

CHALLENGING POVERTY IN NORTHERN IRELAND



St Mary's University College

A College of Queen's University Belfast | Coláiste Ollscoile Naomh Muire

Northern Ireland Catholic Council on Social Affairs



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Introduction

Poverty is a problem in Northern Ireland and challenging poverty is important. It is important for those who have to endure the day-to-day struggle of trying to make ends meet, for those in our society who are forced to live on the social and economic margins and for communities that have been systemically trapped in a cycle of deprivation and social exclusion.

Poverty is an aspect of our seemingly prosperous Northern Irish society that is often not prioritised by either policy makers or media, yet we live in a region of the European Union that has some of the highest levels of definable poverty. Child poverty rates are among the worst in Europe, poverty among the elderly is endemic, our new communities - often from other regions of the EU or Africa - suffer multiple deprivations, and those on low income find that opportunities to escape from the constraints of poverty are few and far between.



In January 2010 the UK government's Equality Office reported some shocking findings regarding the extent of economic inequality in Northern Ireland. They concluded that over the past forty years the socio-economic differences between the richest social groups and the poorest has widened; that disadvantage has been reinforced across generations and life cycles; and that there remains differences in opportunity, income, and life experiences which suggest that current policies and initiatives are having a questionable impact on poverty for significant sections of the population. These findings concur with the dialogue that has been ongoing over the past year between a panel on poverty at St Mary's University College which comprised of academics, St Vincent de Paul and NICCOSA, the Northern Ireland Catholic Council on Social Affairs, a Council of the Irish Catholic Bishops Conference. This report is the product of that dialogue, linking in conveniently with the Big Society debate initiated by the new Coalition Government in Westminster and the ongoing adaptation of poverty related policies in the Stormont Executive.

The results of the research state what those living in this community are all too aware of - that in an apparently prosperous society there are individuals, families and indeed sectors of the population who are caught within worlds of systemic disadvantage and economic deprivation.

This report has engaged with these issues in a number of ways to go beyond the normal quantitative surveys of social exclusion with the aim of approaching the issue from the position of a community dialogue. In this it explores three aspects of the debate on poverty, each focused on the idea of actively challenging poverty, and which reflect on the ethos and community based approach taken by organisations such as the Society of St Vincent de Paul.

These aspects are: first, a section reflecting personal experiences of poverty and the effects that the

experience of poverty has on individuals and families; the second section examines the extent of the problem, the organisational and governmental statistics on the subject; and the third section explores the position of faith-based organisations in addressing issues pertinent to the problem of poverty in our society. Each section complements the other and each of the positions taken carries forward a strong message from those who are in poverty and those who work to rid society of it. In order to challenge poverty we need to invest in personal and organisational energies to overcome both its causes and its effects.

In the final analysis, an ethical position should take us to a situation where people are actively engaging with those causes in our society that perpetuate social exclusion and condemn people, families and communities to poverty. Organisations such as St Vincent de Paul, along with other front-line agencies, are in a unique position to energise the voluntary and communitarian potentials of society, as well as to lobby government to put in place policies which directly challenge poverty. It is hoped that this report advances such an ethical position.

1

The Many Voices of Poverty

This section reflects the views and insights shared by research participants who work in a range of charitable organisations supporting people in poverty, as well as other participants who have had to endure the effects of poverty.

"The great whip of poverty...that great lash of hunger, the dread spirit that ever haunts the poor, reminding them of the hardship that is to come, deadening the pain that is present."

This was the Irish writer, Liam O'Flaherty's description of poverty in early twentieth century rural Ireland. Surely, such problems could not exist in modern day society? Today, the effects of poverty are all around us. People are suffering in our relatively affluent society. What dims our senses? What relegates such a piercing plea to a mere background din in a noisy world? These questions demand attention if we are to face the truth of what poverty really means in our society.

Our understanding of poverty can be one-dimensional. Young people, in particular, are often treated as potential consumers by the media which tries to manipulate and distort their view of the world in commercial terms. Generally, there is a tendency to oversimplify complex concepts like poverty.



As part of this report, a group of sixteen year old pupils in an urban school were invited to suggest definitions of poverty.

Some of the views expressed at the beginning of the discussion were:

- **Anne** - “*Having no money.*”
- **Ciara** - “*Someone who doesn't have the things they need to live.*”
- **Darren** - “*Someone who doesn't have enough money to survive in a normal environment.*”
- **Colm** - “*Can't enjoy life to the full – can't enjoy life's luxuries - because they are always worrying more about their financial status.*”
- **Donall** - “*Severe lack of material goods or wealth. Living in extremely poor living conditions.*”

These views were expressed compassionately and thoughtfully and they do give an insight into the way our society views poverty. The most striking image is one associated with financial hardship, excluding the individual from a more comfortable lifestyle. In today's financial climate, it is understandable that the threat of “**having no money**” is palpable and affects the lives of many. However, the destructive aspects of poverty leave people vulnerable and unprepared to deal with poverty or indeed to respond to it in all its forms.

That concept had not yet been fully understood by the teenagers.

One of the community workers interviewed for this report described the challenge posed by the personal and emotional impact of poverty.

Commentaries and reflections were sought to communicate the havoc and hurt embedded in that situation. “**Having a hole in the soul**” was the harrowing image used by one of the key workers in a charitable organisation to describe this state of being caught in the grip of poverty. The sense of hopelessness experienced by the men and women who find help at the interviewee's drop-in centre, poses the most urgent challenge to its workers.

EARLY BEGINNINGS

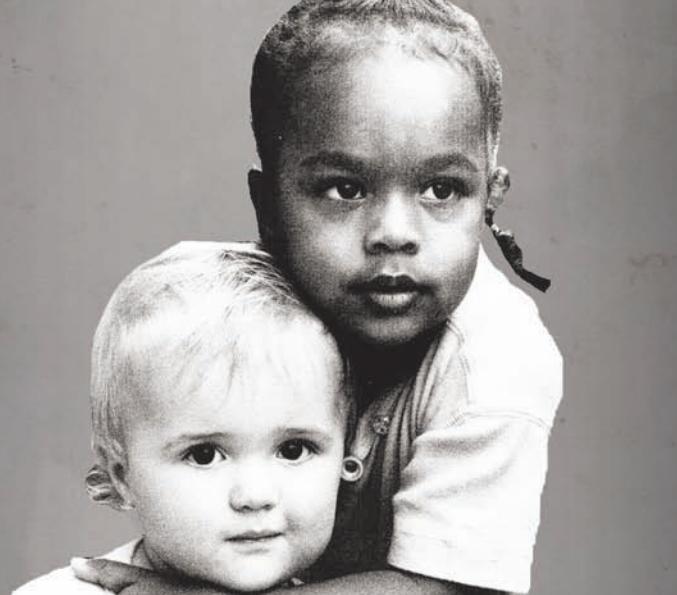
Conversations with people in poverty disclose a disturbing reality: the crisis can often be traced back to early childhood. One of the workers in another charitable organisation made this observation:

“We have a lot of kids who have come through the care system, who weren't fortunate enough to have foster parents. They will fail. And they continue to set themselves up to fail.”

This comment refers to those young people who have left the care system at eighteen, unequipped with the skills needed to survive as independent young adults having experienced dependency in a system and a familiarity with a lack of empowerment.

“He or she has been taken care of by the Government. Everything paid for. Survival skills have not been developed. He or she may never have had to pay a bill or buy clothes. And then at eighteen he or she is just set out in society. Those kids are failed. Those kids are going to fail.”

