

Policy Submission

Local Government and Social Inclusion

**Submission to the Department of
Environment, Heritage & Local Government**

2007

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Introduction

The Combat Poverty Agency is a state advisory agency developing and promoting evidence-based proposals and measures to combat poverty in Ireland. Combat Poverty works for a poverty-free Ireland by striving for change which will promote a fairer and more just, equitable and inclusive society. In line with its statutory role (Combat Poverty Agency Act 1986) Combat Poverty advises Government on policies which have an impact on poverty, informed by its research, its demonstration programmes and engagement with groups experiencing poverty.

The Combat Poverty Agency and Local Government

Since 1999, Combat Poverty has worked, through its Local Government Programme, to build the capacity of local authorities to play a more strategic role in the prevention of poverty and social exclusion as part of the implementation of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS).

Support by Combat Poverty to date has been undertaken through the development of the pilot programme which provided resources in training & awareness raising, research, information and the development of a Learning Network which brought together both officials and elected representatives to better understand how the work and services of local authorities impact on the lives and opportunities for people living in disadvantaged areas. This work has been continued through the provision of support to local authorities to develop local anti-poverty and social inclusion strategies (LAPSIS) and our

participation and leadership within the Local Government Social Inclusion Steering Group (LGSISG) which brings together key government departments and key interests to support the linkages between national and local level and the continued embedding of social inclusion approaches within local government.

Evidence from Environmental Resource Management (2007)¹ would suggest that over two thirds of local authorities have now some form of social inclusion strategy in place mainly due to supports and advice through the local government programme run by Combat Poverty.

Local Authorities tackling Poverty and Social Exclusion

Local authorities have historically played a key role in supporting some of the most marginalised and disadvantaged communities through the provision of housing and other services. However the objectives set out in *Better Local Government: A Programme for Change* (1996) envisaged a wider role for them. The revised NAPS, *Building an Inclusive Society* (2002) further identified potential areas where local authorities could work to assist poverty reduction. The Local Government Act 2001 further consolidated the role of local authorities with regard to social inclusion. The recognition of developing local solutions to local problems and local government's leadership role involving local officials, elected representatives and communities currently presents a unique opportunity to combat poverty and social exclusion.

Local authorities have successfully over a short period of time widened their original mandate which was limited to the provision of mainly essential physical services such as housing, sewage, roads etc to one which advocated new forms of governance and participative decision-making processes. It also embraced the concept of social partnership as playing a

¹ Environmental Resource Management Ltd (2007) *Mapping Social Inclusion at Local Level*. Combat Poverty Agency

key role in policy development and service delivery at local level. Local government and participative democracy has been brought closer together, local government's role in the community has been widened and there is now an increased focus on tackling social exclusion.

New structures, functions and procedures have been developed to accommodate new ways of working. These have included the establishment of City/County Development Boards (CDBs), Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs), Community Fora, Social Inclusion Measure (SIM) Groups and Social Inclusion Units in seventeen local authorities.

Key Challenges for Local Government and Social Inclusion

Despite the comprehensive institutional frameworks at both the national and local levels to address poverty and social inclusion one of the key challenges facing local government in rolling out national social inclusion commitments has been the lack of linkages between central and local government, and between agencies at the local level. A recent Combat Poverty study² found that there is a need for stronger national to local linkages in tackling poverty and social exclusion and suggested that an integrated approach to policy development and implementation is required. The study proposes greater co-operation between central and local government and between agencies at local level and proposes a variety of mechanism to facilitate this.

Efforts have been made to address this in the most recent National Action Plan on Social Inclusion 2007-2016. The Local Government Social Inclusion Steering Group, involving the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Chair), Office for Social Inclusion in the Department of Social and Family Affairs, the Institute of Public Administration, the Local Government Management Services Board, Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs as well as officials from local government and the

² Environmental Resource Management Ltd (2006) *Study to identify potential linkages between the national and local level in the context of the development and implementation of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy*. Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency.

Combat Poverty Agency will be further developed to support the linkages between the national and local level and will report to the Cabinet Committee on Social Inclusion.

Combat Poverty Agency Recommendations

National Social Inclusion Unit

- **The Combat Poverty Agency recommends a fully resourced facility at national level which can provide local authorities with the technical expertise and guidance required in delivering the NAPinclusion at local level.**

Local authorities are being asked to undertake a range of activities as part of their expanded role in addressing poverty and social inclusion. While the Combat Poverty Agency has provided a range of such supports, training, research, networking opportunities and technical expertise through the local government programme to date, it is evident that more is and will be needed on a more coherent and consistent basis.

