

In the Wake of the Celtic Tiger: Poverty in Contemporary Ireland

The Irish Commission for
Justice and Social Affairs
ICJSA



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Foreword



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The publication of this position paper 'In the Wake of the Celtic Tiger: Poverty in Contemporary Ireland' by the Irish Commission for Justice and Social Affairs represents a long-standing concern of the ICJSA. We are all increasingly aware of our economic vulnerability, both as individuals and as a nation, as a result of the current financial crisis and economic recession. Against the backdrop of rising unemployment, increasing levels of personal debt, turmoil in the housing market and a return to emigration, the ICJSA has highlighted the situation of some of the most marginalised groups in our society, many of whom benefited little, if at all, during our time of economic prosperity. The response throughout this position paper to the crisis is inspired by the teachings of Jesus Christ, by the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church and by the belief in the dignity and equality of every person as created in the image and likeness of a loving God. In particular the ICJSA is to be commended for challenging us to build a society which is based on the Common Good of all.

I believe that our response to poverty and its devastating effects on our society must be informed by the experiences of those affected by it and by those organisations working in the field. I am pleased that this present position paper has been developed in close collaboration with the Society of St Vincent de Paul (SVP). In thanking them for their contribution, I wish also to commend them on facing the challenges of providing such a vital service to the poor, the vulnerable and to those who are most in need in our society. While exemplary in the high professional standard which it maintains, the SVP never fails to respond in a most Christian manner to all those who call upon its services. I hope that this important work will continue to be well supported financially, particularly in this time of economic crisis.

I wish also to sincerely thank all the members of the ICJSA Advisory Board for their untiring work in preparing this document and all those who contributed to it.

Raymond Field

Bishop Raymond Field

Chairperson

Irish Commission for Justice and Social Affairs

A Commission of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference

Introduction



The global financial crisis that threatens a severe and protracted recession has heralded the demise of the period of rapid economic growth in Ireland known as 'the Celtic Tiger'. After a period of prosperity we are now faced with difficult economic choices if we are to both sustain the economy and protect the vulnerable in our society. This paper on poverty in contemporary Ireland issues a challenge to all of us to recognise that notwithstanding the social gains and economic growth of the 'Celtic Tiger', poverty does exist on our island and risks increasing significantly in the current crisis. Poverty, of course, is not simply about lowness of income and the consequent impact on people as consumers. Poverty denies individuals what they need to flourish and also denies Irish society the gifts of those who never reach their potential. Thus it is both morally reprehensible and economically damaging.

We also want to issue a caution about the possibility that during this economic downturn those who benefited least from the progress of recent decades will pay the heaviest price. Government commitments to tackling poverty and social exclusion need implementation and delivery so that goals and targets do not become merely aspirational. We recognise the need for serious economic decisions and cutbacks on expenditure during a time of deflating economy; however these must not target the already poor and vulnerable.¹ We need to ask ourselves some fundamental questions: what sort of country do we see ourselves as and what kind of country would we wish to hand on to our children?

For almost two decades now Ireland has been regarded as a positive model of economic development, generating much international interest. In addition, many developing economies are seeking to emulate the combination of social, political and economic factors that contributed to

¹ 'Over the next two years, at a minimum, sacrifices will have to be made and people's lives will be affected by these. Both Irish society as a whole and the Irish Government must address the questions: "Which sacrifices?" and "Whose lives?"; in 'Justice in Recession: Statement on the Current Economic Situation', *Working Notes: facts and analysis of social and economic issues*, Dublin: Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, Issue 59, November 2008, p. 7.



the creation of the 'Celtic Tiger'. We can be sure that those same economies will be observing Ireland's response to the current financial crisis. If the measure of the justice of a society is its treatment of the poor and vulnerable, then this measure is even more pertinent in times of hardship.² Poverty alleviation is not a luxury for prosperous times but a moral and developmental imperative for contemporary Ireland.

The Irish Commission for Justice and Social Affairs (ICJSA) has long been concerned with the issue of poverty in Ireland, well in advance of the current economic downturn.³ While the recent financial crisis means that this paper is being published against a backdrop of widespread economic insecurity, with many in our society concerned that they will experience poverty, perhaps for the first time, this is not our primary focus. Without wishing to underestimate the seriousness of these developments, our concern in producing this position paper is to address the needs of those who have benefited little from our economic growth and are now set to suffer disproportionately the impact of the downturn in the economy.

This paper is not a comprehensive analysis of all the factors involved, but an attempt:

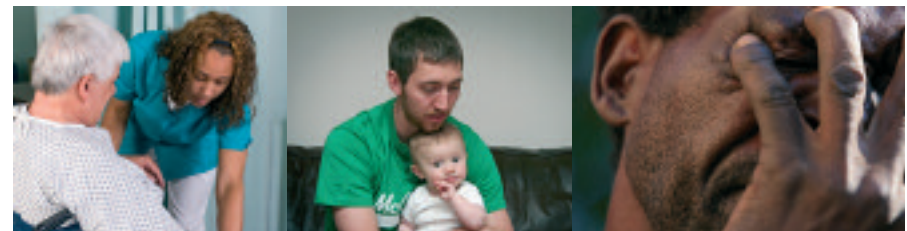
- ❁ to return to our previous exploration of the moral purpose of our prosperity;
- ❁ to uncover the poverty that persisted during the time of the Celtic Tiger;
- ❁ to highlight the threats to the particularly vulnerable sectors of our society resulting from the present economic situation;

²This point was made clearly in a Joint Statement by the Irish Bishops' Commission for Education and the Conference of Religious in Ireland (CORI) on Budget 2009 and education provision: 'It is how we deal with the most vulnerable that defines our society.' 26 October 2008. Available at <http://www.catholicbishops.ie/media-centre/press-release-archive/21-2008/1108-126-2008>

³This position paper marks a continuation of the concerns raised by the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference in the document *Prosperity with a Purpose*, published in 1999 at the height of the 'Celtic Tiger'. *Prosperity with a Purpose* acknowledged that there was much to be thankful for and proud of in our economic progress but raised questions regarding the moral purpose of Ireland's new prosperity: 'Is greater wealth improving us as a people? – in order to answer this, a society should consult with the most vulnerable in its midst.' *Prosperity with a Purpose: Christian Faith and Values in a time of Rapid Economic Growth*, Dublin: Veritas, 1999, par. 15.

- ❁ to explore, with insights from the experience of the Society of St Vincent de Paul, the reality and nature of poverty in contemporary Ireland;
- ❁ to caution about the possibility that during these difficult times of economic crisis those who benefited least from the time of prosperity will pay the heaviest price.

We need to move beyond viewing poverty merely as an economic phenomenon and see the consequences for people who are impoverished. While there are clearly identifiable groups who are more vulnerable to poverty, or have historically experienced poverty, we recognise that any of us can become poor as a result of a change to our circumstances – economic or personal. Ours is a culture driven by expectation of a high standard of living, an expectation that will not serve our young people well either in an economic recession or in the face of the lifestyle changes that the threat of global warming and dwindling non-renewable resources may demand of us. In the present context of economic downturn we are all increasingly aware of our own vulnerability but we need to remember those who have continually experienced poverty and deprivation even during times of prosperity. While this paper is not intended as a response to Budget 2009, relevant provisions will be examined as an indication of the direction of government policy in the key areas we have highlighted. We also need to analyse the problem of poverty in contemporary Ireland because even in the 'best of times' it held back the social and economic development of a nation. A response to poverty is thus both a moral imperative and a developmental necessity.



