Submission

on the

National Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion

2003-2005

by the

National Youth Council of Ireland

May 2003
Introduction

The National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission on the second National Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion (NAPincl) for 2003-2005. The second NAPincl provides us with an opportunity to reflect on the effectiveness of the first NAPincl and to highlight emerging and persistent cases of poverty among children and young people in Ireland.

NYCI’s submission follows, where possible, the template adopted by the European Union and the guidelines distributed by the National Office for Social Inclusion.

Chapter 1- Major Trends and Challenges

The first chapter outlines the major trends and challenges facing Ireland under a number of headings. NYCI makes the following comments on the preliminary draft:

- The first chapter outlines the major economic trends facing Ireland. There is little analysis, however, on the societal impact of poverty in Ireland, which needs to be addressed.
- The first chapter does not highlight in any great depth the main challenges facing Irish society. NYCI suggests that there should be a separate heading that addresses the major challenges facing the Irish economy and society in the next 3 years.
- The analysis of poverty trends should be the focal point of the first chapter. NYCI suggests that the headings be amended to the following: Demography, National Income and Economic Growth, Poverty Trends and the societal impact of poverty on Ireland, Employment and Challenges.
- The poverty analysis is not sufficient. There should be a more in-depth analysis of how poverty affects vulnerable groups (women, children and young people, older people, people with disabilities, migrants, minority ethnic groups including Travellers) under those specific headings and in relation to main policy headings: income, education, housing, employment and participation in society.
In relation to child poverty, the following points are noted¹:

- In 2000, roughly 24% of Irish children were living in ‘relative income poverty’, defined as a household income below 50% of average disposable income;
- While the percentage of children in ‘consistent poverty’ has fallen in recent years, research indicates that the depth of ‘relative income’ child poverty has increased during this period;
- Children in Ireland are almost twice as likely than adults to experience poverty;
- Children in families of three or more children, children living in lone parent households and children of Traveller and asylum-seeking families are particularly at risk of experiencing poverty;
- The longer a child is poor, the greater the impact on life chances of the child and subsequent deprivation in later life.

Chapter 2- Progress report on NAPincl 2001-2003

It is important to note that the majority of targets set out in NAPincl 2001-2003 are not particularly concrete. The majority of targets are noted as Government commitments in particular policy areas with no specific timeline or data-specific objectives attached. In this regard, NYCI believes that it will be a particularly difficult exercise to quantify the success of reaching the NAPincl targets for 2001-2003.

However, NYCI would like to highlight a number of issues that must be emphasised for their lack of progress in the second NAPincl:

- **Child Income Support**: Page 14 of the NAPincl 2001-2003 sets out the PPF commitments on child benefit, outlining that the ‘investment in child benefit will rise by €1.27 billion by 2003’. This target will not be met due to the fact that Budget 2003 failed its commitment to address the needs of young people and children living in poverty. The monthly increases of €8 to €10 in Child Benefit were a quarter of the amount committed to in the three-year child benefit package

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that should have seen the benefit increase to €149 for the 1st or 2nd child and €185 for the 3rd and subsequent children.

- **Educational Disadvantage**: Page 30 of the NAPincl 2001-2003 outlined the Government’s ‘Educational Disadvantage Strategy’. The establishment of the Educational Disadvantage Committee and Forum were noted as part of this strategy, both of which were established in 2002. NYCI welcomes progress in this area, however, it must also be highlighted that there has been no significant change in the number of young people leaving school early. The National Economic and Social Forum report on Early School Leavers (2002) noted that the percentage of young people leaving school early remains at 18%. A clear action plan needs to be incorporated into the second NAPincl to tackle early school leaving.

