving the health of population and reduce substantial health inequalities – are not addressed to any sustained degree.

The report makes some use of a life cycle approach which has now been adopted as a frame for policy making in Ireland (both by the social partnership agreement and the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion). Hence, the measures reported in the NRP this year range more broadly across different age groups than was the case in the past with measures for child income support included along with those on pensions for example. This makes for a more integrated approach and, although somewhat more arguably, a relatively complex understanding of social exclusion.

The degree of closeness between the NRP and the NRSSPSI I would describe as 'moderate'. The NRSSPSI identified and focused on 4 priorities: child poverty (which was also emphasised as a mutual strengthening focus in the NRSSPSI), access to quality employment, immigration, access to quality services. Of these, there is no doubt but that access to quality employment is the one that appears strongest in the NRP. There is no doubt either but that there is a consistency in approach between the two documents – the approach in both is to improve the chances of employment on the part of these groups by intervention and education. This continues the trend whereby active labour market programmes are a major part of the Irish labour market policy landscape. The strategy followed is, again, a dual one: the removal of barriers to employment and the implementation of a new case active management service for all social welfare customers. In terms of the other priorities identified by the NRSSPSI, as already stated, immigration is also quite well addressed in the NRP. Child poverty does not appear very explicitly but it is addressed in the measures relating to child income support for example and in the direct and indirect measures being taken towards greater activation and the provision of targeted childcare. The intergenerational transmission of poverty is not explicitly addressed in the NRP. Moving on to the third challenge, as mentioned the matter of quality services receives little or no explicit attention. In particular, there is no explicit progress towards the model of welfare reform that informed the NRSSPSI and to a lesser extent the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion. This was the developmental welfare state – as elaborated in NESF (2005) whereby the welfare state should be seen as consisting of three overlapping spheres of activity - services, income supports and activist or innovative measures - and reform be undertaken to integrate these so that they form a 'developmental welfare state'.

The 2006 NRSSPSI devoted little attention to the relationships between its strategy and that of the NRP. This, a major point of criticism last year, is to some extent overcome with the production earlier this year of the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion. The availability of this, nationally ratified and legitimated, programme of action has made a big difference to the matters considered by the NRP and in particular to integrating social inclusion-related concerns. However, social policy reform *per se* is not targeted in the NRP, being discussed mainly in relation to work incentives and activating welfare benefit recipients. The extent to which there is an overall reform programme is questionable.

There are a number of criticisms which could be levelled at the 'feeding in' aspects of the NRP. First, the relative failure to address quality services - in its own right and as an issue prioritised from a social inclusion perspective - is a big gap. Health is more or less missing as is care and

the life-long learning section does little more than rehearse existing commitments. There is also the failure to prioritise action on pension provision. Thirdly, the relative absence of an explicit concern with poverty and income inequality must be noted. While one could by way or rejoinder to this point to the equity underpinnings of the tax changes and some of the social protection-related measures, especially in those in the last Budget, it is nevertheless the case that the NRP is not centrally informed by considerations of income equity or poverty alleviation.

1.6 Governance

A point of potential criticism concerns the degree of integration and coherence among the different measures. While there is no doubt but that the NRP and other programmes are centrally linked into the agreements emanating from the national social partnership process, this does not always make for coherence in terms of provision. In particular, care needs to be exercised in ensuring that the implications of new programmes or measures for existing programmes are thought through and worked out. There is now a proliferation of programmes and measures in Ireland, especially those of an ALMP nature, and it is not always clear where the new measures fit in. A propos ALMPS, and in particular the reported lower effectiveness of the new elements of the Preventive Process (pp. 61/62), why continue to roll out the same programme to other group and what is the potential for overlap (and hence inefficiencies) between this approach and the new programme (mentioned on pg 66)? The issue of streamlining the different activating programmes should be raised.