Part One The Faces of Poverty in Ireland



Notwithstanding the anxiety about the implications of the current financial downturn, concerns about poverty in contemporary Ireland are sometimes met with cynicism about the existence of such poverty, with a refusal to acknowledge the complexity of poverty in a developed country and with a dismissal of such concerns as the gloomy reflections of radical critics or social utopians. It is undeniable however that despite the considerable economic progress that we have enjoyed, Ireland is marked by deeply rooted multiple deprivations which have not been eliminated by this progress and which are in danger of being exacerbated in the current economic climate.⁴

A 2007 study by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) examined the social impact of the Celtic Tiger and addressed the common criticism that it left the poor further behind.⁵ The study divided Irish society into three categories: the first is constituted by the 80% who are, in general, free of serious financial problems; approximately 10% of people are placed in the second category of ‘economic vulnerability’ as they struggle to cope with debt and sudden expenses; the third category, about 9% of the population, are classified as ‘consistently poor’. It describes Irish society after the Celtic Tiger as characterised by tiered levels of deprivation – the scale and pattern of which vary depending on whether one focuses on economic vulnerability, consistent poverty or the combination of low income and multiple deprivation – and concludes that ‘both the levels and depth of such deprivation are a good deal more modest than suggested by the radical critics of the Irish experience of globalisation’.⁶

The decision of the survey to ‘look beyond notions of relative income poverty’ reflects the reluctance of governments to address this issue, because economic growth, of itself, does not reduce such poverty. The present paper seeks to present a fuller perspective on poverty and its

⁴ See *Prosperity with a Purpose*, par. 58.

⁵ Tony Fahey, Helen Russell, Christopher T. Whelan (eds), *Best of Times? The Social Impact of the Celtic Tiger in Ireland*, The Institute Of Public Administration, 2007.

⁶ Christopher T. Whelan, Brian Nolan and Bertrand Maitre, ‘Consistent Poverty and Economic Vulnerability’ in *ibid.*, pp. 87–103 (p. 103).



consequences for our society. We take as our starting point the measure of ‘consistent poverty’ used by the Irish Government and the Central Statistics Office and examine some of its most prominent manifestations in our society today. An individual is defined as being in ‘consistent poverty’ if they are identified as being ‘at risk of poverty’⁷ and living in a household deprived of two or more of the items on the index of basic deprivation indicators.⁸ Acknowledging the limitations of this measure however, we do not end our analysis here.⁹ In particular, we recognise the value of the ‘at risk of poverty’ measure in indicating the extent of economic vulnerability in our society. It is our view that, taken together, these two indicators can help convey both the breadth and depth of poverty and deprivation. In Part Two, we take the analysis a step further, focusing on the concept of ‘relative poverty’ and poverty as ‘capability deprivation’.

In 2007, the Society of St Vincent de Paul (SVP) – Ireland’s largest voluntary organisation on social action – spent more than €43 million helping people who were financially marginalised and socially excluded. Already in 2008, the downturn in the economy and price inflation have resulted in an increase in people seeking help for food and payment of basic bills.¹⁰ Worryingly, many of these people are contacting the SVP for the first time, having previously been in the position of donating money to its

⁷ This is the share of persons with an equivalised income below a given percentage (usually 60%) of the national median income. The rate is calculated by ranking persons by their equivalised income from smallest to largest and the median or middle value is extracted. Anyone with an equivalised income of less than 60% of the median is considered at-risk-of-poverty at a 60% level. (Definition from CSO Statistical Yearbook 2007, p. 43)

⁸ In 2007 the Irish government revised its consistent poverty measure, originally based on lacking one or more items from an 8-item index to lacking two or more items from the following 11-item index: 1. Two pairs of strong shoes; 2. A warm waterproof overcoat; 3. Buy new not second-hand clothes; 4. Eat meals with meat, chicken, fish (or vegetarian equivalent) every second day; 5. Have a roast joint or its equivalent once a week; 6. Had to go without heating during the last year through lack of money; 7. Keep the home adequately warm; 8. Buy presents for family or friends at least once a year; 9. Replace any worn out furniture; 10. Have family or friends for a drink or meal once a month; 11. Have a morning, afternoon or evening out in the last fortnight, for entertainment. (Office for Social Inclusion. <http://www.socialinclusion.ie/poverty.html>)

⁹ The Irish Government’s focus on ‘consistent poverty’ as an indicator has been subject to criticism, since the lead indicators adopted by all governments throughout the EU are ‘the risk of poverty’ and ‘relative income poverty’. We further recognise the problematic nature of the index of basic deprivation indicators (see note above) which could be considered subjective, value-laden and culturally driven.

¹⁰ For instance, calls for assistance to the largest St Vincent de Paul office in the country (Dublin Region) are up by almost 40% for the period between January and August 2008. Society of St Vincent de Paul: *A Helping Hand in Harder Times: Protecting People – planning for progress* (Pre-Budget Submission, Budget 2009), p. 3.

work.¹¹ While the situation of those who might be termed the ‘newly poor’ gives serious cause for concern, this paper places particular emphasis on those sectors of our society most at risk of consistent poverty. In doing so, we wish to draw attention to those areas where deep-seated inequalities remained throughout our period of national economic growth, highlighting the crucial challenges we face in attempting to eradicate poverty in our society at a time of economic crisis.

Investing in our Future: Tackling Child Poverty

Child Poverty has a fundamental influence on the life-chances of the next generation. The longer a child is poor, the greater the subsequent deprivation in later life.

Child Poverty in Ireland 2005: An Overview¹²

Children represent a group particularly vulnerable to poverty. It is estimated by the children’s charity Barnardos that in Irish society today one child in nine (10.7% of the population, or 111,000 children) is living in consistent poverty, meaning that their parents earn less than 60% of the national median income. These children may have to go twenty-four hours without eating because their parents cannot afford to buy food, or live in a cold house because their parents cannot afford to heat it.¹³

In assessing the impact of child poverty it must be remembered that children are not poor as individuals, but rather as members of a family experiencing poverty. Consequently ‘child poverty’ can only be meaningfully tackled by measures that address the root causes of disadvantage at parental and familial level. Furthermore, the needs of children can present a heavy economic burden for parents who are struggling to cope on an inadequate income. Lone parents and their children are those most threatened by consistent poverty. According to the CSO data for 2006, over 32% of members of lone-parent households were experiencing consistent poverty.¹⁴

¹¹ ‘Demand for charity’s services is “soaring”’, *Irish Times*, 10 November 2008.

¹² www.endchildpoverty.ie The End Child Poverty Coalition is a partnership of seven national non-governmental organisations that have come together to achieve a common goal: to end child poverty in Ireland. The coalition partners are: Barnardos, Children’s Rights Alliance, Focus Ireland, National Youth Council of Ireland, OPEN – One Parent Exchange and Network, Pavee Point, Society of St Vincent de Paul.

¹³ Information on Child Poverty from www.barnardos.ie

¹⁴ EU Survey on Income and Living Conditions (EU SILC), (available from www.cso.ie).

Education costs are a prime example of the type of burden faced by families with children. Ireland's system of 'free education' masks considerable costs to families in the form of uniforms, school books, voluntary subscriptions and money for extra-curricular activities. While getting into school is free, participation is far from free. It is these 'participation costs' that make it difficult for children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to remain in, and fully benefit from, our educational system. Although allowances are available for books and uniforms, there are many in low-paid jobs who are just above the threshold that would allow them to qualify for such allowances. The inadequacy of capitation grants and government funding of schools means that schools have to draw from parental financial support and this places considerable financial burdens on the poor and economically vulnerable. Targets for class sizes, literacy and educational achievement have not been achieved thus far and must not be sidelined, even in a time of economic crisis, for educational disadvantage simply further consolidates poverty and social exclusion with the consequent detrimental effects on children, families, the labour force and society.¹⁵

While education may indeed be the key to participation in Irish society, problems encountered by poor and disadvantaged children require a multifaceted solution, particularly in the form of more effective intervention in the early years of childhood. Tackling child poverty is a moral imperative that also makes economic sense in terms of preventing unemployment, crime, and other social problems. Sadly, although this fact is widely acknowledged, the 2009 Budget has significantly failed to address this crucial issue; indeed the failure to increase Child Benefit payments may, during a time of rising food, fuel and services costs, lead to an increase in child poverty.