One young person who was interviewed referred to her weekly state benefit of £47.50. She usually spent it all on the first day. Essentials for a teenager go beyond a balanced diet and basic clothing. A teenager caught in the poverty trap is no different from any other teenager in that sense. They are exposed to peer and media pressures, just as much as their more fortunate peers. Basic life skills are even more important to be able to manage a very small budget, without family support, and to withstand the social pressures which teenagers have to endure.



Many young people who have spent their childhood in care, have already known rejection. The consequences of being unable to cope outside the system, reinforce low self-esteem and a vulnerability to being led in all the wrong directions.

One of the workers in an inner city shelter evoked another powerful image when discussing the professional, pragmatic response needed to support people experiencing poverty and often addressing complex needs:

“Peeling the onion. Taking off layer after layer until you find the real issue. Building a trusting relationship. For most clients, it all began in childhood. It is a mindset. It is self-belief...All you can do is...you have to keep supporting them. You have to keep loving them and you have to keep trying.”

HIGH RISK FACTORS

Those in poverty are susceptible to multiple risks, which will affect the manner in which they are able to cope with their situation. These risk factors can also be highlighted as points of intervention by those organisations attempting to effectively deal with the causes of poverty. Risk factors include the following - but individuals can face a number of these at any one time.

Migration

An increasing number of vulnerable people who find some support at drop-in centres and hostels, are newcomers to our society. Extreme poverty confronts those people who, prior to leaving their home countries, were not informed about restrictions that would allow them to claim benefits here. The support centres are sanctuaries for many migrants, providing a hot meal and other help, but these people are often not entitled to claim social security benefits and find themselves homeless if they cannot get work.

Moving out of homelessness

Poverty also intensifies at the point of transition between emergency accommodation in a shelter and settling into more permanent accommodation. Participants reported a high risk period, when individuals cannot access quickly enough the help they need to survive independently. One staff member working in a shelter explained the reason for this period of vulnerability:

“Poverty also sets in when clients move from this centre to their own accommodation. Community care grants take forever. Some of them can be sitting in flats with absolutely nothing for eight weeks. No food in the cupboard. No electric or gas. We will allow them to maintain the use of the day-shelter. Sometimes, the best that we can do is give them a sleeping blanket, but they are maybe sleeping on a floor for eight weeks, with no cooker, fridge or anything else, until we can get the Community Care Grant through.”



Mental health issues

Many of those who use services at drop-in centres and night shelters are vulnerable adults. For many, mental health issues are very real and very severe. Mental illness was identified as the most challenging aspect of poverty that impacts on people in need.

Many of the stories that are heard among people without any accommodation whatsoever include accounts of personal tragedy and twists of fate that could afflict anyone.

Extreme misfortune can be triggered by an unpredictable set of circumstances.

Mental health problems can result and are inextricably linked to feelings of low self-esteem, emptiness, loneliness and alienation. An important aspect of care that is provided involves collaboration between the agencies, social and medical professionals who provide support.

During interviews with key workers across a range of charitable organisations, the term “**mental health issues**” seemed to dominate the dialogue whenever obstacles to overcoming poverty were discussed. Gaps in mental health and other service provision need to be addressed so that people with mental ill health do not have to be condemned to lives in poverty.

The ‘working poor’ and the debt cycle

Poverty is also a very real aspect of life in families where at least one parent is working on a low income. Debt can become a mounting problem which is very difficult to resolve. Access to benefits and tax credits is limited because one adult is in employment. Thousands of children suffer in this environment. One interviewee, a single mother who had a part-time professional job, discussed her embarrassment and shame in this debt trap. She kept the truth of her situation hidden from her extended family.

Only when credit cards were withdrawn and the debt collector became more threatening, did she share her problems and ask for help. One gesture of support, one response to her call for help, could not be enough to enable her to extricate herself from poverty, but that response is important, and a sustained level of support is needed. This participant struggled in this situation for five years. She experienced the fear of opening official letters, phone calls from the bank withdrawing her overdraft and her credit; pleading with an ex-partner to buy new shoes for the children; dealing with the horror of learning that tax credits had been miscalculated by Revenue and Customs and that she owed over £2,000.

All this time she tried to keep up an image of normality, to try to lessen the impact on her children and to hold up some shield to protect her own dignity.

Poverty traps

The predicament of a low income family losing entitlement to benefits can make the prospect of accepting paid work unviable. One of the workers at a community centre reflected on her own personal experience:

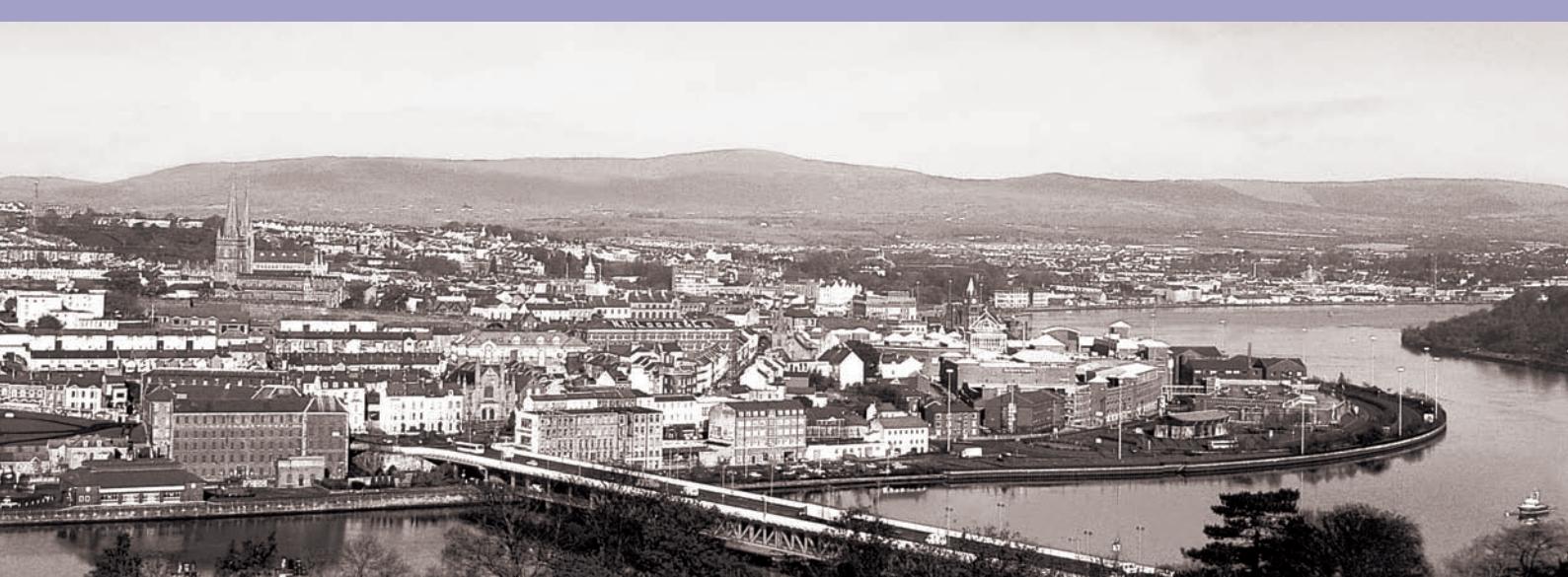
"My husband was out of work for years. I could have got a job, but we would have lost all benefits. I worked out that we would have been £7 a week better off if I took the job, but that was before taking account of the cost of getting there and back. I couldn't do it. I did voluntary work in the community during those years. It was only when he got a job that I was able to look for one."