In addition, a close eye needs to be kept on the linkages across bureaucratic functional areas that have classically been somewhat separate – in particular social protection and economic policy. This is both the novelty and the challenge of the ‘feeding in’ and ‘feeding out’ processes and while there is evidence of progress in this regard there is still a distance to go. The NESC model of the developmental welfare state was very strong on the need to address fragmentation and divisions in service provision and could be much more intensively used to provide a roadmap for an integrated reform process.

There is little explicit information on governance, and in particular the extent to which relevant stakeholders have been involved. While it is clear this being the Irish report that the social partners are closely involved, it is not clear if the stakeholder involvement went beyond this or how systematically the social inclusion stakeholders have been involved. It is my impression that there was little or no consultation outside of the social partnership processes. In addition, there is no reference in the NRP to the heightened importance given in the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion to the Social Inclusion Office in the overall planning process and the intention to produce an annual social inclusion report. The Irish government should be asked to clarify intentions in this regard and also to consider a possible role for the Social Inclusion Forum in the NRP-related decision-making processes.

As regards target sharing, on paper many of the policies do have shared targets although the priority accorded to the concerns that are shared varies. Hence, it is still the case that economic policies tend to be oriented towards the economy, even if it is more broadly conceptualised. Ireland is a long way from seeing the economy as socially embedded (but then so too is the EU). In Ireland it is the social policy domain that has seen the most change in that increasingly social policies are viewed through an economic lens.

As regards monitoring and evaluation or other measures to assess outcomes, monitoring has been institutionalised by the social partnership process. There are also the poverty impact assessment tools, into which effort has been invested to roll them out across departments and unit and at local level. However, these have not been centrally integrated into the economic planning process.

2. Overview of New Reforms and Changes

The period covered in this section is from April/May 2006 to October 2007.

2.1 Changes in the baseline social policy situation

Budget 2007 continued the egalitarian thrust of recent Budgets. An analysis carried out by the Combat Poverty Agency drew the following conclusion:

Budget 2007 significantly enhances the progressive outturn of recent budgets, delivering gains of up to three times the average for low-income groups. Budget 2007 has a positive effect on relative income poverty, especially at the lowest threshold. The engine of poverty reduction is the big increases in welfare rates, augmented by a targeted allocation on child income support. The substantial tax package delivers proportionately little to less well-off groups, with the richest deciles the main beneficiaries. Taken together with budgetary policy since the revised NAPS in 2002, there is a significant reduction in income poverty in line with European best practice (see CPA 2007a).

However research that has looked at the changes wrought by the 'Celtic Tiger' over the last decade or so underlines that conclusions about how poverty and social exclusion have been affected by economic growth depend on the benchmarks chosen (Whelan et al 2007). If relative income poverty (or 'at risk of poverty' in the EU's terminology) is the benchmark then the situation has worsened over time whereas when the benchmark consists of income and measures of lifestyle deprivation there has been a major fall in the poverty rates.

2.2 Changes in the economic, social and demographic context

Commentators agree that the Irish economy is set for a prolonged period of slower growth. The Department of Finance has forecast that, for 2008 through 2010, overall growth will on average be of the order of 3.5% per annum. Commentators are now anticipating a real growth rate in gross national product in the range 2.9% to 3.25% next year; all foresee a stalling investment performance, induced by a decline in house-building activity in 2008; all expect a marked deceleration in the pace of employment growth next year (*Irish Times*, Oct 26, 2007).

In terms of the nature of the change, it is not simply a cyclical slowdown prompted by a downturn in residential construction. The underlying trend growth rate for the Irish economy is also faltering. Rapid reallocation of resources from the domestic sector is effectively blocked by the erosion of cost and price competitiveness and by decelerating productivity growth. These latter two factors are now pressing downwards on the economy's underlying or trend growth rate.

A number of budgetary implications of a medium-term slowdown in Ireland's growth rate are notable. First, the rate of growth in tax revenues will decelerate. At unchanged tax rates, this

means lower income growth for Government. Second, the very rapid increases in current public spending seen in recent years cannot be sustained. The pace of future increases in current public spending will need to reflect the lower underlying trend growth in the economy.