Poverty and Unemployment

The obligation to provide unemployment benefits, that is to say, the duty to make suitable grants indispensable for the subsistence of unemployed workers and their families, is a duty springing from the fundamental principle of the moral order in this sphere, namely the principle of the common use of goods or, to put it in another and still simpler way, the right to life and subsistence.

Pope John Paul II¹⁶

'Unemployment' is a word frequently heard in the current economic climate, evoking feelings of fear and insecurity. Indeed, as a result of current economic trends, many in our society may find themselves unemployed and in the position of having to seek jobseekers benefit for the first time.¹⁷ Adequate procedures need to be put in place to ensure that the often traumatic impact of unemployment on these individuals is not compounded by difficulties and delays in obtaining social welfare. There is also a need to recognise that unemployment affects different socio-economic groups in different ways, with certain sectors of our society particularly vulnerable to long-term or inter-generational unemployment. Such unemployment is indeed a 'real social disaster',¹⁸ consolidating social exclusion especially for young people.

The consequences of unemployment can be devastating, not only for the individuals involved, but also for their families and dependants. CSO data for 2006 set the figure for consistent poverty among unemployed persons at almost 23%.¹⁹ Job loss can also impact negatively on the health of those involved, compounding their economic difficulties and hindering their return to work. Greater unemployment will affect the ability of many, particularly first time buyers, to meet mortgage payments, suggesting the very real prospect of emerging poverty amongst a segment of the population who would never have previously experienced the rigours of poverty.

The current sharp rise in unemployment presents a significant challenge to Government, and will demand a multi-faceted response.²⁰ Investment in education and training is a key starting point. The significance of education

¹⁵ See for example Joint Statement by the Irish Bishops' Commission for Education and CORI, 26 October 2008, on the Budget and Education provision: 'We are dismayed that the Budget for education hurts the most vulnerable people in society.' In particular the statement highlighted the following areas: book grants, traveller grants, language teachers and Leaving Certificate applied grant. Available at <http://www.catholicbishops.ie/media-centre/press-release-archive/21-2008/1108-126-2008>

¹⁶ Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Laborem Exercens (On Human Work)*, 1981, par.18. <http://www.vatican.va>

¹⁷ Unemployment has increased significantly in 2008 to an annual rate of 5.8% against 4.6% for 2007. CORI Justice, Budget 2009: Analysis and Critique, (October 2008) p. 9. Available at www.cori.ie.

¹⁸ Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Laborem Exercens (On Human Work)*, 1981, par.18. <http://www.vatican.va>

¹⁹ EU Survey on Income and Living Conditions (EU SILC), (available from www.cso.ie).

²⁰ Although it is outside the scope of this paper to treat all unemployment issues, it must be noted that in a rapidly changing labour market there is a need to recognise forms of real work other than paid employment if we are to promote a situation where everyone has a right to work but where paid employment will not be available to all those seeking it.



in relation to children has already been highlighted in the previous section, and it should be noted that youth unemployment is now a serious concern. Nonetheless the importance of education and training for adults – including those who are currently employed – must not be forgotten. In the context of an ever-changing global economy Irish workers will need to develop a range of skills that will allow them to adapt to the demands of the market. Moreover, more needs to be done to facilitate the participation in the labour force of those sectors of our society that continue to be under-represented, such as people with physical and intellectual disabilities.

Finally, the income of those who are unemployed needs to be protected in order to ensure that their ability to participate fully in society is not adversely affected by unemployment. The increase in social welfare payments announced in Budget 2009 is a significant commitment by Government; there is however a concern that this rise will not be sufficient to compensate for the increase in basic commodity prices and this issue will need to be examined closely.²¹ Furthermore, during these challenging times we must not forget the contribution that has been made to our economic growth by workers from other countries. While the current economic crisis may result in a number of foreign workers returning to their countries of origin or migrating elsewhere, others may find themselves in difficulties due to lack of employment and it is essential to recognise their rights and facilitate their access to the full range of services and support.²²

Poverty and Disability

Every community has its share of people with disabilities. Anyone can become disabled at any time. Disability does not respect age, gender or class. People with disabilities are marginalised, excluded and discriminated against. Poverty is both the cause and the consequence of disability. Policy and practice aimed at reducing poverty exclude people with disabilities. The cost to society of not including people with disabilities can only be estimated.

People with Disabilities in Ireland (PwDI)²³

Those with physical or intellectual disabilities are disproportionately likely to experience poverty and are two and a half times less likely to have a job.²⁴ The failure to adequately facilitate the participation of those with disabilities in the workforce represents a significant loss for Irish society. It is unjust that individuals who wish to contribute to our society through their labour, and have many skills, abilities and talents that would enable them to make that contribution, are prevented from doing so either through the attitudes of employers or the absence of a physical infrastructure that could accommodate their disability.

For many people with disabilities the devastating consequences of unemployment, described in the previous section, are even more difficult to bear as a result of the increased cost of living resulting from their particular disability. This issue was highlighted in research undertaken by the National Disability Authority (NDA) in 2004 entitled 'Disability and the Cost of Living', which pointed out that people with disabilities will face many extra costs in areas such as medical costs, paying for disability aids and home adaptations, the cost of transport, help with care and higher costs on day-to-day living.²⁵ As a result, the NDA is calling for increased support for those with disabilities, both in the form of cash payment and service provision.

It is unacceptable that a physical or intellectual disability should exclude an individual from participation in society. The value of work extends far beyond its economic significance, with important personal and social implications. In denying those with a disability their right to work we are effectively excluding them from many other areas of social life. If this unjust situation is to be addressed, people with disabilities must be ensured an adequate income and access to the full range of services required to facilitate their full participation in society with the consequent enrichment for all.

²³ Kathleen O'Connor: 'Disability and Poverty', *Cumhacht*, Vol. 1, No. 4, Spring 2003. www.pwdi.ie/index.htm

²⁴ National Disability Authority, www.nda.ie

²⁵ Available at www.nda.ie

²¹ See CORI Justice, *Budget 2009: Analysis and Critique*, p. 2.

²² Article 54 of the *International Convention on the Rights of Migrant Workers and their Families* states that 'migrant workers shall enjoy equality of treatment with nationals in the State of employment' in a number of key areas, including 'unemployment benefits'.

Poverty and Health

Every human being has the right to life, to bodily integrity, and to the means which are suitable for the proper development of life; these are primarily food, clothing, shelter, rest, medical care, and finally the necessary social services. Therefore a human being also has the right to security in cases of sickness, inability to work, widowhood, old age, unemployment, or in any other case in which he or she is deprived of the means of subsistence through no fault of his (sic) own.

Pope John XXIII²⁶

These words from Catholic social teaching begin our reflection on the relationship between poverty and health by reminding us that adequate healthcare is a right, not a commodity.²⁷ Poverty is a significant factor in illness and premature death in Ireland.²⁸ Those suffering from long-term illness are also more likely to experience poverty. According to the CSO Statistical Yearbook: 'In 2005, persons with a chronic illness or health problem had substantially higher risk of poverty compared to those without and were twice as likely to be in consistent poverty.'²⁹ This situation is exacerbated by financial burdens arising from health care costs and the lack of health insurance. It is currently estimated that approximately 230,000 people at risk of poverty and up to 50,000 individuals in Ireland experiencing consistent poverty do not qualify for a medical card because their income lies above the current threshold for eligibility.³⁰ Poverty can thus be both a cause and a consequence of ill-health.

The 2008 WHO Commission on Social Determinants of Health Report, the result of a three-year investigation, indicates that the link between income and health is universal and has been demonstrated as much in the richest countries as in developing countries. The report recommended that health systems be based on the principle of universal coverage, concluding that it is possible to narrow the gap in health inequality in a relatively short

²⁶ Pope John XXIII, Encyclical Letter *Pacem In Terris*, 1963, par. 11.

²⁷ Explicit reference to the right to healthcare can also be found in Article 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: 'The States Parties to the present Covenant recognise the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest standard of physical and mental health.'

