

Ending Child Poverty

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With the long-awaited publication of the Review of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy, the campaign to end child poverty enters a new phase. The promises, targets and objectives contained in the Strategy, despite the qualifications and caveats, represent a policy commitment by Government to go beyond "tackling" child poverty and to secure instead its full elimination. Our primary job now is to insist that the commitment be made real and that the policies that are required to end child poverty in all of its dimensions be fully implemented.

The revised NAPS establishes an "overall objective" of eliminating child poverty. The targets are to reduce the number of children in consistent poverty to below 2% and "if possible" eliminate child poverty completely by 2007. Consistent poverty is defined as being below 50%-60% of average disposable income and experiencing enforced basic deprivation. The most recent statistics available suggest that at least 8% of Irish children are living in consistent poverty.

The "action plan" to achieve these targets consists of delivering on two key commitments: basic child income support (the combination of Child Benefit and Child Dependent Allowances) will be set at 33%-35% of the minimum adult social welfare payment, and the minimum adult social welfare payment will reach 150 Euro (in 2002 terms) by 2007.

According to the Framework Document that accompanies the Review, additional expenditures of between 459 - 666 million Euro will be required to cover the Child Benefit increases alone between 2003 and 2007. (The relationship of the Framework Document to the Review is less than clear, as is the Government's commitment to act on the measures included in the Document).

While the NAPS Review generally backs away from addressing relative poverty among children, the commitment to index basic child support to the lowest adult social welfare payment could become an important tool in the fight to end relative poverty. It will depend in part on the interpretation given to 150 Euro "in 2002 terms". Increasing the payment and adjusting for inflation is one thing; reaching and then maintaining a social welfare payment that is indexed at 30% of gross average industrial earnings is another matter entirely, and one that would contribute significantly to curbing the growth of economic inequality.

Apart from income adequacy, the revised NAPS offers children living in poverty little more than a recapitulation of commitments made in other Government documents such as the National Children's Strategy and the Health Strategy.

With respect to education, promises regarding access to early childhood education are made and targets are set in relation to the number of school leavers and pupils with learning difficulties.

Health targets and commitments merely restate elements of the Health Strategy. The issue of extending free primary care to many more children is again put on the table.

Housing is particularly disappointing. No mention is made, for example, of the number of children spending their early childhood in B&Bs and other accommodation unsuitable for children.

In a potentially significant development, the NAPS Review explicitly embraces economic, social and cultural rights and states that they are provided for in the Irish Constitution and in international conventions ratified by Ireland. Reference to these rights implies a recognition that every child has a right to health care, education, decent housing and an adequate standard of living. While the Government seems to be perfectly comfortable signing up to international treaties such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and European proclamations that unequivocally embrace economic rights and a rights-based approach to public policy, the Government in recent years has at times gone out of its way to avoid using “rights” language in many of its policies and programs.

For NGOs and children’s advocates, the next steps include providing the promised child income support as quickly as possible and accelerating efforts in health, education and housing to stop the routine and systematic violation of children's rights. The Government, for example, should be pressed to immediately eliminate all financial obstacles to primary medical care for children.

The development of child well-being indicators, promised in the National Children’s Strategy and reiterated in the NAPS Review, is an important commitment that should be acted on without delay. Children growing up in a society in which material inequality is growing, even if basic deprivation is declining, are likely to experience the destructive effects of social exclusion because they are vulnerable to being stigmatised and humiliated due to their relative poverty. Well-being indicators could highlight the real damage done to children’s lives by inequality and spur action to make ours a more equal society.

Children, we must always remember, have a right not to live in poverty. Under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, they have a right to an adequate standard of living and to fully develop their human potential. Poverty violates their basic human rights and, in many cases, denies them their childhood.

Published in *Poverty Today* (No. 54, April 2002)