Employment growth too, which has been extremely buoyant, is forecast to slow. The latest forecast from the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI 2007) predicts that employment growth will slow in 2007 and 2008 relative to 2006, with rates of 2.5% in 2007 and 0.6% in 2008. For 2008, it expects the unemployment rate to average 5.6%.

Other important aspects of the context include: high, though declining, poverty levels; a sustained problem with child poverty; ongoing literacy challenges; lengthy social housing waiting lists; lengthy waiting lists for health services and continuing inequalities in health(iness). In regard to the latter, a number of recent pieces of research underline very significant equity issues in relation to access to health, despite large increases in investment in health services (Battel-Kirk and Purdy 2007; Layte, Nolan and Nolan 2007).

2.3 Major new trends and challenges

Demographic change is a noteworthy development. The results of the most recent Census (April 2006) which were released over the period indicate massive changes in the population. First, there has been large population growth - 8.1% in four years (CSO 2006). The average annual rate of population increase in the four-year period since 2002 at 2% is the highest on record. Fifty-eight per cent of this growth was accounted for by net migration. The details in terms of household composition show the traditional family household in decline. Fewer than one in five households in Dublin City are now made up of the traditional family of husband, wife and children (CSO 2007). The results show that there were 477,705 households composed of the traditional family in the State in 2006, an increase of only 3.3% since 2002. The number of such 'traditional households' declined in all the main cities between 2002 and 2006. The figures also reveal that there was a continued increase in the number of one-person households - of 18.7% since 2002. One-person households, which accounted for 22.4% of all households in the State in 2006, were the predominant household type in all five cities. Nearly 56% of one-person households were occupied by single (never-married) persons; a further 26.7% by widowed persons; 14.4% by separated (including divorced) persons and 3% by those describing their marital status as 'married'. The average number of persons per private household has continued to decline and now stands at 2.8, compared with 2.94 four years earlier. Cohabiting couples are the fastest growing family type. Overall, the total number of private households is up from 1.288 million in 2002 to 1.469 million in 2006 - a rise of 14.1%. The population grew by 8.2% over the same period.

The migration figures have to be considered in their own right, given that migration is such a novel and significant experience for Ireland. Foreign-born residents accounted for 14% of the population in 2006, compared with 10 per cent in 2002. A detailed analysis of figures for individual electoral districts shows that the number of immigrants in some areas has grown exponentially over the four-year period. More than a quarter of the population of large areas of Dublin, including most of the city centre, are immigrants. The figures suggest an increase of 64% in the city's non-Irish population, at a time when the centre city's overall population increased by just 11%. The highest proportion of immigrants in the city centre come from outside the EU (15.4%), those born within the EU, excluding Britain and Ireland, account for 11.5% of immigrants to the city centre, while 4.6% are British. Similar patterns emerge in the city centres of Cork and

Limerick. The number of foreign nationals in Cork city centre almost doubled between 2002 and 2006. In 2002, 1,800 people living in Cork city centre came from outside Ireland, by 2006 the figure was 3,578.

It is clear from the Census, as well as from other sources, that migration to Ireland is employment-related. Just over nine out of every 10 migrants from the new EU accession states who were living in Ireland at the time of the Census last year were in the workforce. The figures reveal that the 93% labour force participation rate for this group compared with a figure of 68% for non-EU nationals as a whole. The labour force participation rate for the whole population stood at 62.5%. The new figures also reveal dramatic growth in the construction sector from the period from the previous census in 2002.

2.4 New legislation and policy developments

There have been 6 noteworthy developments, all of which are in the nature of change in policy rather than new legislation.