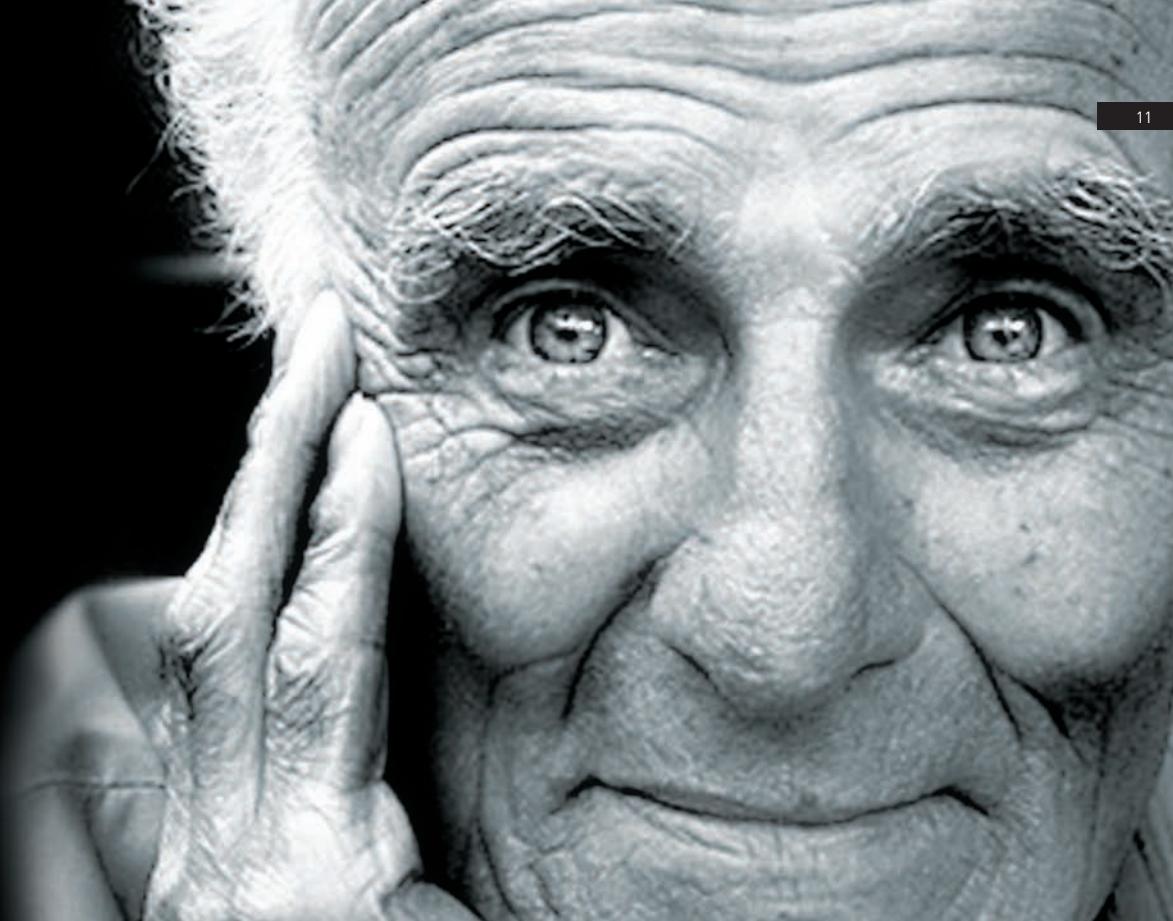
The plight of older people in poverty, surviving on the state pension, is another concern that is acute in society. Older people often find their independence threatened by health, social and economic changes. The Neighbourhood Renewal Manager at one community-based agency highlighted some of the complexities in reaching the elderly and in persuading them to seek help:

"I really worry about those older people who have paid off their mortgage and whose families have now grown up and moved away. They have no income. They try not to use the electricity and gas. They think that they're not entitled to help because they have paid off the mortgage. Many older people are so reluctant to ask for help. They think that they are asking for charity. If they can get by from week to week on the little they have, they will do that."

This Neighbourhood Partnership Group responds to the growing number of pensioners in poverty by bringing a coordinated awareness campaign to the doorstep twice a year. The initiative has resulted in a subsequent increase in the number of people who have been helped to access entitlements such as Pension Credits, free eye tests, Attendance Allowance, etc. Older people often feel stripped of their independence by stark changes in circumstances. A willingness to ask for help can only be effectively encouraged when a sense of dependency or "**feeling a burden**" is not triggered.

An informed sensitivity to the needs of pensioners in poverty or in risk of poverty was very apparent among the community workers interviewed. A further example of this insightful response was apparent in one of the Community Centres where people can call for a hot meal. The lack of food or money for food was certainly a problem for local pensioners who avail of this service; however, staff described the loneliness of these clients and the role of the centre as a place where there is someone to talk to and someone to listen to their story. Community structures are important in addressing the desperation that often comes with loneliness. Such support mechanisms are often a means to reintegrate back into the community – be it through a church organisation, community centre, women's group, or other community based focus.





Christmas time was mentioned at every centre visited as a particularly difficult time for people who are already very vulnerable. The following plea by one mother in contact with St Vincent de Paul, throws light on the dilemma:

“My son still needs new shoes for school and most of his clothes, including his pyjamas, are too small. And all of this by the end of October. As you can guess I don’t look forward to Christmas.”

It is not a lack of “life’s luxuries” referred to above by 16 year old Colm which cause hardship to people, but a real struggle to pay for basic requirements, including those household bills that

arrive just after Christmas. This observation was also made at the Neighbourhood Partnership office:

“Christmas is a difficult time. This is not for luxuries, but people having difficulty paying bills, getting food for Christmas Day, getting new shoes or a coat for the children.”

The recession that has changed the lives of so many people in the last two years has made poverty and social exclusion a topic of discussion or a part of daily life for a much broader spectrum of people in society.

Many people who had previously been unfamiliar with poverty now face the threat of losing their jobs or having their homes repossessed.

Others were just hovering above the poverty line when they managed to access a mortgage and now find themselves sliding towards the trauma of repossession and homelessness. This concern was raised by the Neighbourhood Partnership representative who was already seeing signs of hardship escalating in the region. This observation also suggested a need for community action:

“There is an urgent need for education about money management and debt management. So many people in this area were able to get a high mortgage two years ago, when they really shouldn’t have. Now, with changed circumstances, they are really struggling. I feel a real concern for those people. Their income has fallen suddenly, they face a real crisis.”



An unfortunate change in circumstances was also identified as one factor that could thrust a family into poverty or onto the brink of poverty. In one community centre, for example, bereavement was mentioned as one of these tragic changes. The Manager referred to a high number of local families who have lost parents. In some cases, the deceased person had been the main earner in the family, but had no pension fund and had been working for an employer who did not make pension contributions for employees. This adjustment to personal circumstances without a regular income was recognised as particularly distressing.

Staff in the drop-in centres articulate clearly their appreciation of the support given to them by others. One benefactor that was mentioned frequently during interviews was the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. Not only is high praise given to individual members, but the voluntary work of university students on behalf of St Vincent de Paul is selected as an example of how one organisation helps other charitable groups, as well as families and individuals in need. One centre organiser described this relationship:

“As well as the weekly visits when the students help sort clothes and collect food, other St Vincent de Paul

members come around with donations at Christmas time and Easter. We experience poverty ourselves as an organisation. We are open every day of the year. We don't close. The use of the building is constant, so we are always repairing and trying to maintain things. St Vincent de Paul helps us. They have also bought tickets for some foreign nationals who wanted to return to their home countries. For our organisation, they are absolutely brilliant and they have helped a lot of people here. They have helped individuals who have moved into accommodation. They have provided furniture for them, the main necessities.”