²⁸ See *Tackling Health Inequalities: An All-Ireland Approach to Social Determinants*, compiled by Clare Farrell, Helen McAvoy, Jane Wilde and Combat Poverty Agency, Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency, 2008, p. 29. Available at: <http://www.publichealth.ie>

²⁹ CSO Statistical Yearbook 2007, p. 39.

³⁰ Society of St Vincent de Paul: *A Helping Hand in Harder Times: Protecting People – planning for progress* (Pre-Budget Submission, Budget 2009), p. 8.



period of time. Furthermore it stated that failure to do so will increase injustice and inequality.³¹

This report represents a particular challenge to us in Ireland. A study on healthcare and inequality on the island of Ireland was launched by the Institute of Public Health (IPH) and Combat Poverty to coincide with the WHO report. 'Tackling health inequalities – An All-Ireland approach to social determinants' outlines the extent of health inequalities and emphasises how government strategy and spending on the built environment, transport, social welfare and education have profound impacts on health.³² In the Republic of Ireland 38% of those at risk of poverty – those living on less than €209 per week – reported suffering from a chronic illness, compared with 23% of the general population.³³

The inescapable conclusion from both these reports is that while good health services can help prevent and treat the results of inequality, what is also needed is more concerted action on the social determinants of health. The Institute of Public Health in Ireland reminds us that the impact of the social and economic environment on health is not beyond our control, and that action to reduce health inequality needs more than disease control and medical care. Failure to act means that the chances of a child having a long and healthy life are likely to become more of a social lottery.

Here too, how we respond to the needs of the most vulnerable will define us as a society. This was explicitly recognised by the Irish Government in its national health strategy *Quality and Fairness: A Health System for You* (2001):

'Health is also crucial to Ireland as a nation. Our health care system must reflect our national values: our concern for equity, our commitment to diversity, our determination to end poverty and disadvantage.'³⁴

³¹ World Health Organisation, *Closing the Gap in a Generation – Health Equity through Action on the Social Determinants of Health* (2008), http://www.who.int/social_determinants/final_report/en/index.html

³² <http://www.publichealth.ie>

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ *Quality and Fairness: A Health System for You* (2001); http://www.dohc.ie/publications/quality_and_fairness.html

Poverty and Homelessness



Homelessness is about more than housing. It is about being denied the right to live with dignity and to participate in your community. It is the most extreme form of social exclusion. People who are homeless are also poets, actors, scientists, trades people, musicians, parents and friends. Not having a home denies them the opportunity to be who they are, and Irish society is poorer as a result.

MakeRoom Coalition³⁵

Homelessness is both an extreme manifestation of poverty and a contributory factor. This is a problem with both short and long-term dimensions resulting in insecurity, exclusion and difficulties in accessing vital services. While significant improvements have been made in the immediate response to the problem through emergency shelters, social housing provision in Ireland is currently insufficient to meet the needs of all those who require it. Furthermore, the complexity of this problem demands a response that addresses ‘the needs of the whole person – income, health, employment, support and civic engagement’.³⁶ The many causes of homelessness must also be taken into account. Family breakdown, for instance, is known to be a major factor, and young people who have been in State care or people leaving prison are particularly vulnerable.

The instability and insecurity resulting from homelessness fundamentally restricts the ability of those affected to participate in society. Unsurprisingly, homelessness is often closely linked to other manifestations of poverty. Focus Ireland, for instance, has carried out a study on the links between social exclusion, food poverty and homelessness in Dublin.³⁷ In addition, any assessment of the impact of homelessness in Ireland must take into account the fact that those affected are far from a homogenous group, presenting rather a diverse range of circumstances and needs. People of all ages are affected. The SVP, one of the largest providers of voluntary social

³⁵ The MakeRoom coalition – made up of the Society of St Vincent de Paul, Focus Ireland, the Simon Communities of Ireland and Threshold – campaigns on issues of homeless and housing.

<http://www.makeroom.ie/policy>
³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Focus Ireland, ‘Hungry for Change: Social exclusion, food poverty and homelessness in Dublin’ (2003), http://www.focusireland.ie/htm/research_policy/long_summaries/hungry_change.html

housing projects in Ireland, has developed housing projects specifically for older people.³⁸ Organisations working with those who are homeless also identify the presence of foreign nationals among those availing of their services. While economic recession can lead to a narrowing of the focus of our compassion and concern, we must remember that many Irish people who experienced homelessness after emigrating benefited from government and voluntary services in other countries.

Government plans to eliminate long-term homelessness by 2013 will be more difficult to achieve in the light of the current economic downturn, but it would be unwise to abandon long-term funding because of short-term considerations.³⁹ The prevention of homelessness and the provision of services for those already homeless require not just a vision of change but the political will to implement that vision. The increased funding for homeless services allocated in Budget 2009 is welcome evidence of that political will.



³⁸ <http://www.svp.ie/About-Us/What-we-do/Social-Housing-Projects.aspx>

³⁹ Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government: *The Way Home, A Strategy to Address Adult Homelessness in Ireland 2008–2013*, August 2008.

<http://www.environ.ie/en/Publications/DevelopmentandHousing/Housing/FileDownload,18192,en.pdf>

Poverty and Older People

Poverty can undermine many of the principles of solidarity, creating victims among the weakest members of the population, among whom are the elderly . . . The elderly should never be considered a burden on society, but a resource which can contribute to society's well-being.

Pope John Paul II⁴⁰

Recent studies indicate that the risk-of-poverty rate for elderly persons is declining.⁴¹ While this finding is to be welcomed, we must avoid complacency in relation to poverty issues affecting older people. Pensioners, for example, are more susceptible to rising costs, particularly in the areas of food and fuel.⁴² Rising fuel prices are a source of major concern for households across Ireland and a recent WHO report on health equity expressed shock that in an economically rich country such as ours 'a remarkable 17% of households are fuel poor'.⁴³ Furthermore, it must be remembered that older people are more vulnerable to the health risks consequent upon fuel poverty.

A study by the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice identified, in the case of lone female pensioners, a significant shortfall between income and the expenditure required for a minimum standard of living.⁴⁴ The lack of increase in the Living Alone allowance in Budget 2009 means that these people will continue to exist on an inadequate income with the consequent impact on their quality of life. It would be unjust if the older people who have contributed so much – and continue to contribute in many unacknowledged ways – to our society are forced to choose between food or fuel due to inadequate income.

A further significant factor is that the age profile of Irish society is changing – if current trends continue, by 2050 one in four of the population could be 65 years old or older.⁴⁵ Adequate provision for the care of elderly people should therefore be a priority issue to prevent an increase in the poverty rate within this group. Our concern that elderly people in our society are experiencing poverty is not simply based on an acknowledgment of their past contribution to the economy but also on the ongoing contribution that they make to our society in terms of wisdom, experience, caring and community service.

40 Pope John Paul II, Message to the Second World Assembly on Ageing, Madrid (3 April 2002): *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 24 April 2002, p. 6.

41 ESRI, 'Tackling Low Income and Deprivation: Developing Effective Policies' (June 2008) www.esri.ie

42 'Pension hike "not enough" to help out the elderly', *Irish Independent*, 6 December 2007.

43 World Health Organisation, *Closing the Gap in a Generation – Health Equity through Action on the Social Determinants of Health* (2008), http://www.who.int/social_determinants/final_report/en/index.html

44 Available at <http://www.budgeting.ie>

45 Information from www.ageaction.ie

The Working Poor

In every case a just wage is the concrete means of verifying the justice of the whole socioeconomic system and, in any case, of checking that it is functioning justly. It is not the only means of checking, but it is a particularly important one and in a sense the key means.