Each county/city authority should implement a LAPSIS

- **A LAPSIS should be implemented by each city/county authority. This would be based on relevant guidance from the Combat Poverty Agency in consultation with the LGSISG and should be adequately resourced and supported at national level.**

Combat Poverty supports the implementation of national anti-poverty policies at local level. A key element of this work is support for the development of Local Anti-Poverty Social Inclusion Strategies. These strategies, involving consultation with key stakeholders, should set out the priorities for the local authority in tackling poverty and social exclusion.

Access to Services

- **Ensure local authority services are available and accessible to all, based on levels of need**
- **Consult with local communities to ensure services are tailored to the needs of the local community**
- **Ensure staff have received appropriate training and flexible resources to address the needs of all users of their services, especially low income users and vulnerable groups**
- **Collaboration with other local providers to ensure service provision at the local level is 'joined up' and tailored to users' needs**

For many citizens their main interaction with the state is with the local authority, as they access services at the local level. There are three pertinent issues:

- a) local authority services need to be accessible to all users of services on an equal basis. This requires good policies and good interaction with the public, especially by front line staff;
- b) particular attention needs to be paid to low income users and other vulnerable groups. This requires consultation with people experiencing poverty and social exclusion and their communities to ensure services are tailored to their needs; and
- c) co-operation and collaboration with other service providers at a local level is required to ensure that service provision is 'joined up' and tailored to users' needs.

In this context it is essential that local authorities are resourced (both in terms of skills/capacity and financial resources) to develop their role regarding 'non-traditional' services.

Participation

- **Continue to support community development and social inclusion training for local authority staff and public servants at local level**

- **Promote a public education and awareness campaign of the benefits of consultation and participative approaches**
- **Provide resources to people experiencing poverty and their representative organisations to participate in community fora and similar structures**

Local authorities have a key role in building active citizenship and participation. Community development practice³ is essential in this regard. Poverty and social exclusion cannot be tackled without building the capacity of those experiencing poverty and social exclusion and encouraging and supporting their involvement through community development activity. There is a need to build an understanding of community development practice in local authorities.

Community fora are a local level mechanism to include the participation and voice of the community and voluntary sector. To ensure that anti-poverty and social inclusion issues are heard within these fora there is a need to support the capacity of these groups with an anti-poverty/social inclusion remit at a local level.

Implementation

- **Horizontal, vertical and diagonal linkages and communications systems, between and within national and local government, need to be put in place to ensure coherence in the delivery of public services at the local level. A social inclusion focus to service provision should be embedded in this overall model**
- **The LGSISG should be expanded to include representation from a wider range of government departments, reflecting CDB make up at a local level**

3. Combat Poverty, as part of its statutory remit, promotes community development as a means of overcoming poverty and defines community development as: 'A process whereby those who are marginalised and excluded are enabled to gain in self-confidence, to join with others and to participate in actions to change their situation and to tackle the problems that face their community'.

- **Elected representatives should be supported to strengthen their policy remit with regard to embedding social inclusion within local government**
- **Local authorities require a greater degree of flexibility and autonomy in the delivery of public services**

Lack of linkages between the local and national level has been identified as an obstacle in progressing the implementation of national social inclusion policies, including the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion, at local level. Direct links and communication systems between national and local government levels as well as across government departments at national level and their agencies at local level, need to be developed as a matter of urgency. The LGSISG should be expanded to reflect all key departments represented at CDB level.

The development of local anti-poverty and social inclusion strategies, with local authorities as the co-ordinators and/or lead agencies, will require local authorities to have a greater degree of flexibility and autonomy.

The delivery of integrated services at the local level is important. National public service policies with a social inclusion dimension should be designed and delivered in a way that facilitates the leadership role of local authorities in delivering such integrated services. Elected members need to be supported to strengthen their role in this regard. To implement NAPinclusion at local level, LAPSIS need to relate to the targets set out in NAPinclusion. National departments need to direct local agencies in this regard.

The limited ability of local authorities to raise funds is a constraining factor. Financial discretion to target resources on identified priorities and areas is needed. Local authorities rely heavily on central government grants, generally on specific grants ring fenced for particular projects, with little or no discretion on expenditure. Hence local authorities are limited in responding to different needs locally. The establishment of the Local Government Fund assists in addressing this issue.

Flexible financial resources are needed to adapt local solutions to local problems, based on local knowledge and the involvement of civil society in the development and implementation of strategies. This would involve, for example, in the allocation of funding to build houses, additional discretionary funds to support consultation and capacity building for potential tenants.

Outcome Measurement, Monitoring and Review

- **The impact of public service delivery on people living in poverty and/or excluded should be built into service indicators and evaluation systems**
- **Data systems need to be built to support the collection and analysis of relevant information**
- **Social inclusion objectives that are linked to NAPinclusion should be built into Performance Management and Development Systems**

For successful monitoring and evaluation clear targets and indicators must be embedded into strategy development and service delivery. Service indicators and performance management systems have been developed and introduced into the local government system in recent years. Further work is needed in developing performance management systems in the context of NAPinclusion; indicators need to capture how services are delivered and the quality of services delivered from an identified needs basis. There is a need for ongoing monitoring and evaluation to assess change over time.