CHALLENGING POVERTY

All the organisations that were interviewed worked closely with a range of agencies, charitable organisations, voluntary and statutory bodies to try to provide a coordinated response to poverty. The complexities of poverty and the many diverse voices of poverty seemed very familiar to many of these community workers.

Indeed, personal experience shared by participants during interviews, working to combat poverty, seemed to add a valuable dimension to their expertise and professionalism. One Manager described her own experience of “hiding from

the coalman on a Thursday night when he came to be paid”. She shared her experience of shame and frustration during years when she was caught in that poverty trap herself. She also described how she looked forward to proudly paying her bills every Saturday morning once she did manage to get work again. This individual understands the assault on human dignity that is made by poverty. Her ability to make a contribution to her community now is enhanced by that personal experience. Two other key workers interviewed from different organisations discussed the long-term effects of the experience of childhood poverty. In order to illustrate this observation they also

recalled experiences from their own childhood which depicted the hurt and suffering that they had endured as children themselves living in poverty. These stories were not related to evoke pity or sympathy, but to highlight the lasting nature of childhood memories, scarred by poverty.

The insights gleaned from these personal experiences add an invaluable dimension to the compassion and respect shown by these workers towards their clientele. They also provide evidence that the cyclical pattern of poverty from childhood into adulthood can be broken. They suggest that hope is justified.



The voice of poverty is often unheard because it is stifled. It may be the case that the individual finds it difficult to ask for help. Poverty is still very closely linked to failure, shame and embarrassment; therefore, the responses sometimes have to be subtle, inconspicuous, gentle and informed.

These values are bound up within the strict code of confidentiality that is observed by support organisations. Another worker referred to the silent voice of poverty that can be just as heart-rending - her observations go beyond the caring world of drop-in centres and night shelters. They refer to the child in your street who goes hungry, to the family which hides from the loan shark, to the house with the empty kitchen cupboards. The existence of these stark realities can be denied easily. They are not obvious. Indeed, they are deliberately concealed in order to avoid the stigma of poverty. One interviewee raised the question of every individual's responsibility to look for sensitive ways of providing support to others in the community who are quietly suffering poverty on a daily basis.



Stories about poverty often evoke emotion and occasionally a pause at some tale or image. Indeed, images often communicate more than words. A key worker in a city hostel for men alluded to two different images which were poignant and moving. The first of these was the daily sight of residents in the hostel leaving in the morning, carrying the totality of their worldly possessions in a plastic bag.

The second image describes a man who is forced to sleep rough. He encountered this man during the nightly outreach run, while distributing sleeping bags and hot soup to homeless people sleeping on the streets. The image of this man taking out an ash-tray from a plastic bag, after lighting up a cigarette as he lay in his sleeping bag, left a lasting imprint on him given its simple poignancy.

Throughout the dialogue with the interviewees and the sharing of professional and personal insights that informed this section, the ability of individuals to make a meaningful response to the voices of poverty emerges as one of the key messages. Many references were made to the need for systematic changes, government investment and coordinated responses by various organisations.

However, throughout all the interviews and discussions, individual stories made frequent references to the difference made by an anonymous benefactor, a caring neighbour, or a sensitive community worker.

Poverty is real. It is cruel and destructive, and in this recession it is becoming more widespread.

One ray of hope from the accounts depicted in this section, has been the sense of personal responsibility and the empathy that has inspired action among individuals. This reminds us that we all have a role to play in the response to poverty - each one of us can make a difference. Many people do genuinely care, but how many of us take that small decisive action, which can have such a positive effect? In addition to the actions of individuals, the government's anti-poverty policies must be embedded in order to ensure that poverty traps are eliminated and that the appropriate services and financial safety net are available to prevent people from falling into poverty in the first place.

2



The Scale of Poverty

This section surveys the data on poverty and highlights the key indicators and features that are presented by statutory organisations and non-governmental agencies in the region.

Before 2002, the local direct rule administration did not release specific data on poverty in Northern Ireland and there was no dedicated anti-poverty strategy in place. Over the past two decades the main government initiative on poverty has been Targeting Social Need (TSN). This was a budget allocating scheme which dominated government policy on poverty for the region since the late 1990s. As noted in the Kenway report, *Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion in Northern Ireland*, there had been an absence of official data on poverty in the region, and where data was provided prior to August 2006, it was seen to be “inaccurate”. Indeed, “errors” could be “found in the official statistics for Northern Ireland” and this has been reflected in the manner in which the governmental departments addressed issues relating to poverty. (*Kenway, 2006, p.9*). It is only after 2006 that the data sources for poverty in the region have been statistically appropriate for the effective targeting of resources and policy making in regards to poverty alleviation.

Historically, data on poverty has been collected by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) and while it has been useful in collating census related information, it tended to present unanalysed raw data not linked to departmental policies. There have been other sources of information relating to social data collection in the region: the quarterly Labour Force Survey (LFS), Eurostat, the universities' research, and voluntary sector organisations' sectoral data collection. Since 2006 and together with the NISRA data, each of these databases has been used to formulate an effective framework for addressing poverty in the region.

One central point emerges from most of the data collection -

Northern Ireland has remained one of the most economically peripheral and disadvantaged regions of the EU.

This can be seen from the statistics gathered by the European Union's (EU) Directorate General on Regional Policy since the United Kingdom and Ireland

joined the Community in 1973. Until 2006 it was designated as having 'Objective One Status', and together with the need for special additional financial support to encourage peace and reconciliation in the region, this has meant that a large minority population have suffered long-term and multiple deprivation. This has necessitated substantial intervention by the governments over a period of 33 years and has also placed the region in a unique position within the EU due to the aggravated levels of poverty and its ongoing political conflict.

Two recent initiatives – one from the government and one from the independent New Policy Institute - have enabled the government and civil society organisations engaging with poverty-related issues to monitor patterns of poverty in a more effective manner in the region. The first initiative was the publication in 2006 by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) of the strategy Lifetime Opportunities. The Strategy highlights the scale of social and economic exclusion in the region. In his introduction, Peter Hain, the former Secretary for State for Northern Ireland, gives an indication of the extent of the

problem of poverty within the North's population of 1,730,000: "**327,000 people across Northern Ireland are still denied opportunities to which they are entitled, including around 102,000 children and 54,000 pensioners.**" Out of this strategy a Poverty and Social Inclusion Forum was established with the intention of bringing together relevant stakeholder groups.

Forum participants included local politicians, employers, representatives of trade unions, the statutory, voluntary and community sectors, social economy and individuals experiencing poverty. The Strategy also identified the government's priorities in its attempts to alleviate socio-economic exclusion and committed resources to specific activities. These priorities were: eliminating poverty, eliminating social exclusion, tackling area-based deprivation, eliminating poverty from rural areas, combating conflict-related exclusion through a shared future, tackling inequality in the labour market, tackling health inequalities and tackling cycles of deprivation. (OFMDFM, 2006, pp.4-5; 62)



Acknowledging the “**scourge of poverty which blights the lives of so many people in Northern Ireland**”, the strategy outlines “**different priorities at different stages in people’s lives and the need for policies and programmes to be tailored to these specific needs and targeted at those in greatest objective need.**” The aim of Lifetime Opportunities, the government’s strategy on anti-poverty and social inclusion, is to: “**insulate people from becoming poor and socially excluded as well as providing routes out of poverty for those who do.**” (*OFMDFM, 2006, p.8*).

