

# The NAPInclusion Social Inclusion Forum

## Host Country Report

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### Introduction

This report seeks to provide the background to, a description of, and context for the Social Inclusion Forum (SIF) in Ireland. It aims to inform the Peer Review process being undertaken by the EU Commission. The SIF is being presented as an example of good practice in securing the Commission's objective, as espoused in the European Social Inclusion Strategy agreed at the Nice Summit in 2000, of mobilising all relevant actors including people experiencing poverty in the fight against poverty.

### Background to the Social Inclusion Forum

In 1997, Ireland became the first country in the EU to adopt a National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS). This Strategy set down, for the first time, targets in relation to income adequacy, educational disadvantage and employment, and also contained provisions for combating urban disadvantage and rural poverty. The NAPS named a number of key strategies and mechanisms to meet the goals and objectives of the NAPS and an annual Social Inclusion Report was prepared by the NAPS Unit (now the Office for Social Inclusion) in the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs (now the Department of Social and Family Affairs). The preparation of these annual reports involved gathering data from all relevant Government departments on their anti-poverty work.

In signifying the importance of the anti-poverty agenda, a Cabinet Committee on Social Inclusion was established to oversee the NAPS and is chaired by An Taoiseach (Prime Minister). This Cabinet Committee was supported by an inter-departmental Senior Officials Group. This level of involvement by senior officials, and in particular the involvement of An Taoiseach, signals and promotes strong political oversight of the NAPS and now the NAPInclusion process.

In 2000/2001, the NAPS underwent intensive review.<sup>1</sup> This involved the establishment of six working groups, one of which considered each of the following themes: educational disadvantage, health, housing and accommodation, employment and unemployment, rural poverty, and urban disadvantage. These working groups were themselves exercises in consultation and involved a range of government departments, state agencies, academics and Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs). This review led to a considerable reshaping of the NAPS. *Building an Inclusive Society: Review of the national Anti-Poverty Strategy under the programme for Prosperity and Fairness*<sup>2</sup> introduced the new key themes of housing and accommodation, and health to the NAPS. In addition a list of target groups including children and young people, older people, people with disabilities, women, ethnic minorities and Travellers were also added to the Strategy.

<sup>1</sup> Goodbody Economic Consultants (2001) *Review of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy: Framework Document*, Dublin: Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs.

<sup>2</sup> Government of Ireland (2001) *Building an Inclusive Society: Review of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy under the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness*, Dublin: The Stationery Office.

The review and the revised NAPS also led to a clear recognition of the potential role of local authorities to address poverty at local level.

This review also recognised the need for additional institutional structures to inform and support the NAPS, of which the SIF is one. Rather than a policy measure in its own right, the SIF is a structure designed to facilitate the engagement of all stakeholders in the social inclusion process, allowing for consultation and discourse between the national policy bodies, social partners, local authorities, NGOs and people experiencing poverty.

## Rationale and Aim of the Social Inclusion Forum

The rationale underlying the establishment of this Forum is to provide all stakeholders, including people experiencing poverty, with an opportunity to hear about the NAPinclusion process and progress made under it, and to have their views heard by government officials and others. With the dovetailing of the original national NAPS process and the EU NAPinclusion process under the Open Method of Co-ordination, the latter has been the focus of the Forum.

Much of Ireland's social policy is now developed within the social partnership processes and structures. While Ireland is unique in the EU in awarding the Community and Voluntary Pillar social partner status, it is equally recognised that this Pillar does not speak for every one in the community and voluntary sector, nor for all people in poverty. Neither does the social partnership process accommodate consultation directly with people who are experiencing poverty. The rationale for the establishment of the SIF lies at least partly in addressing this gap. In addition, however, as the review of NAPS also highlighted the role and potential of the local authorities to address poverty and exclusion at a local level, the SIF also provides a forum for local officials and local authority staff to engage with the national anti-poverty policy agenda.

The overall aim of the SIF is to provide people and organisations who are not involved in the social partnership process to have a say in policies and provision that directly impacts on their lives or those of the people they work with and for. The objectives of the Forum can be summarised as providing individuals and organisations with an opportunity to:

- be provided with information on progress and developments under the NAPinclusion process;
- input their views on key policies and implementation issues;
- identify barriers and constraints to progress and how these can best be tackled; and
- provide suggestions and proposals for new developments and more effective policies in the future.

The SIF represents 'added value' as this is the only space in which people and organisations not involved in the social partnership process can come together with senior policy-makers and departmental officials to discuss the development, implementation and review of anti-poverty policy. From a policy-maker's perspective, this provides a valuable opportunity to hear from local level NGOs, local government bodies, and national NGOs who are closest to those experiencing poverty and social exclusion as well as from people living poverty. This allows them to gain a clearer insight into the problems that face people living in poverty and how policy affects their lives. This should ultimately lead to better policy. Further, it provides possibly the only opportunity for people experiencing poverty and their organisations to come together to engage directly with senior government officials.