Appendix 1

The Role of the Combat Poverty Agency in relation to Local Government

Since 1999, Combat Poverty has worked, through its Local Government Programme, to build the capacity of local authorities to play a more strategic role in the prevention of poverty and social exclusion, as part of the implementation of NA PS. This involved the establishment of a Local Government Anti-Poverty Learning Network (LGAPLN) with the primary aim of promoting and supporting 'the development of a strong anti-poverty focus within a reformed system of local government'.

The Network, whose core membership is local authority officials and elected members, has the following elements:

- Training and awareness on poverty and social inclusion;
- Networking;
- Information and dissemination of best practice;
- Supporting participation of excluded communities.

Training and awareness raising on poverty and social exclusion

Training was provided to local authority staff and members on poverty and social exclusion issues and how NAPinclusion relates to local government. Training courses were delivered at sub-regional level, at individual county/city level tailored to the needs of a specific local authority or targeted at a particular section within the local authority e.g. planning.

Networking

Up to four thematic and regional meetings a year were organised, based on needs identified by participants. Each meeting attracted 50-100 attendees, made up of elected representatives and staff. Themes for meetings have included:

- Corporate plans;
- Housing/estate management;
- Ethnic minorities;

- Poverty proofing;
- Poverty profiles;
- Customer care;
- Role of Library Service.

Information and dissemination of best practice

Initiatives to raise awareness of NAPinclusion and poverty issues within and between local authorities have included:

- *Learning Brief*: a newsletter which was published 3-4 times a year;
- Network Exchange: an electronic newsletter distributed to over 1000 local authority staff and elected representatives;
- Information dissemination through existing communication networks within local government; and
- Support for local authorities to develop their own communication and dissemination systems.

A number of publications relating to the work of the Local Government Programme were produced, including:

- *Waste Collection Charges and Low Income Households* (Nov 2003)
- *Access to Public Libraries for Marginalised Groups* (2005)
- *Implementing a Waiver System: Guidelines for Local Authorities* (2005)
- *Social Inclusion Units in Local Authorities: Going Forward – The Lessons Learned* (2005)
- *Linking Local and National Structures: Tackling Poverty and Promoting Social Inclusion*, Policy Statement (2007)
- *Poverty and Social Inclusion: Linking Local and National Structures*, Seán Ó Riordáin (2006)

Supporting participation of excluded communities

Workshops on community development and consultation and participation techniques have been held for staff from local authorities, on a cross-sectional basis.

Other initiatives included:

- Funding for local authorities to develop anti-poverty work in partnership with community groups;
- Guidelines for developing key elements of a local anti-poverty and social inclusion strategy (LAPSIS) entitled *Developing a Local Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy: A Guide*. (2005);
- Funding and support to a number of local authorities to develop a LAPSIS;
- In 2003, Combat Poverty provided dedicated support to three local authorities to develop a LAPSIS: Cork City Council, Donegal County Council and Westmeath County Council.
- Cork City Council focused on the development of its internal processes to support a LAPSIS, using funding provided by Combat Poverty to raise awareness and conduct research to ensure that the social inclusion focus of its Corporate Plan was as strong as possible.
- Westmeath County Council developed its Local Social Inclusion Strategy 2005 – 2009. This resulted in new approaches to service delivery being adopted by staff and the introduction of consultations with customers which led to service improvements and an increase in customer satisfaction.
- Donegal County Council developed a profile of poverty, social exclusion and relative levels of deprivation, which was used to create an awareness of the issues amongst the public and policy makers.
- In 2005, Combat Poverty provided funding to support the development of a model of a LAPSIS in Wicklow and Laois. These projects recently concluded and emerging lessons confirm the importance of leadership and commitment at corporate level in the local authority.

Key elements of the Local Government Programme have now been mainstreamed:

- A Local Government and Social Inclusion Steering Group (LGSISG) chaired by the DoEHLG and comprising representation from the OSI, Local Government Management Services Board (LGMSB), the IPA, the City and County Managers Association and Combat Poverty has been

formed to ensure that the social inclusion agenda continues to be mainstreamed in local government;

- The IPA has taken assumed responsibility for organising Local Government Anti-Poverty Learning Network meetings; and
- Training on poverty and social inclusion has been incorporated into mainstream training providers delivering to local authorities.

The translation of the objectives set out in NAPinclusion to the local level through the development and implementation of LAPSIS remains a key objective for Combat Poverty.