### Chapter 3 & 4 - Strategic Approach, Main Objectives and Key Targets/Policy measures for 2003-2005

#### Strategic Approach

NYCI suggests that the strategic approach taken in this chapter could be strengthened in a number of ways:

- By taking into account a number of reports commissioned by the National Economic and Social Forum. The NESF’s focus on social inclusion is extremely pertinent to the main objectives and key targets of the NAPincl 2003-2005, particularly in the policy areas of early school leaving, lone parents, equity of access to hospital care and social and affordable housing. Many of the commitments in these reports have not been realised even though they clearly highlight an evidence-based approach to policy-making.

- The initial analysis relating to Poverty and Social Exclusion is contradictory. Definitions for both are highlighted followed by an analysis of how to ‘sustain economic growth’. NYCI suggests that a socio-economic analysis of poverty and social exclusion is included in the strategic approach, outlining the inter-generational causes of poverty.
Education
In relation to the education objective, attention should be given to the analysis of educational disadvantage under the Special Initiative in Sustaining Progress (pp. 30) as well as the NESF report on Early School Leavers.

NYCI also notes that the targets for education in the Revised National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS) have been criticised as ambiguous and perhaps unobtainable. It is essential that each target be accompanied by a concrete action plan that outlines how each target will be implemented within the noted timeframe.

Income Adequacy and Security
NYCI suggests that the analysis on income adequacy and child income support in the NESF report An Investment in Quality: Services, Inclusion and Enterprise (pp. 306-333) is incorporated into this section of the text.
Again a clear action plan for each of the targets named under this heading must be included in the document.

Health
In relation to the health targets, bullet point five states that in the “lifetime of the plan those recommendations of the CEO’s Report on the Medical Card Scheme which address barriers to the uptake, information deficits and transparency in relation to income guidelines”. The Chief Medical Officer also clearly cited the connection between child poverty and ill health. The Health Strategy launched in late 2001 contains a Government commitment to substantially expand Medical Card eligibility by increasing income guidelines and by taking particular accounts of the needs of children. This target must be met and further inroads must be made to extending medical card provision to all children under the age of eighteen, beginning with children under the age of five.

Housing and Accommodation
The NESF report on social and affordable housing should be incorporated into the analysis of housing and accommodation.
Objective 3: To help the Most Vulnerable - Children and Young People

The following points must be noted in relation to the analysis on children and young people:

- The analysis in the preliminary draft is not sufficient on the causes and reality of child poverty. Again, the NESC report should be referred to for an in-depth analysis of child poverty.

- Young People are equally vulnerable to incidences of poverty, this section should be re-titled ‘children and young people’

- A ‘joined-up’ policy approach is essential. Incoherent Government policy can accelerate incidences of poverty. For example, cuts to child benefit can impact on whether children can stay on in second level education. Lack of funding for breakfast clubs and after school clubs can impact on the health of children in poverty. In essence, contradictions in Government policy and rolling back on commitments can adversely increase incidences of poverty in Irish society and can hinder children and young people’s participation.

- In relation to education, it must be clearly noted that a number of targets must be reached in order to give young people the opportunity to participate fully in the Irish economy and society. In this regard:
  - It is essential that every child obtains a threshold of numeracy and literacy and that special supports are given to children in order to achieve this.
  - Early School Leaving must be tackled. Approximately 6,000 young people leave school early each year. Their educational and training needs must be a priority as they are susceptible to low-income employment, precarious forms of work, and subsequently, deeper levels of poverty. In this regard, recommendations within the NESF’s report on Early School Leavers need to be implemented.
  - Funding for a number of initiatives such as the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance, homework clubs, book rental schemes, school-meals schemes and out of school services must be maintained in the short-term and increased in the long term, in order to give young people the supports they need to stay in school.
• In relation to the **National Traveller Education Strategy**, the appointed designated official within the Department of Education and Science must forward as a matter of urgency, a Traveller Education Strategy. The aim of a Traveller Education Strategy must be to ensure quality outcomes for Travellers in education and must be developed in partnership with Traveller organisations, including Traveller organisation involvement in the design, steering, monitoring and implementation of a Traveller Education Strategy.