## The Wider Policy Background

The immediate policy background for the SIF is the NAPinclusion, which seeks to draw together all key policies that may affect those experiencing poverty either under key themes or as specific target groups. These include policy in the areas of income maintenance, labour market, education and training, health, housing and immigration to name but a few. Of particular importance to the current report however, is that the SIF is also embedded within a growing policy awareness of the importance of consulting the community voluntary sector, and with those directly experiencing poverty and disadvantage.

The current NAPinclusion, the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016<sup>3</sup>, which was launched in February 2007, adopts a lifecycle approach which places the individual at the centre of policy development and delivery, by assessing the risks facing him or her and the supports available at key stages of the lifecycle. The key lifecycle groups are children, people of working age, older people and people with disabilities. The NAPinclusion contains a chapter covering each stage of the lifecycle, together with a horizontal chapter on communities. The Plan details twelve high level goals, across a range of policy areas and across all stages of the lifecycle, which seek to mobilise resources and address long-standing and serious social deficits in key policy areas. The format of the Social Inclusion Forum for 2007 will also reflect this lifecycle approach in that forum workshops will focus on specific high level goals for the lifecycle stages contained in the NAPinclusion.

Participation by people experiencing poverty and their organisations in decision-making and policy-making occurs through the social partnership process. Ireland remains unique in the EU in awarding social partner status to the Community and Voluntary Pillar, which represents the interests of vulnerable people in the development of the national agreements. The most recent agreement is *Towards 2016*<sup>4</sup> and was agreed in 2006. At local level such participation is achieved through the community representatives on the County and City Development Boards (CDBs).

Within the broader arena of consultation, the *White Paper on the Framework for Supporting Voluntary Activity and for Developing the Relationship between the State and the Community and Voluntary Sector*<sup>5</sup> attempts to set out the framework for relationships between the two sectors. The role this espouses for the community and voluntary sector is one of inputting to, informing or being consulted on policy. The SIF is a clear example of how the State seeks to achieve this. *Toward 2016* reiterates this role for the community and voluntary sector (outside of social partnership) and particularly in informing policy at the local level.

At local level, recent and ongoing reform of local government has also signalled a clear recognition of the need to involve the community and voluntary sector, and in particular those organisations working with and for people experiencing poverty and exclusion, in policy-making. Various structures, including the County and City Development Boards (CDBs), the Social Inclusion Moni-

<sup>3</sup> Government of Ireland (2007), *National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016*, Dublin; The Stationery Office.

<sup>4</sup> Government of Ireland (2006) *Towards 2016: Ten Year Framework Social Partnership Agreement*, Dublin; The Stationery Office.

<sup>5</sup> Government of Ireland (2000) *White Paper on a Framework for Supporting Voluntary Activity and for Developing the Relationship between the State and the Community and Voluntary sector*, Dublin: The Stationery Office.

toring (SIM) groups and the Community Fora all provide opportunities for people in poverty or their organisations to contribute to local policy development and implementation.

Most recently, the Department of An Taoiseach has signalled the continued commitment to consultation by issuing guidelines on this to public servants in the context of Regulatory Impact Assessment. These guidelines refer specifically to the need to consult with people who experience poverty and the organisations which represent them.

It is within the broad context of this commitment to consultation that the SIF is operating.

## Preparing for the Social Inclusion Forum

Prior to the inaugural SIF in January 2003, the Combat Poverty Agency grant aided the Community Platform (a network of NGOs) to undertake consultative and awareness raising meetings with their member organisations and other interested NGOs. The purpose of these meetings was to increase organisations' and individuals' capacity to participate actively in the SIF. In addition, the NAPinclusion 2003-2005 was being prepared in 2002. The Combat Poverty Agency undertook a number of regional consultative seminars with NGOs on behalf of the OSI to inform the NAPinclusion. This consultation process also contributed to people's capacity to engage with the SIF and informed the planning and agenda for the first Forum.

The second SIF was held in January 2005, and took place at a time at which the OSI was particularly interested in hearing people's views on progress made under Ireland's NAPinclusion 2003-2005, as they were developing a regional consultation process that would engage with both what had worked or been progressed from the last NAPinclusion, and what the next NAPinclusion should contain.