The period since 2006 has been a busy one in terms of the production of national plans and programmes of action. In particular the national social partnership agreement - *Towards 2016* – agreed in September 2006 sets out a ten-year strategic vision and a set of measures. Continuing a trend whereby national agreements have become more extensive and wide-ranging over time, the latest agreement devotes much attention to social policy issues, along with measures relating to pay rates, public service modernisation, workplace relations and employment rights and compliance. It therefore raises the visibility of social issues. It speaks of making social and economic policy complementary which it interprets especially in relation to objective (b). Undoubtedly, the major innovation in *Towards 2016* in relation to social policy is its adoption of a life cycle approach. This divides up the population into three groups: children, people of working age, older people. It also refers to ‘people with disabilities’ in this regard (which makes little sense within a life cycle framework given that this is a population category rather than a life cycle stage). *Towards 2016* sets out a ten-year vision and a set of policy goals in relation to each group, together with priority actions. The life cycle framework tends to add coherence and serves as a useful frame for a policy document that contains many proposals.

A recent analysis of national agreements over the course of time in Ireland concludes that it is hard to maintain the ‘high road’ optimism of those who suppose that workplace partnership is, or might become, the template for the future of Irish employment relations (Roche 2007). It suggests that the new agreement has dispensed with the framework agreement format adopted from 1997 to encourage the spread of partnership in the workplace. As agreements of this type appear to have reached their limit as effective catalysts of partnership, this may not be a setback. What the author questions, however, is whether the alternative format that has been adopted, involving a dispersal of efforts to animate partnership across a range of loosely connected joint programmes and initiatives among the social partners, will fare much better. More generally, the growing latitude available to employers—and their growing determination—to tailor employment relations arrangements to their commercial circumstances and postures is taken by Roche as evidence that partnership arrangements will be but one model of employment relations evident in an increasingly diverse employment relations system. It may well be that the period from the mid-1990s to early 2005 may have witnessed the high tide of partnership, even if during that time actual achievement substantially lagged behind aspiration (ibid).

A second noteworthy development was the production, in February 2007, of the new National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-13: *Building an Inclusive Society*. The NAPinclusion identifies a number of high-level strategic goals in certain key priority areas in order to achieve the overall objective of reducing consistent poverty. Guided by a life course approach, these targeted actions and interventions focus on:

- ensuring that children reach their true potential;
- supporting working age people and people with disabilities, through activation measures and the provision of services to increase employment and participation;
- providing the type of supports that enable older people to maintain a comfortable and high-quality standard of living;
- building viable and sustainable communities, improving the lives of people living in disadvantaged areas and building social capital.

The overall poverty goal is to reduce the number of those experiencing consistent poverty to between 2% and 4% by 2012, with the aim of eliminating consistent poverty by 2016, under the revised definition. Among the high-level goals are those aiming at: the provision of targeted pre-school education; reducing literacy difficulties and tackling early school leaving; maintaining the combined value of child income support measures at 33%-35% of the minimum adult social welfare payment rate; introducing an active case management approach to support those on long-term social welfare into education, training and employment, with an overall aim of reducing by 20% the number of those whose total income is derived from long-term social welfare; maintaining the relative value of the lowest social welfare rate; continuing to increase investment in community care services for older people; maintaining, and if possible enhancing, the value of the State Pension; increasing the employment and participation of people with disabilities; delivering increased housing output to meet the accommodation needs of some 60,000 new households, the homeless, Travellers, older people and people with disabilities; developing 500 primary care teams to improve access to services in the community, with particular emphasis on meeting the needs of holders of medical cards; developing a strategy aimed at achieving the integration of newcomers in our society. In addition to the high-level goals, there are some 154 targeted actions and interventions set out in the Plan designed to ensure that a decisive impact is made on poverty.

Thirdly, there have been a 'bunch' of developments within the social protection system. Among the most noteworthy are the following:

- the extension of paid maternity benefit to 26 weeks (from 22) from 1st March 2007. It is estimated that some 43,000 women will qualify for the extended leave during the year between March 2007 and March 2008;
- the introduction of the Early Childcare Supplement in April 2006, which provides a new payment of €1,000 annually in respect of all children under 6 years of age;
- significant increase in the earnings disregard for recipients of lone parents benefits (so as to encourage employment). This, presumably, is the first step of rolling out an integrated programme of measures for this target group as promised in the last NRSSPSI and NRP.

