

# An integrated equality agenda for a more equal and inclusive Ireland

## *Community Platform Position Paper*

*May 2010*

### **Introduction**

The Community Platform\*, representing 29 national social inclusion and equality organisations is calling for an integrated approach to countering discrimination and promoting equality. Specifically it proposes:

1. New independent statutory infrastructure to take up the functions and powers of the disbanded Combat Poverty Agency and the existing but damaged Equality Authority
2. The development of new equality legislation that includes a socio economic ground and includes a requirement for a proactive approach by public bodies to advance equality in terms of redistribution, recognition, representation and respect.
3. New and existing National Action Plans/Strategies to be implemented across all of the grounds e.g. National Women's Strategy, Carers Strategy etc.
4. Equality mainstreaming that combines a focus on redistribution and recognition with systems and supports for mainstreaming developed and resourced
5. Support for the community sector at national and local level, with an emphasis on recognising its independence and the right to advocate for the elimination of structural inequality.

### **Context**

There is a growing realisation that despite massive wealth generation during the Celtic tiger years, Irish society remains deeply unequal. After 15 years of unprecedented economic growth relative poverty levels have dropped by only 1.6%. Discrimination as experienced by women, Black and ethnic minority groups including Travellers, older people, young people, lesbian, gay and transgendered people, lone parents, people with a disability and other groups continues to be a daily reality. Discrimination on the basis of social status remains unrecognised in equality legislation but is pervasive and corrosive.

During the 1990s Ireland made substantial progress in developing a more comprehensive equality infrastructure. This included new equality legislation, new statutory equality institutions, enhanced funding for the community sector and a range of policy commitments including the report of the Task Force on the Traveller Community, the report of the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities and the National Women's Strategy. This built on already existing equality infrastructure with a specific poverty focus which included the Combat Poverty Agency and the National Action Plans for Social Inclusion. The

community sector welcomed these developments but was also critical of the lack of progress on real and meaningful cultural and organisational change within the institutions of the state i.e. poor data collection, little progress on ensuring an equality focus in mainstream programmes, policies, decision making and structures.

With the onset of the recession this equality infrastructure has suffered serious cutbacks which have been widely interpreted as an ideological shift and is only partially related to the worsening economic crisis. This ideological shift is evidenced most starkly in the way communities experiencing social exclusion and inequality have been marginalised through funding cuts and a reorientation of funding programmes away from a concern with participation and advocacy towards a service orientated and behaviour modification approach.

This paper is being developed in the context of a deep recession, unprecedented cuts in public services and social protection budgets alongside increasing resistance and hostility towards those sections of society challenging the prevailing ideology and model of economic development. In the context of the recession, income inequality (while of central importance) has dominated the public discourse and there has been little opportunity to address or give recognition to the continued entrenched problems of discrimination and the intersection between discrimination and poverty i.e. impact of income inequality on women, Travellers etc.

Since its foundation in the mid '90's the Community Platform has been active in promoting equality and countering discrimination. It is the Community Platforms belief that the root causes of inequality and discrimination need to be addressed at a structural and ideological level for meaningful social change to become a reality. The Community Platform formally brings together a wide range of organisations representing groups who experience structural inequalities and discrimination i.e. Travellers, long term unemployed, women, older people, lone parents, migrant workers and immigrants, socio economically deprived, gay and lesbian community, homeless, educationally disadvantaged amongst others.

Ireland is waking up to the reality that the model of economic and social development we have pursued to date has failed society badly. There is now an opportunity to re evaluate the core values and vision informing our future. The Community Platform is keen to contribute to this reimagining of what a 'good society' might mean. We do so from the perspective that equality of outcome is vital, that structural and institutional change is essential and that an alternative model of socio-economic development is possible.

This paper supports the Community Platform in enhancing its equality focus and articulating more clearly its position in advancing an equality agenda. A number of core proposals are presented which the CP believes will substantially improve Ireland's capacity and infrastructure to counter discrimination and promote an integrated approach to equality of outcome. The paper does not specifically deal with the theme of income inequality which is captured in position papers being developed in parallel i.e. income adequacy and taxation policy papers.

## **Why we should be concerned with equality at this time?**

### **1. Economic Recession hits those already experiencing inequality worst.**

It's the sorry truth that when economic situations get worse, the worst hit are usually the most vulnerable groups in society. In addition to being financially poorer the continued existence of structural discrimination places groups such as women, older people, Travellers, migrant workers, socio disadvantaged children and young people, lone parents, people with a disability, carers amongst others at greater risk of vulnerability and disadvantage.