Responsibility for carrying forward social inclusion policies at Stormont rests with the Central Anti-Poverty Unit - within OFMDFM - which meets periodically and continues to work on consultation around their strategy document released in mid-2006. With OFMDFM taking the brief for addressing poverty in the region as opposed to the Department for Social Development, stresses to policy implementation can be seen. It is notable that only two statements were released by OFMDFM in the first 6 months of 2009 which have a poverty focus - both related to fuel poverty. Other regional government initiatives associated to the Anti-poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy include: the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy, the

Sustainable Development Strategy, Shared Future, Sure Start, New Deal, Equality and Human Rights legislation, and New Targeting Social Need, which is a refinement of the old TSN programme. Each of these initiatives specified poverty-related interventions and each have had moderate impact on the increase in the numbers of people being exposed to poverty. This became particularly obvious with the onset of the recession after September 2008.

The second major initiative that has been strategically engaging with issues relevant to poverty alleviation has been a web based research initiative from the New Policy Institute. (www.poverty.org.uk) This broadened the potential for the monitoring of patterns of poverty. It introduced eight themes which were presented as indicators of poverty and targets for intervention. The themes are: benefit uptake, employment and pay, income poverty, deprivation and exclusion from services, housing and neighbourhoods, health and harm, disadvantage in work, and education. The Institute’s *Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion in Northern Ireland 2006* has become the marker in terms of longitudinal poverty analysis in the region. (*Kenway, 2006; there was also an update in September 2009*).



The Kenway report contained analysis of the European Union's Laeken indicators which present comparative statistics from across the Community on various aspects of social exclusion. The report, importantly, attempts to survey data on a longitudinal basis from 1996 until 2006. The document is a regional report from a larger UK wide initiative funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation which is attempting to standardise poverty indicators. This standardisation has led to comparative analyses between UK regions becoming more transparent and authoritative for research purposes. (www.poverty.org.uk)

While poverty is defined by various organisations in different ways - be it child poverty as a key indicator, access to education, or life

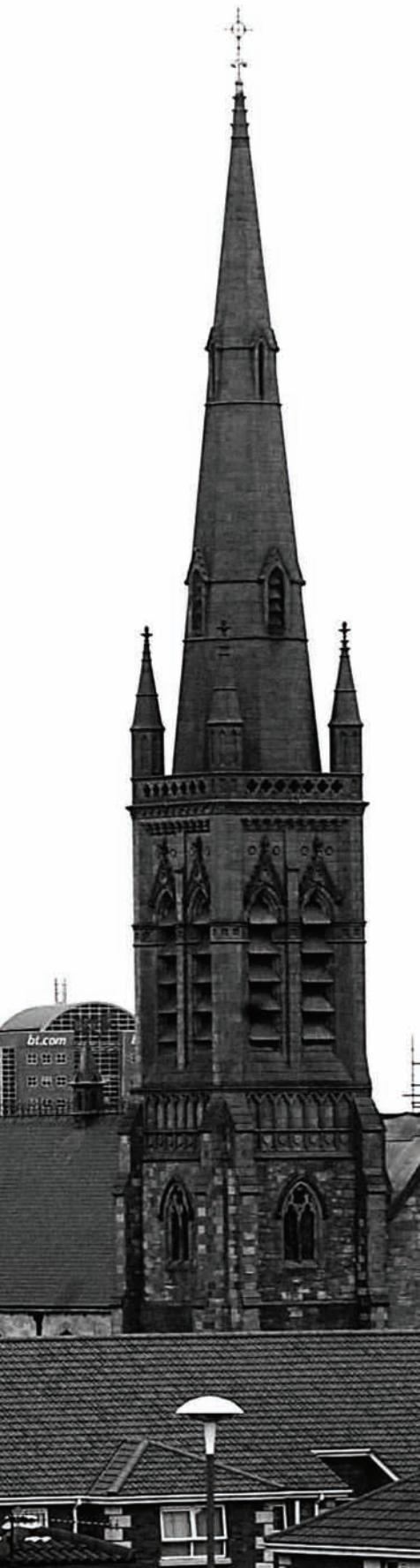
expectancy (as examples) - UK government definitions are usually presented in the formula that a household is in poverty if: "**its income is less than 60 per cent of the GB median household income.**" That is a household with an income that is below £16,224 (1st Quarter 2009). This is also an EU wide accepted definition of being "**at risk of**" poverty or of "**income poverty.**" In Northern Ireland this represents 19% of households, with most in this category having an income significantly less than the median. (Kenway, p.57)

While the collection of data is relatively effective in quantitative terms - if there is transparency and regular updates – the experience of poverty has to be seen as more than percentages and finances.

Families and individuals are often affected by multiple problems: an inability to access social housing, for example, compounded with a loss of income and family break-up can create difficulties almost immediately which include income, family and personal stress - most of which is not easily quantifiable.

Often problems are aggravated by a lack of access to information and support, be it financial or social and community support mechanisms.

Crucially, the point of intervention has to be sensitive, flexible and case-specific for statutory and voluntary sectors alike.



The definition of poverty in the Republic of Ireland is addressed in a different manner and in many ways captures more than just the financial effects of poverty. This is useful to note:

“People are living in poverty if their income and resources (material, cultural and social) are so inadequate as to preclude them from having a standard of living which is regarded as acceptable by Irish society generally. As a result of inadequate income and resources, people may be excluded from participating in activities which are considered the norm for other people in society.” [National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016: www.socialinclusion.ie/poverty]

Significantly, 2010 is the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Inclusion. This European Union initiative has provided a forum for civil society organisations and government departments to compare and discuss the impact of poverty across the Union. The agreed activities for the year give an indication of the policy direction of the EU in regards to its priorities for challenging poverty.

It aims to “encourage involvement and political commitment”; “inspire citizens to participate”; “give voice to the concerns and needs of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion;” the EU will “engage with civil society and non-governmental organisations;” interestingly, it aims to help “deconstruct stereotypes and stigmas;” it also has the objective of promoting “a society that sustains and develops quality of life, social well-being and equal opportunities for all;” finally, the initiative aims to “boost solidarity between generations and ensure sustainable development.” (<http://www.2010againstpoverty.eu/?langid=en>) Each of these points are pertinent to the situation in Northern Ireland.

QUANTITATIVE DATA

With this in mind, the release of figures on benefit take up for key sections of the population in Northern Ireland offers a quantitative audit of the extent of income poverty in the region (defined as having an income below 60% of median UK income).

The other sections of this report will survey the qualitative effects of poverty and social exclusion.