Pope John Paul II⁴⁶

Thirty per cent of all households at risk of poverty in Ireland are headed by a person with a job. These are the 'working poor'. While there are many in Ireland who are taking advantage of the legal opportunities available to avoid paying their fair share of taxation, the working poor did not benefit significantly from the prosperity of the Celtic Tiger. Alarming, the ESRI report 'Tackling Low Income and Deprivation: Developing Effective Policies' (2008) found that there has been an increase in the numbers of the 'working poor'. It is argued that: 'While the risks of poverty are low for those in employment, the numbers in this group imply that even a small risk will involve a large number of persons.'⁴⁷

The situation of the working poor stands to be adversely affected by rising commodity prices, and many of these individuals will not present themselves to organisations like the SVP but struggle silently to make ends meet. The combination of rising costs of food, fuel and services and the failure to raise Child Benefit payments in Budget 2009 will cause further suffering for families who are already experiencing serious financial pressures. A particularly worrying development is the rise in levels of personal debt as people resort to borrowing to cover the shortfall in their income – a solution with potentially devastating long-term consequences.

Inadequate support for those from a low income background struggling to cope with debt and rising costs results in a range of pressures and burdens that are potentially damaging to marital and family life. These pressures can prevent the individuals affected from participating in society and contributing to the life of their communities. The current inadequacy of childcare provision is a major area of concern here.⁴⁸ The provision and costing of childcare is an equality issue which impacts disproportionately on those from lower income families and which can restrict – particularly, though not exclusively – the right of women to work. These pressures and

46 Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Laborem Exercens (On Human Work)*, 1981, par.89. <http://www.vatican.va>

47 ESRI, *Tackling Low Income and Deprivation: Developing Effective Policies* (June 2008) www.esri.ie

48 For a detailed exploration of this issue with comparisons between the situation in Ireland and Scandinavian countries, see the policy paper by the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) Ireland, 'Childcare Benchmarking Paper', October 2007. Available at www.eapn.ie

burdens on families among the working poor may lead to children experiencing not only economic deprivation but also being deprived of quality family life and social opportunities.

It is fundamentally unjust that a growing number of people in our society are experiencing such poverty despite the fact that they are working full time. Workers must be paid a just wage i.e. a wage that enables a worker to earn enough to lift themselves and their families out of poverty. Viewed in this light, any suggestion that the minimum wage be reduced as a response to the economic crisis is difficult to comprehend.



Rural Poverty

The last thing we want is for people to live unnecessarily lonely lives.

President Mary McAleese⁴⁹

The rural context represents a neglected area in contemporary analyses of poverty in Irish society.⁵⁰ With this in mind, we wish to devote particular attention in this paper to the nature and extent of poverty in our rural and coastal communities, since a worrying aspect of this type of poverty is its hidden nature.⁵¹ Rural poverty encompasses examples of all the various categories of poverty already discussed, but with additional specific

⁴⁹ Interview with President Mary McAleese on RTÉ radio in which she expressed her support for a new GAA Social Initiative tackling rural isolation and loneliness amongst older, single men (8 May 2008).

<http://www.rte.ie/about/pressreleases/2008/0508/radio1presidentmay2008.html>

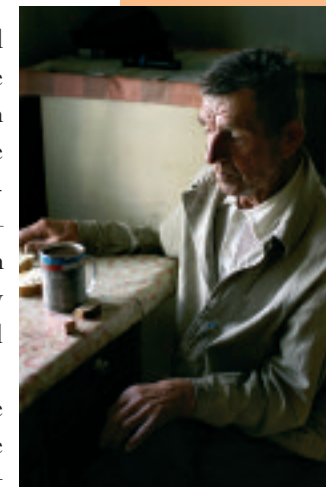
⁵⁰ Many rural development practitioners/experts hold that current approaches to measuring disadvantage are marked by an urban bias and thus 'fail to capture the extent and the complexity of rural disadvantage'. Trutz Haase and Kathy Walsh: *Measuring Rural Deprivation. Literature Review and Issues Arising. A Report to the Rural Development Advisory Committee* (2007), p. v.

⁵¹ Patrick Commins, for instance has argued that: 'A principal characteristic of rural poverty is its invisibility – which accounts in great part for its relative neglect in research and policy.' Patrick Commins, 'Poverty and Social Exclusion in Rural Areas: Characteristics, Processes and Research Issues', *Sociologia Ruralis*, Vol. 44, No. 1, January 2004, p. 61.

characteristics particular to the rural environment, which can at times amplify the impact of other consequences of poverty. In Ireland, there has been an over-reliance on the two income-related poverty measures – 'at-risk-of-poverty' and 'consistent poverty' – defined at the level of the individual. Taken on their own however, these measures do not fully describe the extent of social exclusion in rural areas and are 'likely to exhibit an urban bias'.⁵²

While a comprehensive analysis of the extent of rural poverty would be beyond the scope of this paper, it is necessary to highlight some of its distinguishing features. Population levels in rural areas can fluctuate, particularly as a result of out-migration of young people for education and employment. This can result in a lack of 'critical mass' that makes a full range of services, including post offices and banks, economically unsustainable.⁵³ This problem is often compounded by a lack of forward-planning in housing provision that produces isolated houses instead of promoting communities. In addition, affordable and social housing is often lacking. We recognise that people in rural areas must be participants in decisions regarding rural development and that there will be differences of opinion in relation to what the nature of this development should be; however, it must be acknowledged that some planning decisions can inhibit the development of cooperation between inhabitants at community level and are also environmentally unsustainable.

Notwithstanding that one would not expect the range of services accessible in a large urban setting to be available in rural areas, the inhabitants must have reasonable access to *critical* services. Gaps in the Health Service in rural areas hinder the full participation of inhabitants in society. A particularly important issue in this context is mental health; although not a uniquely rural problem, this can often be exacerbated by the isolation of the rural setting. An extension of this sense of isolation has been the undesirable consequence of the crucial legislation to combat drink-



⁵² *Measuring Rural Deprivation*, p. 19.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

driving; while there are helpful rural transport schemes, these may not be available at night, thus limiting opportunities for social interaction. In addition, a lack of policing services can produce feelings of vulnerability.

Only a minority of farmers earn an adequate income from farming alone, thus making off-farm income essential. The problem of unemployment takes on a particular nature in rural areas due to the proliferation of short-term or seasonal work. Rising levels of unemployment in the construction industry are also having a significant impact in rural communities. In the midst of our justifiable concern for the future of those who work in agriculture, we must not forget those who depend on fishing for their livelihood. The fishing industry is currently facing a number of serious challenges with potentially devastating consequences for fishermen and their families.⁵⁴ Support must be given to those who have maintained this essential industry through work that is physically demanding and often dangerous.

Access to employment in these communities can be further inhibited by inadequate childcare and educational facilities. The decreased allocation to information and communications technology in Budget 2009 does not bode well for rural areas which are awaiting broadband access.⁵⁵ Lack of access to information can have a disempowering effect in rural communities which is further exacerbated by the re-structuring of electoral boundaries in a way that is making the rural voice less important in political decision-making.⁵⁶

The work of the SVP in rural communities, where volunteers visit those in need, is of vital importance. This contact not only helps overcome the isolation of those experiencing poverty, but also respects their privacy, a significant consideration given the stigma that can sometimes be attached to rural poverty, arising from its hidden nature. Equally important is the work of community associations and other initiatives aimed at addressing the problem of isolation and loneliness, since being deprived of human contact is one of the most serious deprivations of all.

Poverty and the Travelling Community

Racism is a wound in Humanity's side that mysteriously remains open. Everyone, therefore, must take efforts to heal it with great firmness and patience.

The Church and Racism:
Towards a More Fraternal Society⁵⁷

We recognise that Travellers are a diverse and complex group, who live out their distinct culture in a variety of contexts and we acknowledge the contribution the Travelling Community makes to Irish society. Not all Travellers experience poverty but Travellers nonetheless are probably the most marginalised group in Ireland today. Poverty among the Travelling community is most clearly evidenced in inadequate and substandard accommodation. Pavee Point Travellers Centre reports that: 'The Traveller accommodation crisis means that nearly 1,000 Traveller families still live on the roadside in appalling conditions without access to water, sanitation and electricity. Many other Travellers live in official accommodation that is poorly serviced and maintained and often situated in unhealthy or dangerous locations.'⁵⁸ The failure to provide decent and adequate accommodation is a breach of a basic human right. The provision of adequate permanent and transient accommodation for Travellers remains an urgent social concern. This insecure accommodation – together with low levels of literacy – means that many travellers are excluded from vital public services such as health, social welfare, education, legal advice and banking. Despite Travellers' marginal socio-economic status, Budget 2009 leaves the allocation for Traveller Accommodation unchanged from 2008 and cuts funding of resource teachers for children from the Travelling community.⁵⁹



⁵⁴ See for example: 'Fishermen's Federation Statement on Current Crisis in Fishing Industry', 10 June 2007. www.fif.ie

⁵⁵ The Irish Farmers Association (IFA) urged the Government to prioritise the rollout of the national broadband scheme stating that broadband is essential to economic recovery in rural areas. IFA Rural Development News, 5 November 2008, www.ifa.ie

⁵⁶ *Measuring Rural Deprivation*, pp. 30–33.

