



# Combat Poverty Agency

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## VIEWS ON A THIRD EUROPEAN PROGRAMME TO COMBAT POVERTY

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Combat Poverty Agency has compiled this paper in its role as the official Irish government agency charged with the task of developing measures to combat poverty. The Agency was established by the government in September 1986 with four main functions: to advise the government on all aspects of social and economic planning in relation to poverty; to initiate and evaluate measures aimed at overcoming poverty; to promote, commission and interpret research into poverty; and to promote greater understanding of poverty. In fulfilling these functions one of the Agency's responsibilities has been to co-fund with the EC the nine Irish projects which are part of the second European Programme to Combat Poverty. The Agency has also been involved in giving support and advice to the projects, facilitating meetings between the projects, organising training opportunities and drawing out practical lessons for national policy from their work.
- 1.2 The purpose of this paper is to outline the views of the Combat Poverty Agency on a possible third European programme to combat poverty in order that these may be taken into account by those involved in drawing up proposals for such a programme. The paper is based on the Agency's experience of the Second European Programme to Combat Poverty and on other anti-poverty work in which it has been involved in Ireland.
- 1.3 Underlying this paper is the Agency's considered view that the existence of a European Programme to Combat Poverty is of the greatest importance at both European and National levels in the war against poverty. While the Agency believes that there are a number of structural weaknesses in the way the current programme is organised it clearly demonstrates the contribution

that the European programme can make.

1.4 The paper has three main parts. In section 2 the reasons why the Agency believes an EC programme to combat poverty is important are outlined. Section 3 highlights structural weaknesses that the Agency has identified in the current EC programme. Section 4 makes recommendations for changes in the way a future programme should be organised.

1.5 In its "Proposal for a Council Decision on specific Community action to combat poverty" (COM [84] 379 final, Brussels, 18 July 1984) the Commission suggested that a new programme of cross national anti-poverty projects would do three things:

- (i) encourage reform within Member States' own social systems;
- (ii) demonstrate innovative approaches;
- (iii) pave the way for more coherent and comprehensive policies to alleviate poverty in the community.

The Agency considers these to be reasonable objectives and in Section 3 and 4 is concerned to identify weaknesses that have hindered their achievement and to suggest how these might be addressed in a future programme. In doing this it has particularly addressed itself to the key elements that the Commission identified for achieving these objectives. These include testing and developing new methods of helping persons beset by or threatened by poverty (i.e. local action-research projects involving the participation of the persons concerned), undertaking studies aimed at improving understanding of the nature, causes, extent and mechanics of poverty and the dissemination and exchange of knowledge and the transfer of innovative

approaches between member states.

2. IMPORTANCE OF EC PROGRAMME TO COMBAT POVERTY

- 2.1 The programme has helped to highlight the importance of poverty as an issue for the whole EC.
- 2.2 It is a way of highlighting the needs of both the poorest areas and of particular groups who have not benefited from the overall prosperity of the community - this is particularly important as we move towards the single European market and the goal of developing the weakest sections of the community.
- 2.3 It has been important in identifying new and changing aspects of poverty, in showing that there are many different manifestations of poverty and in highlighting to what extent these are common to all EC countries and to what extent peculiar to only one or a few.
- 2.4 It has encouraged discussion and the exchange of ideas between EC member states on ways of combating poverty and has thus contributed to the development of national policies.
- 2.5 It has given the poor at least some degree of a voice at EC level and it has been a sign of hope for the poor in that it has shown that the EC is concerned about all its citizens.
- 2.6 It has the potential for monitoring the impact of the main EC structural funds on the poor.
- 2.7 It has reinforced the reality that poverty is connected to wider economic and social policies.

2.8 It has given status to anti-poverty work at a local and national level.

2.9 It has allowed and indeed encouraged experimentation and research at a local and national level.

### 3. CURRENT STRUCTURAL WEAKNESSES

The experience of the Agency in relation to the Second European Programme suggests that, in spite of the many positive aspects of the programme outlined above and the important and excellent work that is being done by many of the projects, there are a number of weaknesses that seriously lessen its effectiveness at both EC and National levels. These need to be rectified in any subsequent programme.

#### 3.1 In relation to Reform within Member States' Own Social Systems

- (i) The current programme does not provide sufficient learning opportunities for national policy makers concerned about poverty. The Combat Poverty Agency's existence is, as far as the EC programme is concerned, a matter of coincidence. If the Agency did not exist and had not consciously set out to learn lessons from the Irish projects many of these would be lost to policy makers.
- (ii) The effectiveness of several of the Irish projects has been significantly enhanced as a result of the amount of advice and help given by the Agency. This role is not provided for by the current European programme. There have also been benefits from the Agency facilitating co-ordination and discussion between the Irish projects which is also not provided for by the EC. This has been

particularly valuable in that it has enabled the Agency to identify common strands between the projects which are relevant to national policies to combat poverty.