General Statistics

The May 2009 Northern Ireland Social Security Statistics Bulletin noted that:

- 28% (121,220) of children and young adults in full-time education were living in benefit-dependant families.
 - 19% (211,240) of people of working age were claiming a key benefit (job seekers allowance or income support).
 - 16.6% (287,327) of people over state pension age claimed a key benefit.
 - 6.1% (107,236) of the population were claiming Incapacity Benefit, those who have become incapable of work.
 - 10.2% (177,653) are in receipt of Disability Living Allowance (DLA), those who have become disabled before retirement age.
- (NISRA, 2009, pp.3-7)

Lifetime Opportunities noted that:

- Northern Ireland lags behind other regions of the UK in terms of working age employment rates. To remove this gap would require 56,000 additional people in employment.
- The current economic inactivity rate (27%) is the highest in the UK.
- Disadvantaged children are achieving significantly less in terms of educational qualifications.
- Homelessness has increased markedly in recent years.
- Health inequalities between the poor and the better off remain significant.
- The risk of poverty is higher for individuals living in urban areas outside Belfast.
- 41% of individuals in lone parent families live in poverty.
- 30% of children in urban areas outside Belfast live in poverty, 22% in Belfast and 20% in rural areas.
- 33% of pensioners in rural areas live in poverty, 12% in Belfast and 16% in urban areas outside Belfast. (OFMDFM, 2006, pp.22-3)

The key identifiable sections of the community that are susceptible to the range of issues related to poverty and social exclusion include:

Children: Child poverty is a useful indicator of the extent of deprivation within communities and across regions. Between 2002 and 2005, 25% of children were living in income poverty. (Kenway, p.63) By 2009 this was 26% with an estimated 110,000 children living in poverty. (New Policy Institute 2009, p.3). In October 2008 the United Nations (UN) Committee on the Rights of the Child specifically highlighted Northern Ireland as an area where 20% of children were living in 'persistent poverty'. The United Nations' definition of poverty is worth stating here:

"Fundamentally, poverty is a denial of choices and opportunities, a violation of human dignity. It means lack of basic capacity to participate effectively in society. It means not having enough to feed and clothe a family, not having a school or clinic to go to, not having the land on which to grow one's food or a job to earn one's living, not having access to credit. It means insecurity, powerlessness and exclusion of individuals, households and communities. It means susceptibility to violence, and it often implies living on marginal or fragile environments, without access to clean water or sanitation". (United Nations, June 1998)

The numbers of children in Northern Ireland living in long term poverty remains more than double the rest of the regions in the UK.

Northern Ireland has been singled out as the worst case scenario.

Figures released by OFMDFM in 2009 attracted media attention because they confirmed the fear that almost one in four of the region's children were officially living in poverty. That is where the government has quantifiable data to confirm the number of children living in a family which has an income of under £16,224 per annum after household costs are removed.

The percentage that this amounts to equates to 22% of children in Northern Ireland (96,000) with 12% (52,600) living in what the government describes as '**absolute poverty**' – that is living on half the average household income. (OFMDFM, 11 February 2009)

Homeless People:

In 2004-2005, 17,000 households presented to the Housing Executive as being homeless, 6,000 of these households included children. (*Kenway, p.91*)

The reasons given for homelessness further highlight poverty related consequences – loss of accommodation (36%), relationship breakdown, domestic violence (19%), intimidation (13%), current accommodation unliveable (13%), no accommodation (10%), other reasons (9%). 50,000 people remain on the waiting list for social housing. (*NIHE Statistics 2004/05*)

The Council for the Homeless notes that 86% of homeless people are unemployed and over 60% have been unemployed for over three years. 60% have low or no qualifications, putting over 80% of job vacancies beyond reach. (*NIAPN, 2009, p.10*)

Government policies prioritising the private rented sector have also meant increased pressure on the massively under-resourced social housing sector. As a result, demand for social housing has risen, with the number of applicants on the waiting list going up from 36,350 in 2006 to 38,923 in 2008. (www.nihe.gov.uk)

Lone Parents: Between 2002 and 2005, 40% (25,000) of lone parents were living in income poverty. (*Kenway, p.65*)

Of the 70,000 children living in households where adults are without work, 50,000 are in lone parent households.

31% of women with dependent children are economically inactive. The vast majority of lone parents are women and of those in employment their roles are mostly part-time or low waged. (*Gray and Carragher, 2007, p.18, 21*) In Northern Ireland there are nearly 92,000 lone parents with 150,000 children. Between 20% and 25% of all families in Northern Ireland are one-parent families. Gingerbread statistics also note that: 60% of lone parents are in debt.

(*Lone Parents Needs Assessment - NHSSB - Lynda Spence - Gingerbread NI*); 75% of single parent households have no savings compared to 41% of all households in NI (*Family Resources Survey 2004/05*); 67% live in rented accommodation (*NI Census 2001*); and 67% of lone parents live on an average of £156 per week (*New TSN*). (www.gingerbreadni.org/Factfile.htm)

Minority Ethnic Groups:

Between June 2006 and June 2007, 32,000 people came to settle in Northern Ireland. 8% (1,900) of all births in that year were to foreign nationals (that is, not Irish or British). This rose to 18% in the Dungannon area. Polish migrants have been the largest of the new communities – accounting for 60% of recent migration. (*DFP, July 2008 Briefing*) The total minority ethnic population in the region is estimated to be upwards of 60,000, or 3.5% of the population.





In June 2005, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety estimated that there were in the region of 3,000 and 12,000 “undocumented” migrant workers in Northern Ireland. (*Concordia*, p.3, 11)

Affordable housing is a particular problem, with homelessness and overcrowding an additional aspect of poverty within the minority ethnic communities. In November 2009, a report by the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities (NICEM) revealed that Polish people were three times more likely to be unemployed than Northern Irish people.

Older People: Between 2002 and 2005, 40% (100,000) of single pensioners and 20% of couples received no income beyond the state pension. This is twice the GB average. While the rate has fallen, 20% of pensioners were still living in poverty. (*Kenway*, p.31, 61)

According to census-based projections, by 2020, 21% of the population (381,000) will be of retirement age. (*OFMDFM*, 2006, p.58)

Fuel poverty is a particular concern in Northern Ireland, with almost a quarter of households in fuel poverty in 2009. Older people are particularly susceptible to fuel poverty - that is where more than 10% of income is spent on household heating. In 2004, 40% of pensioners were in fuel poverty. (*NIHE*, 2004)

50% of older people live in fuel poverty in Northern Ireland. By 2006, 34% of all households were in fuel poverty, while the cost of domestic electricity increased by 36% between January 2008 and October 2008. The cost of domestic natural gas increased by 19% between January 2008 and October 2008. The rate of fuel poverty in Northern Ireland is almost three times that of England. (www.consumercouncil.org.uk/key-issues/fuel-poverty/)

The Working Poor and those in Income Poverty: One in five of the population, 19% (200,000) of working age adults, receive an out-of-work benefit. In GB the average is 13%. “**Northern Ireland has a higher proportion of households who are in receipt of tax credits than any of the Great Britain regions.**” (*Kenway*, pp.27, 36)

31% of the working-age population are not in paid work. This is higher than any of the GB regions. (*Kenway*, p.41) While pre-recession figures showed a drop in unemployment by almost half between 1995/6 and 2005/06 (from 75,000 to 35,000), this process is being rapidly reversed with mass redundancies during 2009. (*Kenway*, p.45)

Of those in employment 22% were paid below £6.50 per hour, the minimum wage at that date (2006).



"Over the period 2002/03 to 2004/05, 20 per cent of the population of Northern Ireland were living in income poverty, equivalent to around 350,000 people... just four GB regions have lower rates." 28% of households lack a bank account. (*Kenway, p.57, 75*)

It is those with debt commitments who are spending up to 50% of their income to service debt - represented 10% of the population. (*OFMDFM, 2006*). This section of the population is particularly vulnerable to recession. A final related indicator is educational attainment. In Northern Ireland 22% of the working age population lack any qualifications, which is higher than GB in every age group. (*Kenway, p.137*)

Those in Ill-health: In 2006 those with a disability or on long-term sick leave represented four-fifths (110,000) of long-term benefit recipients. "Across the Northern Ireland districts, the proportion of working age people suffering from a limiting long-term illness ranged from 22 per cent in Strabane to 13 per cent in North Down. The proportion in Belfast (20 per cent) places it among those districts with the highest rates." (*Kenway, p.29, p.109*)

Three times the number of people (2.9% in 2006) in Northern Ireland received DLA for mental health reasons than in GB. Of those

who received DLA 36% noted that a friend or relative had been injured or killed during the conflict. (*Kenway, p.111*)

Poverty and long-term illness are linked:

"Poverty is significantly related to gender and limiting long-term illness. Men (37%) or women (41%) with a limiting long-term illness are at a greater risk of poverty than those men (18%) or women (23%) who do not have a limiting long-term illness."

