



Community Workers'  
Co-operative

## Key messages to the Social Inclusion Forum, 2014 (from 10 regional and thematic meetings with 216 participants).



European Anti Poverty  
Network Ireland

Local meetings in Castleblaney, Cork, Dublin, Ennis, Galway, Kilkenny, Letterkenny and Tullamore.  
Thematic meetings on issues for Women and on Traveller and Roma health

### Making the Social Inclusion Forum relevant –the ‘implementation gap’

All of the meetings again expressed frustration at the gap between national and EU goals on poverty and discussions at fora such as the Social Inclusion Forum (SIF) on the one hand and the actual implementation of policy commitments on the other.

Participants were adamant that there needs to be a **report on progression** on recommendations from previous SIFs provided by the government at every SIF. Participants expressed a sense of consultation fatigue at being asked to discuss issues every year and never receiving feedback on issues discussed.

The meetings were dominated by frustration and anger at the way in which policy choices since 2008 and before have hit the lives of people on low incomes hardest, despite commitments in the anti-poverty plans. **The gap between rich and poor has widened** due to unemployment, cuts to vital services and poorer quality work. The Department of Social Protection now produce a budget impact analysis on the tax and social welfare components and this needs to be used as a planning tool and extended across Government.

**Current austerity policies need to be reversed.**

In discussion, it was felt that **the questions asked to effectively measure deprivation need to be**

**reviewed.** Many are inappropriate, a number of them have a middle class bias and of have little relevance to people living in disadvantage communities. Ways of measuring and understanding poverty need to reflect the reality for people.

We need to understand both poverty and social exclusion and their impact on people as more than just lack of income. The causes of poverty and social exclusion are structural.

#### The four main recommendations from SIF 2013

1. (in relation to Direct Provision for asylum seekers): “...a moral responsibility to ensure that access to and standards of service equate with that available to Irish citizens.”
2. (in relation to bottom-up approaches) “...the partnership approach between the state and community sector needs to be re-established.”
3. (in relation to activation): “...The roll-out of Pathways to Work needs to be viewed as a learning model”
4. (in relation to ageing) “...It is imperative that the National Positive Ageing Strategy is brought to immediate completion.”

### Recommendations to the workshops at SIF 2014

#### 1. Local Government Reform

There was unanimous consensus that the current policy of local government reform will continue and compound developments in the past few years that has seen the destruction of grassroots community development and approaches to addressing poverty, social exclusion and inequality.

#### Disenfranchising local communities

There was a fear across the meetings that current changes in local government and in community and local development **will disenfranchise local**

**communities and spell the end for community development** as an effective force for change. The connection with people on the ground, which is central to community development, will be lost.

The alignment process has been developed behind closed doors without clear information, debate or consultation. The lack of involvement of those who will be affected is unacceptable and undermines the official language of enhanced *engagement*. Changes are happening without foresight and with a lack of respect.

### **People will lose their voice in decisions.**

Services are being centralised to local authorities and being taken out of the hands of local community and voluntary organisations. People will lose their voice in decisions. There is a **particular concern for women's and Traveller organisations** which are currently still independent. The targets for gender equality on the Local Community Development Committees are tokenistic at best.

*“Planning is being done from the top-down instead of the bottom-up and there will be nobody left to challenge – the community no longer have a voice”*

One of the main reasons for the growth of local and community development infrastructure was that the state and its agencies, including local government, couldn't reach rural or disadvantaged communities. This infrastructure will now be destroyed.

There was a strong belief that this will cost the state in the long-term. There are neither the skills capacity nor the resource levels within local authorities to take on local development or community development.

### **Community Infrastructure**

Community groups are diminishing because of resources being cut, affecting support services. This leads to mental health issues and a loss of hope.

Because of cuts to community groups, they are relying more on schemes (CE, TUS) and volunteers. This leads to lack of continuity.

There is an uncertainty about how decisions on community funding will be made, at national or local level and what criteria will be used. Participants also highlighted the danger that LEADER funding will be politicised by giving the local authority responsibility for it.

*“The only people that will be able to work with Travellers on the ground are Traveller organisations – Traveller won't engage with these private companies”*

There will be a loss of the experience that exists in local groups if they don't get the tender.