⁵⁷ Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace: *The Church and Racism: Towards a More Fraternal Society*, 1988.

⁵⁸ Further information available at www.paveepoint.ie

⁵⁹ There is a 50% reduction on the total educational grant allocation for travellers for 2009–10 and this grant will only be paid to DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) schools. See: Joint Statement by the Irish Bishops' Commission for Education and CORI, 26 October 2008, on the Budget and Education provision <http://www.catholicbishops.ie/media-centre/press-release-archive/21-2008/1108-126-2008>



While economic measures can go a long way to addressing inadequate accommodation and levels of literacy, it must be recognised that prejudice and racism are obstacles to overcoming Traveller poverty and social exclusion in Ireland. Racism can be expressed in discrimination based on skin colour but also in discrimination against people in a minority ethnic group. Poverty in the Travelling community is not just a breach of their human right to adequate shelter and participation in society but is also the result of an often unacknowledged racism, a 'wound' that remains open in contemporary Ireland.

Part Two Poverty as Capability Deprivation: A Fuller Perspective



An understanding of poverty that is limited only to 'consistent poverty' ignores the other forms that exist in our society and have a devastating effect on the individuals affected. We turn to the concept of 'relative poverty', generally understood as a household income level below 60% of average national income. While those classified as 'relatively poor' in Ireland may appear considerably better off than 'the poor' in other parts of the world, when considering the consequences of poverty in Ireland a number of different factors must be taken into account. The relatively poor in high-income countries may lack access to cultural goods, entertainment, recreation, and to quality healthcare, education, and other prerequisites for participation in society and for upward social mobility.

There is a tendency to dismiss the significance of relative poverty with the argument that anyone can be poor relative to someone else. However, when speaking of relative poverty in contemporary Ireland, we are referring to those whose incomes are below the threshold of approximately €220 per week. These are the people living on the margins, with little savings and just enough money to get by. They are unable to cope with unexpected expenditures such as appliance breakdown or household repairs, and are most at risk from price increases.

In contrast with seeing poverty only in terms of lowness of income, the economist Amartya Sen describes poverty in terms of 'capability deprivation'. A person is defined as poor if he or she lacks basic capabilities in terms of accessing health, education, shelter, clothing, nutrition and clean water. Poverty arises when basic capability failure is caused by inadequate command over the resources needed to generate socially determined basic capabilities. Ultimately, Sen says, the focus has to be on how poverty impacts what we can or cannot do, can or cannot be. Sen does not deny that lack of income is clearly one of the major causes of poverty, but suggests that 'relative deprivation in terms of incomes can yield absolute deprivation in terms of capabilities'.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ *Development as Freedom*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, Chapter 4: 'Poverty as Capability Deprivation', pp. 87–110, 89.

To be relatively poor in a rich nation can be an enormous capability handicap, even when one's income might be high in terms of world standards of poverty. 'In a generally opulent country, more income is needed to buy enough commodities to achieve the same social functioning.'⁶¹ Without minimizing the despair of absolute poverty, it is important to understand the strain imposed on a relatively poor person in a rich country like Ireland, even when that person has an income that is high in comparison with the poor in less developed countries. A family in contemporary Ireland may have difficulty taking part in the life of a community without access to forms of technology and communication that would not be necessary for participation in a community in one of the least developed nations.⁶² The focus here is not on the commodities themselves but on the freedoms generated by them and the participation facilitated by them.

Amartya Sen's is not the only, nor the most comprehensive, analysis of poverty, but it concentrates the issue by the deliberate shifting of the primary attention from means to the ends that people wish to pursue and the freedoms necessary to achieve these ends. Sen reminds us of how poverty and inequality affect the development of human potential. Irish society is one which ensures that some people do not reach their potential. While our society is one that aspires to cherish all our children equally,⁶³ this is not the reality for some who seem almost 'predestined' to a life of poverty and social exclusion. Poverty and social exclusion impoverish those who do not reach their potential but, as a nation, we too are impoverished, for we are denied the gifts and talents of those who never reach their potential.

While much has been done to move people out of consistent poverty, combating relative poverty requires a commitment to tackle social inequality. Ireland is one of the most unequal societies in the West. In 2006, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) ranked Ireland 17th out of 18 selected high income OECD countries for poverty;⁶⁴ such structured inequality means that outcomes in life can be largely

61 Ibid.

62 The concept of relative poverty and the possible link with 'reactive violence' in Irish society is addressed in the ICJSA position paper *Violence in Irish Society: Towards an Ecology of Peace*, Dublin: Veritas, 2008, p. 14.

63 1916 Proclamation of the Irish Republic.

64 United Nations Development Programme Human Development Report for 2006, *Beyond scarcity: Power, poverty and the global water crisis*. The OECD is the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, an international organisation helping governments tackle the economic, social and governance challenges of a globalised economy.

determined from the earliest years. Recent research on the social impact of the Celtic Tiger in Ireland acknowledges that there is still widespread inequality but suggests that 'even those at the bottom of the income ladder are better off than they used to be'.⁶⁵ This insidious acceptance of inequality as an unfortunate but inevitable side-effect of a dynamic economy means that it is perhaps more appropriate to speak not of those who are poor, but of those who are impoverished.

Many of those who have benefited from our economic progress have no idea how bleak the quality of life is for some people in poorer areas. We often live in areas where we are isolated from people from significantly different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, with big disparities between the quality of life in these communities. This creates the danger of 'communities' which are characterised by homogeneity and self-protective exclusion.⁶⁶ Conversely, it can also lead to communities that are 'ghettoised', a situation that engenders a kind of isolation that breeds fear and is detrimental to national development. Of particular concern is the clustering of migrants in some areas and a key challenge is 'to create conditions where clustering does not develop into segregation'.⁶⁷ It is thus vital that social housing is allocated in a way that maximises the socio-economic and cultural diversity of communities.

The complexity of relative poverty means that the 'relatively poor' can simultaneously own a plasma screen TV and lack access to cultural goods. Some people can have the right to education yet leave school functionally illiterate.⁶⁸ Many are condemned to non-participation in a knowledge-based economy. It is evident that theoretical equality of opportunity does not necessarily lead to equality of outcome, as evidenced, for example, in the third-level access figures. The lower socio-economic groups remain disproportionately underrepresented in third-level education in Ireland.⁶⁹

65 Such a perspective reflects the neo-liberal assumption that there is a trade-off between economic growth and equality. Neo-liberal economic policies tend to privilege the rule of the market, privatization and the reduction of public expenditure for social services.

66 Terms drawn from Anthony Downs' work on the social-economic hierarchy of U.S. neighbourhoods. (Woodstock Theological Center, Washington, DC, 1991.)

67 National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism, *Building Integrated Neighbourhoods, Parts I and II*, September 2008, Part II, p. 14.

68 For a detailed discussion of literacy problems and equality issues in Irish schools see: CORI Justice, *Planning for Progress and Fairness (Socio-Economic Review 2008)*, pp. 155-7. CORI Justice considers the Government target of reducing 'restricted literacy' amongst adults from its 1997 level of 25% to between 10 and 15% in 2016 to be 'unambitious' and 'unacceptable', calling instead for a target of 5%.