Failure to address structural discrimination will further marginalise those communities. It is evident that in the public discussion surrounding training and job creation there are subtle and sometimes not so subtle distinctions being drawn between the deserving and non deserving unemployed. The non deserving being those who are long term unemployed and likely to be a member of a group experiencing intergenerational inequality and discrimination i.e. lone parents, older women and men, socio economically disadvantaged young men, Travellers, migrant workers and educationally disadvantaged.

### **2. There is a backlash against equality.**

As conditions worsen, the risk of viewing equality as a luxury increases. In fact, there is a view amongst some that equality has gone too far! At an organisational level this is reflected in the shelving of equality policies, cuts in equality budgets and the dropping of equality brief from job descriptions as positions are consolidated. At a state level we have already experienced a savage cut in the equality infrastructure which can only be partially linked to reduced available resources. Increased competition for resources at a community level is likely to result in a row back in some equality work especially work that is focused on advocacy and empowerment.

### **3. Prejudice and discrimination are increasing.**

Prejudiced and discriminatory behaviour tends to become more pronounced during recession. Attitudes can harden and there can be less tolerance for diversity. Associated

with a tough economic environment is a corresponding sense of entrenchment and an increase in views of a nationalistic nature.

This can translate into a pattern of blaming the 'other' and discussions on cultural values which can have a profoundly polarising effect on themes such as freedom of religious belief, migration, and racism. In the US the recession and the associated hardening of attitudes is thought to be having a negative impact on the gay community and in particular support for same sex marriage.

Women are experiencing a row back on fundamental gains made over the past few decades. There are reports of women being laid-off during their maternity leave, having their maternity pay cut, isolation when they reveal their pregnancy and bullying when they return to work, being denied previously agreed work sharing or part-time work arrangements and being given notice when they return to work. Reported increases in violence against women are symptomatic of the unequal status of women and the way in which this becomes exacerbated in times of stress at a societal and individual level.

#### **4. The recession is being managed in a manner that will increase inequality.**

The effect of the cuts in public services is not shared equally by everyone. Groups in society experiencing inequality are without doubt bearing the brunt of the pain. Within the education system children with a disability, children requiring language supports, children with delayed learning are at greatest risk of being further marginalised.

The decrease in social welfare payments and the threat posed to the minimum wage are deepening income inequality which is likely to impact more severely on groups such as lone parents, children, and women.

Some of the public discourse is also exacerbating a perception that those experiencing inequality and poverty are largely to blame themselves and terms such as 'freeloaders' and 'spongers' are more freely used on our airwaves and in public discourse.

#### **5. Equality commitments in place are not being implemented.**

There is an ongoing lack of clarity about the status of policy commitments and some have clearly been shelved. For example

- The National Women's Strategy
- Traveller Accommodation Programme
- National Intercultural Health Strategy 2007 – 2012
- The equality aspects of the National Development Plan
- Follow on from National Action Plan Against Racism
- Follow on from Year of Equal Opportunities 2007
- National Carers Strategy

## **6. Under cover of recession the equality infrastructure is being dismantled.**

Up to recently Ireland was credited internationally with having an advanced and forward looking institutional policy and statutory commitment to countering discrimination and promoting equality. This has been brutally undermined over the past few years e.g. cuts in Equality Authority, closure of NCCRI, closure of the Combat Poverty Agency, conclusion of the National Action Plan Against Racism, stalling of funding programmes i.e. Equality for Women Funding Programme.

## **7. The attack on the community sector**

The pursuit of equality outcomes has traditionally been led by the community sector. What has recently emerged is a pattern of resistance and hostility towards the community sector, locally and nationally, and a systematic effort to limit and minimise equality and advocacy related actions in favour of an emphasis on more effective service delivery. This is reflected most acutely in the decision to close 13 Community Development Projects and force the remaining 160 under local partnership structures. The new Community and Local development Programme under which support for local community development is to be resourced is exceptionally light on an equality focus and heavy on service provision.

## **Inequality in Ireland**

Inequality has not gone away and evidence indicates that discrimination is a systemic problem impacting on the lives of many individuals and communities in Ireland.