Alongside these the period saw significant additional investments in child income supports, on a universal and targeted basis, as well as support for carers of elderly people (including measures that make it easier to receive a social welfare benefit for caring if one is employed). Over recent years there has been major progress on benchmarking social welfare payments. Budget 2007 delivered on the *Towards 2016* commitment to benchmark the minimum social welfare rate at 30% of Gross Average Industrial Earnings, equivalent to €185.80 in 2007.

Fourthly, there was the New Childcare Investment Programme 2006 - 2010, a key part of the National Development Plan, to which funding of some €575 million is to be allocated over the five-year period, including €358 million for capital investment. It is anticipated that the programme will create up to 50,000 new childcare places, with the objective, *inter alia*, of assisting parents to access affordable, quality childcare, create 5,000 after-school and 10,000 pre-school education places; support childcare facilities as well as education measures for children and parents in disadvantaged areas. The programme will be delivered at local level through the City and County Childcare Committees under the coordination of Pobal. The equality aspects of this programme are receiving attention. It has recently been announced (October 22, 2007) that the method of grant aiding community childcare providers is to be changed to limit subventions for children in community-based childcare to those whose parents are social welfare recipients. From January of next year, parents in receipt of social welfare will receive a €80 weekly supplement for full daycare while parents in receipt of the Family Income Supplement will receive some €30. Notably, subventions will not be provided any longer for care for the children of other parents.

Fifthly, a Task Force on Active Citizenship was established in 2006. With a brief to recommend measures which could become part of public policy to facilitate and encourage a greater degree of engagement by citizens in all aspects of life and the growth and development of voluntary organisations as part of a strong civic culture, the Task Force produced its report in March 2007 (Task Force 2007). Among its recommendations were an independent electoral commission to encourage everyone who is eligible to register and vote in elections, National Presidential Citizen Awards to recognise outstanding contributions to civic and community life, a formal Citizenship Ceremony to mark admission to Irish citizenship and to engage and welcome newcomers (to apply also to Irish citizens once they reach majority) a National Active Citizenship theme each year to stimulate local initiatives and events, a National Observatory to act as a focal point for research on civic engagement. The government has responded to the report by a commitment to set up an Active Citizenship Office. The national agreement, *Towards 2016*, also contains a commitment to the effect that, arising from the work of this Task Force, consideration will be given to the development of appropriate measures and indicators of social capital, and to future approaches in relation to citizenship education and voter participation.

Sixthly, there have been significant developments in regard to gender. In particular in 2007, the Government launched the long-awaited *National Women's Strategy* (NWS). Relating closely to commitments in the National Development Plan, the objectives and actions in the NWS fall under three themes:

- Equalising socio and economic opportunity for women - the measures included here refer to, *inter alia*, decreasing the gender pay gap, the advancement of women in the labour force, supporting more women as entrepreneurs, achieving their full potential in the education system, optimising childcare services for children and parents, care infrastructure which supports women's socio-economic engagement.
- Ensuring the well being of women – by such measures as increasing women's health status through gender-focused policies, enhancing women's work/life balance,

promoting healthy lifestyles for women, protecting women from bullying and harassment in the workplace, promoting women's participation in sport and recreation, combating violence against women.

- Engaging as equal and active citizens – in particular by improving women's participation in decision making and women's human rights (with a particular emphasis on violence against women).

Funding runs in the first instance to 2013 and it complements the very significantly increased package of €68 million for positive actions under the Equality for Women Measure (up from €37 million in 2000 - 2006). In the National Development Plan overall funding to support gender equality and women's issues has been increased from €37 million in the 2000-2006 NDP to €148 million in the 2007-2013 Plan.