69 This fact was acknowledged in the Action Plan for 2005-7 produced by the HEA, *Achieving Equity of Access to Education in Ireland (2004)*, which stated that although the introduction of free second-level education in the 1960s had greatly increased levels of participation, including third-level, 'that participation has not, however, been shared equally by all sections of our society'. The report notes that: 'Students in our higher education institutions continue to be predominantly from the middle and higher income groups' (p. 9).



The value system in some families and communities seems to preference ‘living for today’ over long-term goals such as education. This seeming confusion of values is often a manifestation of a profound lack of hope. People are ‘living for today’ because alienation from decision-making and a sense of disempowerment leads them to prioritise the immediate over long-term future considerations. We also recognise that people can contribute to or exacerbate their own poverty through abuse of alcohol, drugs and gambling. The drugs trade, in particular, offers the temptation of easy money for those devoid of long-term goals, with devastating consequences for families and communities.

Poverty is thus not simply about income or commodities. These indicators, albeit complex in a developed economy such as ours, represent a deeper impoverishment – capability deprivation – that affects both the poor and the rest of our society. Such capability deprivation is a distortion of the common good.

Part Three What Can Be Done?



The Common Good: Consulting with the vulnerable

A society that wishes and intends to remain at the service of the human being at every level is a society that has the common good – the good of all people and the whole person – as its primary goal.

Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, n.165⁷⁰

Irish culture has traditionally had a strong sense of community, a sense that has been eroded by prosperity and by the lifestyles that people have adopted, or been forced to adopt, in recent decades. Demanding work schedules combined with an inadequate travel infrastructure often mean that it is not so much a case of people not being good neighbours, as people not knowing their neighbours. This kind of isolation renders people particularly vulnerable at times of illness or crisis.

Indeed work schedules have spiralled out of control to such an extent that it could be argued that people do not have sufficient quality time to really know their own family members. This ‘time deprivation’ is of particular concern in the context of parent-child relationships where it is increasingly difficult for parents to combine long working hours and lengthy commutes with the important contribution that parents make to the personal, social and educational development of their children. The stress and strain of simultaneously trying to combine these demanding roles increasingly manifests itself in marital difficulties, in some cases leading to the breakdown of marriage. This is devastating on a personal level for those involved and is also detrimental socially and economically for society as a whole. It is time for all of us, despite difference of faith,

⁷⁰ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Dublin: Veritas, 2005, n.165.



culture and politics, to recognise that we need to consider the common good, a principle stemming 'from the dignity, unity and equality of all people'.⁷¹

The concept of the common good grows out of reflection on what constitutes human flourishing or well-being, the common good being understood as the set of conditions that will enable all people to flourish. Human flourishing is deeper than economic success. Many organisations call for a more expanded measure of national well-being that takes issues such as the quality of community, social and intimate relationships into account.⁷²

The idea of the common good is one of the key principles of Catholic Social teaching, building on the principle that the human person is both sacred and social. We realise our human dignity and rights in relationship with others, in community. How society is organised – in politics, economics, law and social policy – directly affects human dignity and our capacity as human beings to flourish. The ethical call to love of neighbour is not only a challenge to love individuals but has a broader social commitment. Christians have a responsibility to the good of the whole society, to the common good.⁷³

However the common good is also a very ancient concept in philosophy. Perhaps it is time to return to the kind of reflection to which Aristotle was devoted over two millennia ago: what is the nature of the good that people should seek?⁷⁴ Aristotle proposed that a good life is oriented to goods shared by others, the common good of the larger society of which one is a part. While the social and political form of the Greek city state differs

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, n.164.

⁷² The Social Partnership Agreement Towards 2016 articulates a commitment to social as well as economic well-being. http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/attached_files/PdI%20files/Towards2016PartnershipAgreement.pdf

⁷³ 'Christians must be conscious of their specific and proper role in the political community; they should be a shining example by their sense of responsibility and their dedication to the common good; they should show in practice how authority can be reconciled with freedom, personal initiative with solidarity and the needs of the social framework as a whole, and the advantages of unity with the benefits of diversity.' *Gaudium et Spes*, 75.

⁷⁴ *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross, rev. J. L. Ackrill and J. O. Urmson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

greatly from contemporary Ireland, the philosophical tradition born of Aristotle stresses the inseparability of the good of the individual and the common good.

St Thomas Aquinas gave primacy to the idea of the common good in the moral life⁷⁵ and was confident that human reason could grasp the broad outlines of the common good, even in a society that is not religiously unified. Concerns about the common good are shared by those who would not include the religious dimension in their vision of the human person and human flourishing.

We recognise the dangers and potential distortions of the common good, namely that there is some historical association of the common good with coercion, or the subordination of the individual to community. There is also the danger that economic progress can be accompanied by a distorted – utilitarian – understanding of the common good. The common good is more than the greatest good for the greatest number; such a reduction of the common good runs the risk of sacrificing a minority for the sake of the majority. The common good embraces the interests of the community viewed as a whole. 'It is the sum of all those social conditions which allow the human dignity of all to be respected, and their basic needs to be met, while giving men and women the freedom to assume responsibility for their lives.'⁷⁶

The common good as understood by Aristotle and Aquinas was profoundly different from later economic and utilitarian concepts of general welfare e.g. expressed in the summing up of the economic welfare of the individual members of the society in one aggregate sum, such as the gross national product. The Gross National Product (GNP) of a nation can grow even while people grow poor and inequality increases. An aggregate good can increase while the well-being of some of those who are part of the 'common' can decline.

⁷⁵ St Thomas Aquinas holds that all virtues pertain to justice in that they point human beings toward the common good. 'It follows therefore that the good of any virtue, whether such virtue direct man in relation to himself, or in relation to certain other individual persons, is referable to the common good, to which justice directs: so that all acts of virtue can pertain to justice, in so far as it directs man to the common good.' *Summa Theologica*, IIa.IIae. q. 58. a. 5.

⁷⁶ Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales 2001, *Vote for the Common Good*, p. 5. See also *Gaudium et Spes*, par.26.

But perhaps the real danger is that we can accept uncritically the scepticism of liberalism regarding the notion of the common good.⁷⁷ This scepticism is expressed by those who tell us that it is not possible to agree, across the boundaries of faith, culture and class, on crucial dimensions of the common good. Without seeking to minimize the significant differences that exist, a plurality of perspectives on the common good would agree that conditions that increase inequality of wealth and social exclusion are contrary to the common good.

The promotion of the common good is the responsibility of all in society but Government is entrusted with the task of ensuring that its policies serve the common good by protecting the weak and vulnerable, and by promoting the integral development of everyone.⁷⁸ All of us need to call our government to move towards implementation and delivery of promises on eradication of poverty so that goals and targets do not become merely aspirational. Governmental responsibility in matters of service provision for the most vulnerable, poverty eradication, social equality and taxation needs to be monitored by responsible citizenship in terms of the use of our right to vote and our duty to call for accountability. Government action or inaction in the area of poverty eradication is ultimately something for which all in society must take responsibility.

We recognise that there are existing policy frameworks that address questions of national development and acknowledge the interdependence of economic policy and social policy,⁷⁹ but perhaps these plans need to be augmented by what Professor John Monaghan recently called a 'National Development Plan for People' which focuses on the development of human infrastructure in our communities.⁸⁰ Such investment would not only be in keeping with the demands of social justice, but would also bring significant economic and social benefits to Ireland.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Liberalism is expressed in a group of political philosophies that give priority to the goal of individual liberty. 'A central thesis of contemporary liberalism is that government must be neutral in debates about the good human life.' *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd edition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 502–3.

⁷⁸ 'The responsibility for attaining the common good, besides falling to individual persons, belongs also to the State, since the common good is the reason that political authority exists.' *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church*, n.168. The economist and journalist Colm Rapple, in an essay commenting on the document *Prosperity with a Purpose*, suggests that successive Irish governments 'have failed to take adequate account of the common good'. 'The Failure of Government', in Eoin Cassidy, ed.: *Prosperity with a Purpose. What Purpose?* Dublin: Veritas, 2000, pp. 109–122, 115.