The third SIF, which took place in February 2006, was again held in the context of developing a new NAPinclusion strategy. Prior to this the consultative regional seminars with NGOs and people experiencing poverty, spoken of at the previous SIF, were organised by the OSI. Seven regional seminars were held during November and December 2005. The seminars were designed to support the participation within the NAPinclusion process of those with either direct experience of poverty and/or who worked with groups and communities experiencing social exclusion. A total of 512 people attended the seminars including representatives from government departments, state agencies, the community and voluntary sector, and members of the general public, some of whom were experiencing poverty and social exclusion of various forms. In addition to informing the NAPinclusion, the results of these consultative seminars provided the basis for discussion at the SIF in 2006. In advance of the Forum, summary papers on the issues raised in the consultations were prepared and circulated to participants to assist them in preparing for their attendance at the Forum by giving (i) a short overview of the issues that were raised, in terms of the general findings; and (ii) a briefing on specific issues that would be relevant to the particular workshop that they would be attending at the Forum.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> NESF (2006) *Third Meeting of the NAPS Social Inclusion Forum, 15th February 2006 Royal Hospital Kilmainham: Conference Report*, Dublin; NESF.

In addition to these focus groups, in early 2006 the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) Ireland organised a series of six regional seminars, with funding from the Combat Poverty Agency. The purpose of these focus groups was to inform the EAPN's thinking on the NAP/Inclusion and to build the capacity of people experiencing poverty to participate in the SIF. The focus groups were comprised of small groups of people directly affected by poverty. While these groups were not representative of all people living with poverty, they provided insights into some of the main issues affecting those who took part. One of the six groups was comprised of migrant workers from Asia and North Africa, and one was made up of younger lone parents. The remaining groups were comprised of a mixture of people including a homeless person, lone parents, migrant workers, refugees, older people, long-term unemployed and people dependant on disability allowances.

Each focus group was adapted to the needs of that particular group, but centred around small-group and general discussion on what had gotten better in the previous three years, what needed to be improved and what the Government needed to change *'for things to improve for you and people like you.'* A number of key themes emerged from the focus groups including Employment, Income and cost of living, Transport, Education, Health, Housing/Accommodation, Childcare, Community Development, Integration policy for new minorities and general issues.

## Description of the Social Inclusion Forum

The SIF is held annually and is organised by the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF), the Office for Social Inclusion (OSI) at the Department of Social and Family Affairs, and the Combat Poverty Agency (CPA). In order to facilitate the attendance and participation of as many people as possible, the SIF is held in the Royal Hospital Kilmainham as this is one of Dublin's largest conferencing venues and provides room for several workshops to take place simultaneously. This is necessary to allow participants to cover the very wide range of issues discussed at the SIF. Between 200 and 300 people have attended the three Fora held to date.

The SIF is divided into plenary sessions, roundtable discussions and workshops. The Fora have all been opened by the Chair of the NESF, with this being followed by a number of inputs by keynote speakers. These typically included

- a representative of the European Commission who provides an input on progress and development at the EU level,
- a presentation on poverty in Ireland,
- an input from the OSI which sets out progress on the delivery of the NAP/inclusion as well as the challenges facing anti-poverty and social inclusion policy, and
- an input by the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) on progress and challenges that they see remaining at EU and Irish level.

These inputs are separated by roundtable discussions which happen after the first two inputs. At these roundtables participants are asked to address a number of questions pertaining to the presentations and to provide brief feedback to the plenary group. The discussion at this plenary, and at the final plenary of the day, are recorded and later transcribed.

The SIF then allows participants to choose from a number of themed workshops. These workshops have addressed a range of issues, but at least some of them always address some of the

target groups included in the NAPinclusion, such as women, children, older people, people with disabilities and minority groups. Cross-cutting themes have also been the subject of workshops, including public transport, equality, employment and public participation. These workshops include a brief input from one or more experts in the particular policy area such as academics, civil servants, researchers or NGOs, which participants then respond to and discuss. Detailed notes of each of these workshops are taken by a rapporteur.

The Forum closes with a final plenary session. This includes feedback of key points from each of the workshops, an overview of the day, and a final panel discussion session. These panels are comprised of experts, social partners, the OSI and the Combat Poverty Agency. Again, the proceedings of this plenary session are recorded and later transcribed.

It should be noted that each Forum has either been opened or closed by the Minister for Social and Family Affairs. This indicates the high level commitment that exists to the Forum within what is essentially its parent department.

## Reporting on the Social Inclusion Forum

A rapporteur has been appointed to each SIF. This rapporteur is responsible for the collection of all notes taken at the plenary sessions, roundtables and workshops. These notes, as well as the transcribed proceeding of the plenary sessions and any papers prepared for the SIF are then written into a report of the day. This, with a foreword by its Chairperson, is then published by the NESF. These reports are available at [www.nesf.ie](http://www.nesf.ie).