In its response to the NWS, the National Women's Council of Ireland has praised the Strategy for its breadth and recognition of the wide range of women's inequalities acknowledged (National Women's Council of Ireland 2007). However, it points out also that mechanisms to remove these are largely absent, and that the NWS does not contain measurable targets, or timescales. Nevertheless, the Council acknowledges that there is a commitment to positive action measures that will play an important part to ensure implementation of the NWS. However, a weakness with such measures is their short-term nature; to truly impact on persistent inequalities in Irish society the Council considers that much more sustained long-term measures are required. The Council is also critical of the extent to which the NWS is underpinned by a thorough analysis and understanding of the structural causes of women's disadvantage. Missing is analysis of such factors as the lack of childcare, discrimination in the Constitution and sexist attitudes. The Council also believes that there should be a more targeted approach to reducing the numbers of women experiencing poverty, particularly those in the following categories: part-time workers, widows, qualified adults, low-income families, lone parents, farm/family business workers, home makers and pensioners. Against this backdrop, it should be pointed out that the latest available figures indicate an 'at risk of poverty rate' that the prevalence of poverty amongst women aged 65 years and over of 36%, compared to a 30% rate for men (CSO 2006b).

Mobilisation and involvement of actors

While Ireland has a substantial track record on consultation, there is little progress on 'mobilisation' in its meaning of involving people who are experiencing poverty and social exclusion other than in the annual social inclusion forum.

Mainstreaming

Ireland again has a good track record in this respect, especially in recent years. The latest NRSSPSI also made progress in this regard with its strong focus on improving a range of services, especially health.

2.5 Regional and local interests

Progress is still slow although institutional structures are being gradually put in place. In particular, local level implementation of the National Action Plan and the NRSSPSI is supported by the Local Government Policy section within the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government. This section participates along with a variety of other actors on the Local Government Social Inclusion Steering Group, originally an initiative sponsored by the Combat Poverty Agency and now mainstreamed and supported by the Institute for Public Administration.

At the local level delivery of the NRSSPSI/NAPinclusion is heavily reliant on the effective functioning of the County/City Development Boards and, in particular, the Social Inclusion Monitoring committees within them. Social inclusion units have been created and are slowly being rolled out - it is expected that there will be 17 by the end of 2008. Staffing and significance of these units varies among local authorities - in some cases, consisting only of single officers.

Two recent reports (Combat Poverty Agency 2007; ERM 2006) drew attention to the difficulties involved in developing an integrated approach to the the implementation of the National Action Plans for Social Inclusion at local level. The following were the main difficulties identified:

- Central and local priorities are not aligned. This prevents national policies from being embedded at a local level.
- There is a perception at local level that too many 'new' partnerships and programmes are being developed, rather than building on existing structures.
- A lack of coterminous administrative boundaries for many agencies and bodies presents challenges to developing integrated policies to address social issues.
- There are too many special programmes and short-term initiatives, and ambiguity regarding their level of priority.
- Despite rapid expansion of the institutional spectrum over the last decade there has been no major overhaul of local resourcing or any real devolution of power.
- 'Silo' thinking is instilled at all levels, which results in administrative and/or
- organisational cultures blocking progress in the implementation of policy.

The general conclusion was that the required structural elements are already in place at local and national levels but there is a need for greater coherence in how these elements interact and deliver on policy goals. In addition, the point is made that national and local bodies should be accountable to one another and demonstrate a clear understanding of their respective roles and mandates in addressing poverty and social exclusion (see Combat Poverty Agency 2007b).

2.6 Other

Publication of NESF 'The arts, cultural inclusion and social cohesion' 2007

Taking account of its earlier work on social capital (NESF 2003), the NESF initiated this work to look at how the arts contribute to cultural inclusion and social cohesion and how this can be enhanced further. The recommendations have been identified with a view to exploiting more fully the potential of arts to enhance social capital and create a more inclusive and cohesive society. They include recommendations in such areas as improved policy co-ordination, management of funding, supports for children and young people, targeted measures for specific groups (people in disadvantaged areas and young people), improved data and evaluation and implementation mechanisms. In responding to the report, the Government agreed that the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism would appoint a Strategy Committee with an independent chair to consider the

NESF's recommendations as outlined in the report in the context of ongoing policy to broaden participation in the arts.

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