There is not enough recognition of the amount of money citizens save the exchequer by working voluntarily in the community e.g. minding family members at home.

The role of volunteers will be significantly undermined by the new structures.

### **Travellers and Traveller organisations**

These particular issues for **Travellers and their organisations** whose independence and needs will not be respected if alignment proceeds. Councils will control funding for Traveller organisations as well as projects and services. Traveller organisations will not be able to challenge County/City Councils. The hostility or at least lack of support for Travellers and their culture among councils is well known. This is evidenced by unspent funding for Traveller accommodation returned to the Department.

### **Privatisation**

Moves to privatise local and community development are very worrying. Apart from the increased bureaucracy involved in tendering, there will be a loss of the local knowledge, experience and networking. Participants were also worried about politicisation.

There are issues of workers' rights and loss of skills.

### **Recommendations**

- The policy to give power to local authorities on local development and particularly community development needs to be reversed – it will not work;
- Independent community work to achieve social inclusion and equality must be resourced at local and national levels.

## **2. Roma Integration Strategy**

At both the local and thematic meetings, it was recognised that Roma are facing some of the worst levels of discrimination, prejudice and poverty in Ireland. There are few data on Roma in Ireland, but it is estimated that there are 5,000 people here.

### **Community development supports**

There is relatively little community development support for Roma. There are few additional resources for local projects with resources already stretched to capacity and beyond.

At some of the meetings, it was stressed that the needs of Roma, as new communities with less few

local networks or experiences, may be different from existing communities and Roma their own voice in anti-racism and inclusion strategies.

The Irish Traveller & Roma Strategy is not fit for purpose. Assessments by the EU place Ireland in the bottom-third of member states.

Roma are particularly vulnerable to exploitation by unscrupulous landlords and employers in the informal economy, being mostly new to the country and relatively isolated.

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## Habitual Residency

The Habitual Residence Condition is having a significant impact on work with the community. Many Roma are not entitled to any social welfare protection

and if working are more than likely to be on extremely low incomes.

Begging is sometimes seen as 'cultural' but it is not part of Roma culture. Roma people resort to begging because they have no other option.

## 3. The Healthy Ireland Strategy

There was little awareness of the Healthy Ireland Strategy among participants in the workshops and its implications for them were not fully understood.

Participants talked of the need for a preventative approach to supporting older people – instead of only responding to a crisis.

Participants around the country stressed the structural inequalities in relation to health and the known links between poverty and ill health. This has been made worse by overall policy decisions which have pushed people beyond their limits.

### Mental health epidemic

Mental ill health is now endemic, leading to isolation and sometimes suicide risk. It is a real issue in rural areas where there is a link to isolation and among homeless people and people on low and precarious income. It is also a significant issue for the Traveller community and for asylum seekers, linked with discrimination and other social determinates of health.

### Medical cards and prescription charges

Changes in eligibility for medical cards are a big problem, and the process of getting a card can lead to damaging delays. The cost of prescription medicine is prohibitive to many people. The prescription charges impact particularly on people who need a lot of medication or who have large families, with long term illness such as diabetes, but we heard stories all over the country of people unable to pay for prescriptions, especially in emergencies. Medical card holders are still paying for blood tests.

*“How am I supposed to think about healthy food? - I don't even have a fridge.”*

Travellers and Roma need to be included in mainstream strategies, but their poor health status requires targeted approaches as well. The state cannot say that it doesn't know the extent of health inequalities faced by those in poverty and communities such as Travellers – they do know, they have the evidence but they are doing nothing about it.

## 4. Homelessness

There was no faith that the goal to eradicate homelessness can be reached by 2016.

The time that it takes to turn around vacant houses for new lettings is unacceptable, as the longer they are vacant the more they deteriorate and therefore the higher the cost to renovate. Regeneration projects are being postponed in areas of high need.

The numbers experiencing homelessness are increasing dramatically, especially young people on the lower social welfare rate of €100 per week. There are several causes, including waiting up to six months for rent support; lack of availability of private rented accommodation, particularly for those dependant on rent allowance; rising rents; lack of social housing. For those living in areas covered by Centralised Rental Units, difficulties are compounded by the fact that there is no personal contact with welfare officers, and getting a response takes an inordinate length of time.