3.2 In relation to Demonstrating and Exchanging Innovative Approaches

- (iii) To date there has been very little exchange of information between national poverty agencies, or similar units or departments in national governments, about innovative approaches to tackling poverty. There is a serious flaw in the structure of the current programme in that it does not allow for regular discussions and exchange of information between people in the various member states who have the main responsibility for anti-poverty work. Such exchange certainly does not come through sufficiently from transnational meetings of small local projects. The Agency, given its statutory role in formulating policies to combat poverty, would welcome the opportunity to meet regularly with other policy makers with a similar role in other member states. At present the Agency is not aware of many new ideas and approaches to poverty emerging in other countries as a result of the programme.
- (iv) The fixed term nature of the EC programme causes serious difficulties. Some projects need longer and some shorter periods of time to demonstrate new approaches. Furthermore, the programme does not appear to adequately allow for the time and effort it takes to translate lessons learnt into policy changes at EC or National levels.
- (v) The selection of projects needs more thought and

attention. There should be much more consideration given to what is the appropriate type/scale of project for any particular theme. This will vary depending on the theme and also on the structures in any given country. Too often very small local projects seem to be expected to draw out major policy lessons which they are ill-equipped to do.

- (vi) The EC appears to have had difficulties in coping with the administration of small grants to a number of local projects and this has led to unnecessary delays and frustration.

### 3.3 In relation to Developing Community Policies to Alleviate Poverty

- (vii) The programme seems to lack sufficient status at EC level. It does not appear to have a direct enough input into the main structural funds to ensure that lessons learnt about poverty are applied to how they operate. The allocation to an outside agency of responsibility for evaluation and research, for co-ordination of the programme and for the dissemination of information needs to be reviewed in the context of the next programme. It may be that the programme would have more influence on other aspects of the EC's work if it were to be handled directly by the Commission or if an outside Agency were to be based in Brussels and to have more direct access into the EC system.
- (viii) There is insufficient opportunity for the involvement of MEPs and national politicians in the ongoing work of the programme and this lessens the likelihood of their becoming aware of the

outcomes and the resulting policy recommendations.

#### 4. RECOMMENDATIONS

##### 4.1 In relation to Reform Within Member States' Own Social Systems

- (i) Any future programme should have a much clearer emphasis on drawing out policy lessons at a national level. To achieve this there should be an agency or unit within each national government which would take responsibility for co-ordinating the participation of that country in the programme.
- (ii) There should be funding for development, co-ordination and evaluation work at a national level and then this should be linked together at an EC level.
- (iii) At a national level there should be a specific person or agency appointed to look at how lessons emerging from the EC programme could be used to change the practices of existing agencies and to identify worthwhile changes in major state schemes affecting the poor.
- (iv) EC funding for local projects should be channelled through the national agency or government department which is providing matching funding. The national agency would then take responsibility for monitoring the paying grants.



#### 4.2 In relation to Demonstrating and Exchanging Innovative Approaches

- (v) There should continue to be a major emphasis on local action research projects involving those affected by poverty as this grounds policy discussions in the reality of poverty and helps to alert and sensitise policy makers to particular aspects of being poor. Such projects should be very carefully selected. They should continue to involve those affected by poverty and to test out new approaches to tackling poverty. However, they should also have the capacity to draw out learning points and relate what is done at a local level to national policy. In general this may mean having fewer, but slightly larger and better-resourced projects in a future programme, though this will depend to some extent on the particular themes that are selected.
- (vi) A major focus should be on linking national agencies and policy makers together and facilitating contacts and meetings between them. To assist this there should be a committee of experts from the various national agencies meeting in Brussels on a regular basis (probably every two months) and acting as an advisory group to the EC officials responsible for the programme.
- (vii) Research should be developed around the key poverty themes selected and used in conjunction with the lessons being learnt from the pilot projects to develop new policy proposals at both national and EC levels.

#### 4.3 In relation to Developing Community Policies to Alleviate Poverty

- (viii) Anti-poverty work should be based on the understanding that poverty is not a residual problem but directly linked to social and economic policy. Thus a future programme should become a mainstream EC programme operated as a rolling programme with themes changing at different moments and projects coming in and out of the programme as appropriate.
- (ix) A key element in any future programme should be the translation of the findings of the second programme and of subsequent programmes into the work of the main EC structural funds and into the work of national agencies. A priority task will be to ensure that, where appropriate, successful projects from the current programme will be enabled to develop their work by being integrated into mainstream national and EC funding networks.
- (x) A future programme should be given the task of developing an overall framework for anti-poverty work which would encompass all aspects of the EC's activities. This would involve a process of continuous monitoring of changes and developments in the work of the main EC structural funds for their impact on the poor.
- (xi) To facilitate the above developments a high powered unit should be established either in or closely linked to the Commission to tie the various elements of the programme together and to work on the translation of new ideas into the work of the main EC programmes. This unit would also

be involved in facilitating debate and discussion about poverty policy and the dissemination of information. Consideration should be given to whether this might be done by working with an existing EC institution such as the Foundation for Living and Working Conditions rather than contracted out to the outside agency.

- (xii) A significant increase in resources should be made available commensurate with the growing extent of poverty in the EC and in order to enable the tasks outlined in this paper to be more efficiently undertaken.