



Combat Poverty Agency

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Submission to the Government and
Social Partners on a new National
Agreement

1990

The current agreement has been most effective where specific targets were set. The existence of a Monitoring Committee involving the Social Partners has helped to ensure that targets have been met. Particularly noteworthy has been the success of the Agreement in tackling the crisis in the public finances over the national debt and in achieving a significant improvement in the country's economic position. Its relatively modest targets in other areas have also been largely achieved.

In terms of increasing social equity the PNR's contribution has been more limited. There have been welcome increases in social welfare ahead of inflation, some measures have been introduced to help the low paid, a Housing Bill has been enacted and new funds to support community development and women's groups have been made available. The impact and extent of cut backs in public expenditure, while very serious for some people on low incomes, have not been as extreme as some feared they might have been. However, given the very deep seated nature of poverty and the degree of social inequity that existed in 1987 the goals set in the first PNR were not extensive enough nor specific enough to effect a major change in the distribution of resources and opportunities in Irish society nor was the rate of job creation high enough to make the necessary major inroads on the problem of unemployment. Thus the major challenge still facing this country is to tackle the underlying causes of poverty and to address continuing and very serious inequalities in areas such as education, health and housing.

FOCUS FOR A NEW AGREEMENT

A different situation now exists to that pertaining in 1987. The immediate crisis in public finances is less urgent. The new challenge is to manage and expand the economic recovery and to do this in such a way that underlying problems in Ireland can be addressed. Thus tackling the twin problems of poverty and unemployment, together with the ongoing need to reduce the national debt and to expand the economy in the context of the Single European Market, should be critical concerns in any new agreement between the government and the social partners.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A PROGRAMME FOR ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

If tackling poverty and increasing social equity is to be a core part of any new agreement then a comprehensive range of actions will be required. The Agency details below its recommendations on key commitments that it would like to see included in a new programme. If a significant impact is to be made on the issues of poverty and social equity then a programme of action will need to be implemented over a period of three to four years. The recommendations thus represent a framework for action. The specific measures will need to be adjusted to take account of the length of any new agreement.

1. Overall Commitment to Address Poverty

1.1 All Government Departments and Agencies in whatever field they operate - environment, health, economic development, education and training, rural development, the arts - should be required to ensure that the programmes they are responsible for are contributing to tackling poverty and social disadvantage. They should be asked to indicate how they intend to enhance the anti-poverty dimension of such programmes. They should report back regularly to the Monitoring Committee on what progress is being made. In addition the Combat Poverty Agency, as the specific state agency charged with addressing poverty, should be adequately staffed and resourced to enable it to monitor, advise on and support the range of actions necessary to tackle poverty.

2. Unemployment

- 2.1 Specific annual targets for creating jobs should be agreed which relate to the current very high levels of unemployment. There should be a declared aim to reduce the current very high levels of unemployment by at least three-quarters over a three year period.
- 2.2 A task force for job creation should be established involving all the main social partners and representatives of the unemployed. It should be asked to particularly focus on the long-term unemployed.

services, the development of an effective programme of community care as recommended in the NESC report "Community Care Services: An Overview" and the extension of legal aid services as recommended in the Pringle report.

8. Low Pay

- 8.1 The proposal in the EC Social Charter for an equitable wage should be translated into reality during the course of the programme. This will require establishing effective mechanisms to achieve an adequate minimum income in all sectors, extending improvements in the FIS scheme, further reducing the tax burden on the low paid and increasing protection for part-time workers.

9. Areas of Special Social Need

- 9.1 The problems faced by urban and rural communities experiencing multiple disadvantages should be prioritised. Special programmes of integrated development and increased support for community development projects and local women's groups in such areas should be introduced.

REFERENCES

1. see for instance:
Combat Poverty Agency, Annual Report, 1989.
2. CSO Statistical Release, Live Register - Age by Duration Analysis, CSO, April 1990.
3. J. Blackwell and B. Nolan, Low Pay - The Irish Experience, CPA and ICTU, 1990.