- Of the nine grounds covered by equality legislation, age-related discrimination was the most commonly reported (19 %) followed by race/ethnicity/nationality (16 %) and sex (12 %)
- The Equality Authority identified that 'of the eligible population, 9% of respondents reported discrimination accessing services and 7% reported work-related discrimination. In 71 % of cases, discrimination was experienced on more than one occasion. (*Equality Authority, 2008*)
- The Community Platform has identified significant inequalities in the distribution of wealth in Ireland with 1% of the population holding 20% of the wealth and 5% holding 40% of the wealth. (*A Better Ireland is Possible 2009*)
- Significant income inequality has been identified by the CSO with about 28% of income being earned by 6% of the population.
- The gender pay gap in Ireland remains at 11% (*NWCI 2010*)
- Even where both partners work outside the home it is still evident that maintaining the household is the women's primary responsibility, (*The Guardian 12 July 2004*)

- Only 13% of those elected to the Dail are women and the percentage of women appointed to the Cabinet in this Government has declined by 7% while the percentage of women Ministers of State has decreased by 11% (*NWCI, 2010*)
- Almost 80 per cent of individuals from black or ethnic minority groups living in Ireland claim they had experienced some form of racism or discrimination. Many of these discriminatory attacks were not one-off or incidental occurrences. (*Irish Centre for Human Rights and Amnesty International, 2006*)
- People with disabilities are two and half times less likely to have a job than those without a disability (*CSO data 2002*)
- Twice as many disabled people are in consistent poverty compared to those without such a condition (*DSFA (2008) 'Statement of Strategy 2008' Government Publications*)
- European surveys have demonstrated that levels of violence directed against lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people are up to three times higher than those experienced by the population as a whole (*Implementing Equality for Lesbians, Gays and Bisexuals (2002)*)
- Families of same sex couples do not have equal rights to those of married heterosexual couples (*GLEN*)
- The age ground was the highest area of case files under the Employment Equality Acts for the first time in 2007 (24%) (*Equality Authority 2008*)
- The Traveller community remain one of the most discriminated against ethnic group in Ireland. Travellers fare poorly on every indicator used to measure disadvantage: unemployment, poverty, social exclusion, health, infant mortality rates (more than twice those of the general population), life expectancy (ten to twelve years less), illiteracy (some 80 per cent of adults), education and training levels, access to decision-making and political representation, gender equality, access to credit, accommodation and living conditions. (*Pavee Point website, 2010*)
- Households headed by lone parents and by older women remain at higher risk of poverty. (*OPEN, 2010*)
- Social status, while not legally recognised under Irish equality legislation, greatly matters in determining equality outcomes for many in society. Children with lower social economic status have poorer outcomes in relation to health status, education and earnings (*ESRI 2004, OECD 2010*)

### **Understanding the equality framework**

While there is a general acknowledgement that the existence of inequality has a corrosive impact on society there is less agreement on the causes of inequality and the range of responses required to tackle inequalities and discrimination.

Inequality is caused by many factors in society and is manifest in many different ways. Sophisticated responses are necessary, responses that address the various elements of the economic, political, cultural and human interaction systems and structures that organise society.

Equality is only possible where there is progress across the various spheres and structures of society. For example while economic independence for women is key to the achievement of equality for women, failure to address exclusion from decision making and violence against women will not generate the type of outcomes necessary for the achievement of full equality.

The National Economic and Social Forum (absorbed into the NESC in 2010) agreed a strategic framework for understanding equality in 2002 (in association with Equality Studies Centre, UCD). This framework presents an important and useful framework for considering the complex multidimensional nature of inequality and discrimination

1. **Redistribution.** This objective is concerned with an emphasis on economic equality and the equal distribution of resources. It addresses themes such as poverty, income adequacy, access to and experience in the workplace
2. **Representation.** This objective is concerned with the political sphere and access equal representation and participation in decision making. It addresses themes such as representational democracy and its institutions nationally and locally, participatory democracy and legal and judicial systems.
3. **Recognition.** This objective is concerned with the cultural sphere and with equality in facilitating an affirmation and accommodation of identities. This involves a focus on issues of multiple identities, negative stereotyping, education and media systems
4. **Respect.** This objective is concerned with the caring and emotional sphere. It address such themes as violence against women, family support structures, isolation, care issues.

These four objectives can be addressed in their own right and it should be acknowledged that there are frequently tensions between the four dimensions e.g. during the boom, the emphasis was more focused on recognition, now the dominant attention is on redistribution.