(*Scullion and Hillyard, 2005, p.7*)

FACING RECESSION

From the last economic quarter in 2008, an unprecedented contraction took place in the regional economy, following on from the collapse of significant sectors in the banking, financial services, construction, and retail industries. The recession continued through 2009 and is expected to continue for some time before showing any indication of genuine recovery. The impact on Northern Ireland has been significant and compounded by the extent of the contraction in the economy in the Republic of Ireland. The Republic of Ireland has suffered the highest unemployment numbers in its history with key economic sectors (construction, financial services, banking) virtually collapsing. In human terms, the recession has meant 100 people losing their jobs every day and by June 2009, 400,000

were on the “**live register**” of unemployed in the Republic. In the North, the high levels of public subvention and public sector involvement in the economy have cushioned the extent of the economic shock that came with the recession elsewhere. In the North the most visible aspect of the recession has been the closure or rundown of high profile private sector companies which had been drivers of regional economic development (*Visteon, Seagate, Zavvi, Shorts, Nortel, Woolworths, Adams*), with job losses averaging 1,000 per month. Between May 2008 and May 2009 there was a 159% increase in redundancies with 49,000 people unemployed - an 11,000 increase on the previous year.

(Belfast Telegraph, 13 May 2009)

This will be added to by an anticipated contraction within the public sector in 2011 and the job cuts related to the estimated billions necessary in savings that the government of Northern Ireland is intending to make in the financial year 2011-2012. With this single sector of the economy in Northern Ireland employing 32% (222,000) of the working population, income poverty will be visited upon many additional thousands of families. The anticipated cuts could mean a further 20,000 people unemployed.

Stephen Kingon, the Chair of Invest Northern Ireland commented: “**I do not think we will be spared any harsh realities. It is going to be a tight decade or two.**”

(Belfast Telegraph, 16 June 2009)

Accounting for the already formidable problems relating to the regionally peripheral position of Northern Ireland, the legacy of the conflict, high levels of poverty, unemployment, and house repossession, it is anticipated that the outworking of this recession will bring additional complications to already stressed governmental and voluntary sector attempts at intervention.

In effect, an already difficult situation for many people will become worse and the numbers who are subjected to poverty and social exclusion will increase as long as the recession continues.

With this in mind the poverty generated by a prolonged recession urgently needs to be planned for by government and voluntary sector organisations.





3

Faith and Poverty

This section identifies some of the main theological and social principles which underpin the work of faith-based organisations such as the Society of St Vincent de Paul: providing support and friendship, promoting self sufficiency and working for social justice.

(www.svp.ie)

A deeper awareness of the reality of poverty locally and globally is emerging in the face of the current economic challenges. Crises in the world's financial and economic systems and growing unemployment add greater urgency and present challenges to communities everywhere. Christians of all traditions, mindful of the life and teaching of Jesus Christ - have a sense of public responsibility and community. Their ethos has implications for social structures and they are often to the fore in seeking to alleviate and eradicate poverty. This is in spite of a widespread tendency to empty religious faith of its public and political dimensions, reducing it largely to the sphere of personal and family morality.

The Bible reminds us that the poor are God's chosen ones. The Hebrew Scriptures teach that the sign of the observance of the covenant is a real care for the poor and the weak. (*e.g. Exodus 20: 22f, Amos 5:11-12*)

The New Testament builds on and enriches the Old Testament's teaching about the poor.

Jesus grew up as one of the common people, and his ministry was for the most part directed towards them. He came “**to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives.**”

(Lk 4:18-21) Jesus in his ministry had special concern for the poor, dejected and those excluded from society. (e.g. Lk 17: 11-19)

Concern for both charity and justice should be of the utmost importance to all who call themselves Christians.

Thus, for example, the World Synod of Catholic Bishops in 1971 - representing a watershed in the interpretation of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) - declared that: **“Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of preaching the Gospel.”**

(*Justice in the World*)

In his first encyclical letter *Deus Caritas est* (2006) Pope Benedict XVI emphasised the Church's ministry to those in need and identified it as pertaining to the very identity of the Church:

“The Church's deepest nature is expressed in her three-fold responsibility: of proclaiming the word of God, celebrating the sacraments, and exercising the ministry of charity. These duties presuppose each other and are inseparable. For the Church, charity is not a kind of welfare activity which could equally well be left to others, but is a part of her nature, an indispensable expression of her very being.” (n. 25)

There is the recognition that the practice of the Christian faith has concrete social consequences within the Catholic Church, especially since the nineteenth century. It has led to the emergence of a substantial and evolving body of literature referred to as Catholic Social Teaching and this developing teaching has informed the outreach to the poor by almost a million volunteers in the Society of St Vincent de Paul in 132 countries globally, as well as other Church based agencies.

WHAT IS CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING?

Catholic Social Teaching emphasises the central place of justice in personal and social relationships. This teaching is grounded, of course, in the values of Judeo-Christian religious experience which are reflected in the Scriptures and the Church's lived tradition. Its fundamental principles are directed not just to Catholics, but to everyone in the Christian tradition and to people of goodwill everywhere. They are thus not characteristically formulated on the basis of a specifically Catholic or Christian outlook, but draw on a language and philosophy which may resonate with peoples of all faiths and none. Pope Benedict XVI has recently published a social encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), and this encyclical has been widely praised in media and political circles internationally as an insightful and comprehensive reflection on Catholic thinking on economic activity, business, and social justice. (see *Donal Dorr*, p.463) It crucially links economic development to poverty alleviation.

The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace in its 2004 *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* encapsulated what it termed the four “**permanent principles**” - drawing from scripture and the tradition of the Church - of Catholic Social Teaching, namely, the dignity of the person, the common good, subsidiarity and solidarity. These principles offer a powerful antidote to the ills and injustices caused by the machinations of unfettered capitalism (so much in the public eye at the moment) and valuable perspectives on what government and society in general should prioritise in terms of both social and economic policies.

EXPLORING THE FOUR KEY PRINCIPLES OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

The **first principle** is the dignity of the human person. Human beings are created in the image of God and have a dignity that is expressed in many ways. They are both body and soul; they are by nature open to God, unique and social. They have an essential equality and freedom. Created by God, all persons have rights that are “**universal, inviolable, inalienable**” (*Compendium*, n.153) as well as reciprocal duties. Before God they are all equal, no matter their race, sex, class or creed. The *Catechism* of the Catholic Church enunciates this point succinctly when it teaches: “**Created in the image of the one God and equally endowed with rational souls, all [people] have the same nature and origin...all enjoy an equal dignity.**” (*CCC*, 1934)

The **second principle** concerns the common good and builds on the understanding that the human person is both sacred and social. The communitarian character of human existence means that the good of each person is bound up with the good of the community. (*Compendium*, 167) The Second Vatican Council expressed this well when it stated that humans were created by God not to live life in isolation but for the formation of social unity. (*Gaudium et Spes*, n.32) We realise our human dignity and rights through our relationship with others in community. The way in which society is organised, in terms of politics, economics, law, the environment and social policy directly affect human dignity and our capacity as human beings to flourish.