### Recommendations

For Travellers, there is the added difficulty of not being able to access accommodation because of discrimination and the failure of local authorities to provide culturally appropriate accommodation.

- Rent caps need to be means-tested and rates need to correspond to rent levels in the area
- Legislation is required to restrict the ability of landlords to increase rents
- A programme of social housing construction needs to be expedited
- The turn-around time for letting vacant housing needs to be significantly expedited.
- Ghost estates should be used for those families who are on housing lists
- The *Housing First* model is a good approach for addressing homelessness. We need resources for homeless people who are coming from problem backgrounds such as gambling, drink abuse, drugs.

There is also an increase in hidden homelessness and overcrowding. There are 90,000 people waiting for social housing with no construction being undertaken.

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## Some other issues discussed

### 1. Some particular issues for women

There was broad welcome for the inclusion of a gender analysis. If it is not deliberately included, it won't appear on the agenda.

Many policies that appear gender-blind are having a disproportionate impact on women. For example the changes to the number of credits required to access a full pension has a much greater effect on women because of their work patterns.

Latest figures indicate that there were 66,000 new jobs, but there was an actual decrease for women under 35 years of 17,000 jobs. The labour market is still highly segregated and the female dominated areas are not recovering, with any jobs in those areas going to men.

Changes to community projects like Local Training Initiatives are having a huge effect on women.

### 2. Some rural Issues

Many rural issues don't come up at national level. These include lack of access to services such as health, childcare and transport and a struggle to keep services going; isolation which impacts on mental health; difficulty accessing training and employment services and the additional cost of living in rural communities. There is also need for better information on the services that are available, and this is a particular issue for older people.

### 3. Some issues for Travellers

The National Traveller Advisory Committee has not met since 2012. The Roma & Traveller strategy needs to be rewritten to include real targets, actions and associated budgets with a timeframe for implementation and a monitoring mechanism. Funding support should be sought from the EU. Areas to be covered include: Education, Health, Accommodation and Employment, with gender and anti-discrimination as overarching issues. **A new Traveller Health Strategy is required.**

Discrimination towards Travellers is widespread. The provision of Traveller accommodation remains a major issue, with little Traveller specific accommodation and no transient sites in most areas, failure to follow through on five year Traveller Accommodation Programmes and money for Traveller accommodation being sent back by local authorities. Part of the problem is that there is no recognition of Travellers as an ethnic group.

### 4. Some employment issues

It is hard for many to take up a low income job or a CE scheme, because of the cost of going to work or back to education, including the cost of childcare. The cost of going to college makes it unattractive to many.

When you become unemployed, courses should be available straight away, not in six or 12 months. Intreo needs the right people with the right values and attitudes. The new 'employment companies' with targets are worrying, as is the scaremongering Government approach. Transport is an issue effecting access for those living in rural areas in the country.

Emigration is hiding the real level of youth unemployment. It is harder for young people to get back into employment. Youth unemployment leads to anti-social behaviour, mental health issues, drugs, long-term impact on society. JobBridge and other schemes take advantage of people and are based on control.

### 5. A sample of other issues discussed

**The cuts to social protection supports** such as the grant at Communion and Confirmation times are pushing people into the hands of illegal money lenders and causing real hardship.

**Older People:** The reality of poverty and social exclusion for older people is missed by the statistics. Many are living in fuel and food poverty in one room or spending much of the day in bed to keep warm. Many older people are now financially supporting their grown-up children, putting themselves under enormous pressure and providing unpaid childcare.

**The cuts to services for people with a disability** are having a significant impact on people's lives.

**Lone parents** experience a cycle of mental health problems, caught between the expense of going out to work or staying on lower social welfare supports. Changes have made it more difficult for lone-parents to go to work and they face the cost of childcare.

**Childcare** is expensive but there are also difficulties in accessing it in some places and in particular rural areas and towns. It stops parents going back to work and education. Under 3 is a problem age group in accessing childcare.

**There is a need for outreach education** at levels higher than the basic.

**There are not enough facilities** for kids over 13.