• In relation to **employment and training**, the following policy issues must be acknowledged:
  - The reduction in the number of places on the **Community Employment Scheme** (CE) must be addressed. CE provides an opportunity for people who are long-term unemployed to access employment and training. It is a particularly advantageous scheme for young people who are not ready to work in the open labour market, for whatever reason, while providing an opportunity to learn essential work-based and interpersonal skills.
  - Young people must be provided with opportunities to participate in second chance education. Age restrictions must be removed from second chance education schemes such as VTOS (currently only open to people 21 or over) so that there is seamless progression between first and second chance education for all young people.

• In relation to **health**, the following steps should be undertaken:
  - **Medical card provision** must be extended, on a phased basis, to all children under the age of 18, beginning with those under the age of five.
  - The commitment in the National Health Strategy to substantially expand **Medical Card eligibility** must be implemented.

• In relation to **child income support**, the following policy issue must be noted:
  - Implement a targeted **refundable child tax credit** that relieves universal child benefit of having to play an anti-poverty role.

• In relation to **accommodation**: 

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- Young Travellers are still at risk of poverty due to the lack of suitable accommodation for them and their families. Approximately 3,000 children are living on the roadside without facilities.

- In relation to **unaccompanied minors**, the following policy issue must be acknowledged:
  - Unaccompanied minors, also known as separated children, have been identified as a group of children and young people that are vulnerable to poverty and social isolation. The majority of separated children live in hostel accommodation and receive supplementary welfare allowance of €118.80 per week to cover the cost of food, clothing, travel and other expenses. McCrea’s research on unaccompanied minors has also identified the fact that many of these young people face restricted access to educational and leisure opportunities and are susceptible to feelings of boredom, cultural dislocation and loneliness. It is imperative that this issue is identified in the second NAPincl and realistic targets are established to alleviate the level of social exclusion experienced by separated children living in Ireland.

**Objective 3: To help the Most Vulnerable- Women**

The following points must be noted in relation to the analysis on women:

- Young women are particularly susceptible to incidences of poverty. The analysis in the NAPincl must reflect this.

- The following policy issues must be highlighted in relation to young women and **education**:
  - The Department of Education & Science has not put in place national policy or guidelines that directs second level schools to put in place procedures and practice to retain young pregnant schoolgirls or schoolgirl mothers. The educational needs of teenage mothers need to be addresses so

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that young women are not excluded directly or indirectly from further education and training.

- Research suggests that young women who become lone parents are especially at a disadvantage when compared to their peers. Lone parents under 25 represent over one fifth of all OFP recipients. (NESF 2001). The demands of parenting alone at such a young age and without adequate supports such as childcare and financial resources militate against continuing education and participation in training. Currently educational provision is not tailored to meet any of the specific needs of young mothers who wish to remain in the education system. Education represents one of the best ways of breaking the cycle of poverty for young women.

- Adequate and supportive childcare facilities for young mothers in the formal and non-formal sector (second level, third level, and out of school settings, including Youthreach).

- In relation to health and young women, it must be noted that Ireland has one of the highest rate of teenage pregnancy at 5.5% within the EU in comparison to Holland at 0.7%. There is a lack of understanding of fertility, use and access to contraception, the combination of alcohol or drugs and sexual activity, which are factors contributing to the incidence of unwanted pregnancy. Therefore, the following policy issues must be incorporated into the text:
  - A free and accessible medical service for young women, particularly in the area of sexual and reproductive health, must be provided. In particular, to reduce the number of STI’s and teenage pregnancies.
  - Cervical and breast screening should be provided free to all young women.
  - Ensure that the SPHE programme is formalised within the education sector and that it becomes a core subject in the curriculum.

Chapter 5- Institutional Structures

NYCI notes that there is an urgent need to put in place the data strategy committed to in the revised NAPS. Unless up-to-date data are collected and disaggregated for each of the vulnerable groups, the NAPS targets will not be met.