⁷⁹ The Social Partnership Agreement: Towards 2016 (www.taoiseach.ie), the 2007 National Development Plan (www.ndp.ie) and the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion (www.socialinclusion.ie).

⁸⁰ Society of St Vincent de Paul: *A Helping Hand in Harder Times: Protecting People – planning for progress* (Pre-Budget Submission, Budget 2009), p. 4.

⁸¹ See for example the conclusion of the National Economic and Social Development Office that: 'In a globalised world, the strength of Ireland's economy and the attractiveness of its society will rest on the same foundation – the human qualities of the people who participate in them.' *The Developmental Welfare State*, May 2005, p. xxiii. Available at www.nesc.ie

Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Populorum Progressio* emphasises that development is much more than economic growth. 'In order to be authentic, it must be complete: integral, that is, it has to promote the good of every person and of the whole person.'⁸² This concept of 'integral human development' was echoed three decades later in the work of Amartya Sen. Both emphasise the importance of the ethical and philosophical foundations of our understanding of development and the need for a clear focus on the issues of poverty, inequality, and social choice and action.

'Is greater wealth improving us as a people? – in order to answer this, a society should consult with the most vulnerable in its midst.'⁸³

This statement from *Prosperity with a Purpose* reminds us that the common good cannot be adequately comprehended without consultation with those who do not possess or participate in many of the conditions that enable people to flourish. So rather than accepting 'modest' levels of poverty and inequality as inevitable by-products of economic success – an invidious position that would merely amplify such poverty and inequality in these times of recession – we are challenged to view society from the perspective of those who are poor and excluded.

While it is clear that a multi-cultural and religiously diverse society can contain a diversity of visions of the good life and human flourishing, a common starting point for exploring the common good can be found in consultation with the vulnerable, with those whose capabilities are deprived. We propose that it is with the reality and complexity of poverty and social exclusion in Ireland that we must begin our discussion of the common good.

⁸² *Populorum Progressio (On the Development of Peoples)*, 1967, par.14. <http://www.vatican.va>

⁸³ *Prosperity with a Purpose*, par.15.



Conclusion



As long as you do this to the least of my brothers and sisters, you do it to me.

Matthew 25:40

Concern for charity and justice is at the heart of the mission of the Church.⁸⁴ There have been and continue to be many within the Church who both work directly with those who are poor and challenge the structures which perpetuate poverty.⁸⁵ Nonetheless the continued existence of poverty is a challenge to all members of the Church to strengthen our efforts to both alleviate the impact of poverty and work to transform the structures that perpetuate poverty.

Christian faith has a distinctive understanding of poverty, one that is grounded in the Hebrew Scriptures where God shows a special concern for the poor, widows and orphans i.e. those who suffer from a combination of poverty, powerlessness and exclusion.⁸⁶ In the Christian Scriptures, Jesus not only reflects this special concern for the poor and vulnerable, but he identifies himself very specifically with them: 'As long as you do this to the least of my brothers and sisters, you do it to me' (Matthew 25:40). This self-identification of Jesus with the poor, the least and the vulnerable is the most profound challenge for the Christian, the challenge on which we believe our lives will ultimately be judged.⁸⁷

Poverty is the great problem of our world – the poor are the majority of humanity – and while the World Bank poverty line of one dollar per day is contested, it is nonetheless a stark reminder that poverty, with all its nuances, complexities and specificities within different contexts, has a

⁸⁴ 'She cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. She has to play her part through rational argument and she has to awaken the spiritual energy without which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper.' Pope Benedict XVI: *Deus Caritas Est*, 28.

⁸⁵ 'Since her origin and in spite of the failing of many of her members, [the Church] has not ceased to work for the relief, defence and liberation [of the poor] through numerous works of charity which remain indispensable always and everywhere.' *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2448.

⁸⁶ See, for example, Exodus 3:7; Psalm 82:3-4; Psalm 146:7-9; Isaiah 1:12-17; 58:6-8; Amos 2:4-6.

⁸⁷ 'The Church's love for the poor is inspired by the Gospel of the Beatitudes, by the poverty of Jesus and by his attention to the poor.' *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, n. 184. See, e.g., Luke 6:20-26; Matthew 5:1-12; also Mark 10:17-31; Matthew 9; Luke 4:16-19; John 4:4-42.

bleak and absolute form.⁸⁸ We live in a world where absolute poverty has not been eliminated and where rising food prices are threatening to set back by seven years the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger by 2015.⁸⁹ While the effects of climate change are being felt around the world, the poor of the developing world, who have contributed least to the process of climate change, are the ones most at risk from its consequences. An equitable way needs to be found to balance poverty eradication and economic growth with safe levels of carbon emissions.

Ireland maintains a strong commitment to the eradication of extreme poverty and the significant increase in overseas development funding is to be welcomed as Ireland continues on course to meet the United Nations target of spending 0.7% of gross national product on aid by 2012. We strongly urge the government not to abandon its commitment to this global justice goal even as it endeavours to adequately respond to the current economic recession.

In comparison with the bleak and absolute poverty of many parts of the world, it would seem that the obvious signs of poverty disappeared in the Ireland of the Celtic Tiger. However, as we have seen, despite the progress that has been made in terms of poverty reduction, poverty continues to be a problem in contemporary Ireland, a problem that is both morally reprehensible and economically unwise.

In producing this position paper the ICJSA is seeking to promote a wider debate on the issue of poverty that addresses both its root causes and the consequences, not only for the individuals and families affected, but for society as a whole. We further wish to acknowledge the essential contribution of the voluntary sector to tackling the problems of poverty and social exclusion in Irish society. We wish to emphasise the importance of continued support of these organisations through volunteering and financial contributions.

⁸⁸The World Bank poverty line of about one dollar a day is based on the assumption that after adjusting for cost of living differences, one dollar per day is the average minimum consumption required for subsistence in the developing world. This measure of poverty has been criticised however as being conceptually and methodologically inaccurate in capturing minimum subsistence levels across developing countries.

⁸⁹The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are an agreed set of eight goals targeted for 2015: promote poverty reduction, education, maternal health, gender equality, and aim at combating child mortality, AIDS and other diseases.

In addition, during these difficult times for our economy, we call on the Government to:

- ✿ Increase school capitation grants to eliminate the need for parental contributions thereby providing equal educational opportunities to all children – an essential contribution to breaking the cycle of poverty in families and communities.
- ✿ Ensure that the income of those who find themselves unemployed is protected and that they are able to access social welfare payments without delay. While it is important to ensure that there are incentives to work, those who are unable to do so must be guaranteed an adequate standard of living.
- ✿ Introduce a ‘cost of disability’ payment to assist those who are struggling to cope with the various increased costs arising from disability.
- ✿ Review the threshold for medical card eligibility to ensure that people experiencing poverty, or at risk of poverty, are not deprived of a medical card, which can also be a necessary requirement for availing of other forms of assistance.
- ✿ Implement a strategy to address and prevent fuel poverty. This is particularly important in the case of older people for whom fuel poverty poses serious health risks.
- ✿ Prevent ‘ghettoisation’ in our communities by allocating social housing in a way that promotes diversity, both in terms of socio-economic and ethnic background.
- ✿ Examine the transport infrastructure and service provision in our rural communities to combat the growing sense of isolation.

- ✿ Provide adequate public, affordable childcare facilities in communities to alleviate the burden on those families experiencing poverty despite the fact that parents are in paid employment.
- ✿ Address the marginalised position of the Travelling community through early intervention promoting the integration of children in our education system. This requires targeted support in the classroom that takes into account the needs of this particular community.

Finally, we support the call for the construction of a 'National Development Plan for People' that will ensure enough money to live on, access to education, access to healthcare, and the development of strong and environmentally sustainable communities. This development plan must include a forum for discussion of the common good that includes people of different faiths and convictions, giving priority to the voices and experiences of the poor, disadvantaged and vulnerable.