A more holistic and balanced response is required as all of the dimensions are interlinked. There is a lack of consistency across Departments and Agencies with the approach fragmented particularly in relation to areas relating to redistribution and recognition. Legislation and plans were developed as if in a vacuum without considering how they relate to or strengthen policies and legislation developed in other areas.

Although this framework was adopted by NESF there remains in place a damaging policy fragmentation in the response to inequality. Poverty and issues of redistribution are the remit of the Department of Social Protection. Equality and issues of recognition are now the remit of the Department of Community, Equality and Gaeltacht. While acknowledging a move in the right direction much fragmentation remains.

This has also divided the community sector response to inequality. The redistribution agenda has largely been the domain of the traditional community sector while the recognition area has been more closely linked to what is known as the human rights sector. In reality there has been a huge cross over with many single issue groups i.e. Traveller, women, migrant rights groups also pursuing active agendas under both spheres. Perhaps the area of divergence has been more on the approach i.e. legal strategy as opposed to a traditional advocacy and empowerment based approach predominant in the community sector. In recent years there have been substantial efforts to link more closely these two spheres within the community sector in addition to a greater mix of strategy i.e. combination of advocacy, participation and legal approaches.

### **Equality messages for the Community Platform**

- 1. Equality is important in the current context of recession.** It is important not only for those who experience inequality but for all of society. More equal societies do better at every level. In more equal societies there are lower levels of stress and higher levels of trust.
- 2. Inequality damages all of society.** Research shows that inequality has a corrosive and damaging effect on all of society. Increased stratification of groups and communities, racism, perceptions of fear and insecurity, mental and physical stress/ill health are problems on the increase. Inequality as a driver for the economy is no longer a valid strategy.
- 3. We must be more ambitious than before.** Move away from language like fairness, tolerating difference and equality of opportunity towards the language of equality of outcomes, valuing differences etc.
- 4. Now is the time for renewal not repair.** There is a need for renewal of our commitment to equality and our efforts must not be limited to an inadequate effort to repair a broken model. Too much damage has been done. We must use this time of crisis as an opportunity to re-imagine. Something new is needed to re-engage and re-energise people.

- 5. We need to integrate the approach to the inequalities in redistribution and in recognition.** A single department should have responsibility for these issues and they should be the focus for a coherent policy initiative that addresses all forms of inequality. The creation of the Dept of Community, Equality and Gaeltacht offers a real possibility for change. This department brings together policy issues of inclusion and equality for the first time.
- 6. A strong independent community sector is essential.** Without a strong advocacy focused community sector communities and groups will not have their voice heard, the lived experience of discrimination will not be heard and bad policy not challenged.
- 7. We need a new equality infrastructure:-**
- New equality legislation that covers a socio economic status ground
  - New provisions in equality legislation that requires a proactive approach by public bodies to advance equality in terms of redistribution, recognition, representation and respect.
  - A new statutory institution to take up the functions and powers of the now dismantled Combat Poverty Agency and the Equality Authority.
  - Introduction of and investment in equality mainstreaming that combines a focus on redistribution and recognition making use of templates already developed for Poverty Impact Assessment and Equality Proofing.
  - Implementation of the National Womens Strategy etc, replacement of the National Action Plan Against Racism and completion of the National Carers Strategy.
  - Full implementation of the Disability Act and improvement of the Act to ensure services are provided to meet needs assessment and to broaden the range of people with disabilities who are covered by the legislation.
  - Targeted initiatives to develop care infrastructure, address Traveller accommodation etc.
  - Funding programme for an independent national and local community sector focused on the participation and empowerment of communities experiencing poverty, inequality and social exclusion and advocates for the elimination of the structural causes of inequality.

\*The Community Platform is made up of a network of 29 national networks and organisations within the community sector working to address poverty, social exclusion and inequality. Community Platform members comprise: ATD <sup>4th</sup> World, Age Action, Community Action Network, Community Workers Co-operative, Cairde, EAPN (Ireland), Focus Ireland, Gay & Lesbian Equality Network, Immigrant Council of Ireland, Irish Association of Older People, Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed, Irish Penal Reform Trust, Irish Refugee Council, Irish Rural Link, Irish Traveller Movement, Migrant Rights Centre Ireland, National Adult Literacy Agency, National Network of Women's Refuges & Support Services, National Traveller Women's Forum, National Women's Council of Ireland, Older Women's Network, OPEN, Pavee Point, Rape Crisis Network Ireland, Simon Communities of Ireland, Threshold, Voluntary Drug Treatment Network, Vincentian Partnership for Justice, Women's Aid.

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