The **third principle** is subsidiarity. Its focus is the need to enhance participation for the sake of the common good. It assumes the natural right to associate and organise in society. It recognises that the primary relationships in society are family and small social groups. Thus individuals do not exist for the state but rather the state exists for the well-being of individuals and families entrusted to its care. It seeks to empower people at the local level and to emphasise the person as opposed to an instrumentalising bureaucracy. Subsidiarity implies that nothing should be done or imposed at a higher level that can be done or fulfilled as well or even more effectively at the local level, namely at the point closest to where it will have its immediate and greatest impact. (*see Pope John Paul II, 1991, n.48*)





The fourth principle is solidarity. It holds that there is an essential bond between all people. This is more and more evident in our globalised world where we are increasingly interdependent. (*Compendium*, 193) This was a theme particularly favoured by Pope John Paul II. He insisted that solidarity is “**not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far**”, but, on the contrary, “**a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all.**” (1987, n.38)

He then went on to say:

“The exercise of solidarity within each society is valid when its members recognise one another as persons. Those who are more influential, because they have a greater share of goods and common services, should feel responsible for the weaker and be ready to share with them all they possess. Those who are weaker, for their part, in the same spirit of solidarity, should not adopt a purely passive attitude or one that is destructive of the social fabric, but, while claiming their legitimate rights, should do what they can for the good of all.”

The intermediate groups, in their turn, should not selfishly insist on their particular interests, but respect the interests of others.” (1987, n.39)

The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church (n.73) also asserts that there are three levels of Catholic Social Teaching, which might be summarised as those concerning the heart, head and hands respectively. The first is to motivate people to care and to act. The second concerns the norms, principles and themes that help people to interpret reality and discern courses of action.

The third level is the call to live out these norms concretely in everyday life.

These principles inform the work of the Society of St Vincent de Paul in Northern Ireland as elsewhere and they allow its volunteers to contribute in a distinctive manner to the common good. Their contact at such close-quarters with the poor and marginalised mean that they have developed a particular knowledge and expertise which government and other state agencies can profitably draw from in formulating and implementing policies and strategies to tackle poverty and related issues.



Conclusions & Recommendations

As with other faith-based organisations the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul has been working across Irish society to carry social justice to vulnerable and deprived communities who have suffered multiple deprivation.

The experience of the staff and volunteers places the charity in a unique position within Irish society to assess the extent of social exclusion and many individuals' plights to overcome poverty. This has been compounded by the recession which, in Northern Ireland, as with other places, has left an estimated one in three of the adult population economically inactive for various reasons. The recession coupled with the ongoing problems related to economic and social exclusion has merely added to the severity of the situation.

In engaging with these issues the Society of St Vincent de Paul and other faith based organisations have highlighted a number of points of intervention which could assist organisations such as themselves in targeting poverty under the current circumstances.

These include:

- **Addressing income poverty.** This is based on the belief that poverty is not inevitable and that there are ways “to ensure that policies can be implemented to tackle income poverty.” (SVP, 2009a)
- **Ensuring that vulnerable people have access to services.** This would include providing support for access to quality education, health, housing services and financial services.
- **Building community.** This is achieved by overcoming the problems related to isolation, social exclusion and loneliness – problems which are highlighted by the experiences of migrants, the elderly, those with physical and intellectual disabilities, and lone parents. It means investing in community support structures.
- **Advocating on behalf of those in poverty.** Attempting to change government policies to be actively anti-poverty and supporting individuals and families who are having difficulty with government agencies. Supporting agencies need to create the space for those in poverty to reflect on and articulate their experiences of poverty.

The recession has caused immense hardship for many families and this is reflected in the stress placed on communities and neighbourhoods throughout Northern Ireland. With this cycle of economic instability set to continue for years to come the problems that affect vulnerable families and individuals are intensifying. The inequalities between those who have so far weathered the storm of recession and those who have not, reflects on political and economic leaders struggling to control a volatile economy.

While in the pre-recession period there was a sense of, and evidence of, poverty being addressed, in the current climate with thousands of job losses, house repossession and increased homelessness, child poverty rates among the highest in the UK and Ireland, and things set to get worse, the concept of ‘joined up government’ is more important now than in decades.

Social partnership with charities such as the Society and similar organisations can provide an opportunity to confront the effects of poverty and recession, until the recovery can be registered.



Working at community and family level in Northern Ireland there is a general aspiration towards the eradication of poverty from Irish society. Indeed, this should be the stated objective of all organisations challenged by this injustice. The possibilities are there to engage with poverty, but these demand the right will and the proper dedication of resources. However, such initiatives are dependent on the goodwill of various agencies working in this field and agencies need partnership to carry this vision forward.

To quote the Society's paper '*Submission to Strengthening Families Strategy*': **"As the largest charity in Ireland working with people experiencing multiple and emerging forms of poverty, exclusion and inequalities, the Society is a daily witness to the stresses and strains of families living on the margins of our society. Its privileged position close to the heart of disadvantaged families allows it an unfiltered view of how government services can impact on and support disadvantaged families...to capture the experience of people living in poverty and to inform government about the policies, structures, strategies and services that work for vulnerable people."**
(SVP, 2004)

Finally, taking direction from the various opinions and points made in this document from both a qualitative and quantitative approach, and in respect to the ethos base of the organisations contributing to this document, a number of recommendations can be surmised. These relate to the role that civic society, individuals, government and faith-based communities can play in the alleviation of poverty in our society.

- It is important to continue to highlight the impact of poverty on the most vulnerable sections of our society. Lobbying and campaigning are aspects of anti-poverty work that are in need of constant renewal.

The voices of those who are affected by poverty should be enabled and empowered to bring the issues alive to civic society and our politicians in particular.

- This would give the causes of poverty a more pronounced profile and provide a forum for engaging with the effects.
- There should be pressure on our politicians and policy makers to ensure that the elimination of poverty and social exclusion are the most important issues being addressed in a recessionary period.
- In the midst of recession capital investment in housing security through social housing should be prioritised; benefit security should be supportive in overcoming poverty and not contributing to poverty; children should be provided with a framework of support mechanisms to give them the best possible opportunity through schooling and into adulthood irrespective of their social background; older people and those with disabilities should be facilitated with the means to live full, valued and - where possible - independent and fully integrated lives within the community.
- More investment is needed to target those sections of our community who have been caught in a cycle of poverty, such as older people, people with disabilities, victims of violence and migrants.
- The various organisations working with those exposed to poverty should be facilitated to ensure that groups do not feel as if they are working in isolation from others and state agencies. Networking should be recognised as a central plank in any strategy to confront poverty.

Where possible the cycle of deprivation for individuals needs to be broken with strategic and concerted intervention. Organisations working directly with vulnerable individuals should continue to be a focus for investment.



These groups can act as an outreach for funding bodies and statutory agencies. Investing in organisational capacity is a key to addressing social exclusion.

Ultimately, what is required is an integrated approach to overcoming the difficulties that poverty brings to society, with organisations and individuals playing their respective roles to intervene where and when it is possible to confront the causes and implications of poverty and social exclusion.

Individuals, including volunteers, need to be encouraged and their activities enhanced to bring the weight of civil society to bear on the pressures that poverty places on families and communities. Such a meaningful partnership needs to involve individuals, parishes, the schools and agencies working on poverty related issues.

Finally, an integrated approach must include a responsibility from statutory authorities to actively engage with and support faith-based communities in their attempt to build social capital for the betterment of all people across the north of Ireland.

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CHALLENGING POVERTY IN NORTHERN IRELAND