## Evaluation of the Social Inclusion Forum

No independent evaluation of the SIF has been undertaken to date. However, at the third SIF in 2006, evaluation forms were distributed and participants asked to complete them before leaving. In addition, participants are invited to send any further comments to the NESF by email or post.

The participants' evaluations of the third SIF were broadly positive, although it should be noted that few (34) participants actually completed the evaluation forms provided. The results of a basic analysis of the evaluation returns from the 2006 SIF are shown here.

**Table 1**  
**Participant's Rating of Overall Forum, Morning Presentations and Workshops 2006**

	Overall Forum	Morning Presentations	Workshops
Excellent	9	9	6
Very Good	10	14	14
Good	10	7	7
Fair	5	4	7
Poor	0	0	0
	<b>34</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>34</b>

A number of suggestions were also made as to how the Forum could be improved. With relation to both the Forum overall and the workshops, some participants felt that both were too crowded, too rushed with not enough time for deliberation, and that they did not provide sufficient time for discussion with policy-makers. In addition, the language used was difficult for some participants and too much 'jargon' was used. The issue of the SIF being too much like the preceding one was also raised. When considering the morning presentations, a number of participants felt that insufficient time was allowed for questions and answers, and that new faces and different inputs were needed. In particular, the NGO sector needed to be better represented. In relation to the workshops, many more comments were made and included that workshops needed to be more structured, that some of the rooms did not allow for a circular rather than lecture style room layout, and that there was no indication of where the discussion would actually lead to.

What participants found most useful about the SIF were the opportunity to meet people and network, the roundtable discussions and the workshops. Other useful aspects mentioned included the information obtained through handouts and inputs and the opportunity to meet the Minister and lobby him for change. What people said they would change about the SIF included: allowing more time so that everyone could participate; more focused, less general inputs; the provision of more information about the content of the Forum beforehand; inputs from representatives of all sectors and more from the community and voluntary sector; greater input on co-ordination structures and empowering local communities. Some additional changes suggested for future SIFs included: moving the Forum from Dublin to another location; provision of reports on what actions have been undertaken and impacts achieved, rather than how many targets have been met; adoption of a results focus; identify what works and what does not; greater highlighting of the role of local authorities, local partnerships etc. and securing their input and involvement; and the provision of childcare for persons attending the forum.

The one consistent theme that emerges from the evaluation is that participants want more time to discuss the issues raised by the SIF and more opportunities to engage with senior policy-makers. This in itself indicates the importance and value of the SIF as a consultative forum.<sup>7</sup>

One potential indicator of how the usefulness of the Forum is perceived is the fact that attendance at meetings has been oversubscribed. At a time when the number and means of engagement in the NAPinclusion process have increased, the large numbers attending the Forum can be construed as validation of its utility and of the importance attached by stakeholders to its value as a mechanism for evaluating progress and pursuing policy goals.

## Using the Social Inclusion Forum to Pursue Policy Goals

As indicated above, the Social Inclusion Forum is recognised by Government as an important institutional structure aimed at ensuring the involvement of all actors in the drive to combat poverty and social exclusion. By facilitating direct communication between key policy makers and persons and groups at whom these policies are targeted, the forum serves as a useful barometer of how the success of the NAPinclusion process is perceived. It also provides an opportunity to consider new and emerging causes of poverty, e.g. the challenges presented by Ireland becoming a country of net immigration, an issue which has been considered by the Forum. A further benefit of the Forum is the extent to which it helps to demonstrate the multi-dimensional nature of

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<sup>7</sup> A more comprehensive report of this evaluation of the 2006 Forum can be found in the report of that forum.

poverty and social exclusion. Workshop discussions at the Forum have shown that those most vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion often experience multiple forms of disadvantage, e.g., lone parents with low levels of educational attainment, people with disabilities who are also unemployed. These issues emerging from meetings of the Forum, by highlighting 'what works, what does not work, and what can be improved', have served as important inputs to the policy development process.

The most immediate use of the SIF is to inform the OSI in respect of the target groups and themes identified in the NAPinclusion. The SIF and the various consultations that have surrounded the NAPinclusion have been used by OSI to highlight existing issues in the NAPinclusion that policy is not addressing effectively, and to identify new and emerging policy issues that need to be planned for.

In putting the SIF in place, the Government aims to fulfil its commitment to consultation with all relevant stakeholders in the development and review of the NAP/inclusion. The SIF, by including the perspective of organisations and people not otherwise consulted in relation to policy, provides a unique contribution to the development of policies, the review of progress and the impact of the implementation of these policies. It provides valuable information exchange opportunities and, hopefully, results in better policies for those experiencing poverty.