

ANTI-POVERTY

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WEST BELFAST ECONOMIC FORUM

RESPONSE TO TOWARDS AN ANTI-POVERTY STRATEGY
A CONSULTATION DOCUMENT

AUGUST 2005



West Belfast Economic Forum responded to the previous consultation on the proposed new Anti-poverty strategy in 2004. As the comments we made at that time were completely ignored by those analysing the responses. We resubmit our original response, as the points remain valid.

The Economic Forum was one of almost 180 organisations that added our name to NICVA's submission criticising the proposed strategy and calling for a real anti-poverty strategy. The department again chose to ignore the views of the majority of the responses received to the previous consultation.

The Economic Forum is once again adding its name to the NICVA 'Enough is Enough' campaign which states that the proposed strategy is unacceptable and will not address the high levels of poverty and deprivation that exist in areas such as West Belfast. This strategy as proposed by OFMDF must be scrapped and started again in partnership with those who work in disadvantaged areas and with groups suffering from poverty and deprivation.

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Una Gillespie
Coordinator

West Belfast Economic Forum



WEST BELFAST ECONOMIC FORUM

RESPONSE

TSN- TOWARDS AN ANTI-POVERTY STRATEGY

October 2004

Preamble

West Belfast Economic Forum is supporting the position adopted by NICVA in relation to TSN. Our experience has been that consultation with government departments has generally been meaningless with the opinions of civic society and particularly those who are most vulnerable in our society being generally ignored.

WBEF has hosted a number of consultation events on developing an anti-poverty strategy and the reports from those workshops have been submitted separately. We have produced a special Economic Bulletin on TSN and that also has been submitted separately. On 13th September WBEF with the NI Anti-poverty Network hosted a major conference on key issues relating to poverty. We submit a report of that conference separately and wish these to be considered as responses to the consultation document.

In this submission we will not deal with any of the substantive issues or proposals in the consultation document but instead flag up what an anti-poverty strategy should do.

This is the third time West Belfast Economic Forum has responded to consultations on some variation of the Targeting Social Need Policy. Targeting Social Need has been in place since 1991. It was introduced as the complementary policy to fair employment legislation and with that legislation aimed at reducing community differentials. However the policy has proven to worse than useless and the same arguments have had to be reiterated time after time with no lessons apparently being learnt by civil servants or direct rule Ministers. **Tackling poverty is about a redistribution of resources and this has to be seen to be done with immediate tangible benefits in people's lives. This will be the measure of the success or failure of any anti-poverty strategy.**

Failure to name a problem means that the long-term solution is impossible to find. The TSN document fails utterly to define poverty. Rebranding an already failed policy as an anti-poverty strategy is an attempt to fool everyone including people living in poverty, that this government is sincere in its desire to eradicate poverty. It is also an attempt to fool people that the British government are seriously addressing their obligations under NAPS inc.

We would recommend the Dublin government definition of poverty:

'People are living in poverty if their income and resources (material, cultural and social) are so inadequate as to preclude them from having a standard of living that is regarded as acceptable by Irish society generally. As a result of inadequate income and resources people may be excluded and marginalised from participating in activities that are considered the norm for other people in society.'

Since 1991, thirteen years ago, **nothing** in terms of poverty and deprivation in this state has changed. The wards that were listed, as areas of multiple deprivation in the 1970's are the same wards listed today under Noble. In some cases the only things that have changed are ward names or boundaries. **The legacy of the conflict must be addressed in an anti-poverty strategy.** Research has shown that there are clear correlations between people's experiences of the conflict and the levels of poverty in which they live.

Indeed in terms of religion evidence provided by NISRA to the consultants carrying out the evaluation of TSN listed the following:

- The proportion of children living in workless households, more of whom live in households whose head is a Catholic compared to Protestant, **has remained the same.**
- The number of children living in families claiming a key benefit **has only started to decrease.**
- The proportion of school leavers achieving no qualifications **has remained the same.** The school leavers in this category are higher amongst those entitled to free school meals and in Catholic managed schools.
- The proportion of children achieving no GCSE's **has increased** and is higher amongst catholic managed schools and higher for children entitled to free school meals.
- The proportion of working age adults who are in employment is higher for Protestants than for Catholics and for males. **This has remained the same.**
- The proportion of working age adults who are unemployed which is higher for Catholics than for Protestants than for Catholics **has remained the same.**
- The proportion of working age adults living in workless households which is higher for households whose head is a catholic **has increased.**
- The proportion of working age lone parents in employment has overall **remained the same but is decreasing for those whose head of household is catholic and increasing for those whose head of household is Protestant.**
- The proportion of those aged over 50 in employment has **remained the same but is higher for Protestants compared to Catholics and for males in comparison to females.**
- The proportion of working age people without a qualification has **remained the same but is higher amongst Catholics than Protestants.**
- The proportion of working age people who would like to have paid work but do not have it has **remained the same** though the proportion is higher amongst Catholics than Protestants and for those with a disability compared to those without.

- The proportion of households that live in homes below the bedroom standard has **remained the same** but is higher in households where the head is Catholic compared to Protestant.
- The proportion of economically active working age people who are long term unemployed has **remained the same** and although it is higher amongst Catholics than Protestants there is evidence that it is **decreasing** for Catholics.
- The proportion of work rich households **increased** from 2001 but is higher amongst households where the head is protestant compared to Catholic
- The proportion of lone parent households was **lower in 2001** but remains higher amongst households where the head is Catholic compared to Protestant.

All of the above show how TSN and equality legislation is failing the most vulnerable in society but the equality agenda put in place as part of the Good Friday Agreement is also failing Catholics and women in particular. Indeed the document itself states that in terms of monitoring community differentials: 'Our assessment of action plans found limited evidence if additional activities being undertaken in relation to either the measurement or monitoring of community differentials.'

These failures need to be addressed with targets and timetables in any anti-poverty strategy.

The key areas that must be actively addressed within an effective anti-poverty strategy are:

- **Income**
- **Employment**
- **Benefit levels**
- **Housing**

□ **Health and Education**

Income levels for the poorest in society must be addressed to reduce the widening gap between rich and poor in this society. The issue of the 'working poor' must also be addressed.

Jobs must be created, must be located in areas of need and must be real jobs with decent wages. There must be clear targets set to tackle unemployment, particularly for Catholics and specific steps put in place to do this.

Benefit levels must be raised to such a level that people do not live in poverty. Benefit levels must be such the sizeable percentage of the population who cannot be and never will be in the labour force can enjoy some quality of life with a realistic income. Long-term sick people, older people, carers, single parents and people with disabilities who may never be in a position to seek employment are equally entitled to an income. To have debt management and information on benefits as the only recommendations in anti-poverty strategy is to blame the victim and to subject people to further poverty.

Government finance, our finance, must be directed at geographic areas of need and at groups of people who suffer deprivation and inequalities commensurate with the level of need.

An anti-poverty strategy should contain clear commitments to meet defined targets with real numbers attached. Aspirations are not enough. There must be an agreed set of concrete performance indicators with hard numbers attached and these must be monitored in a transparent fashion. Immediately targets fail to be met new actions should be put in place to redress the situation. The relentless pursuit of failed policies and policies which have been designed to fail has been allowed to continue for too long. This practice has got to stop.

Political will to tackle unemployment and inequalities, particularly the religious differentials, has been noticeably absent for many years but even

more so under British Direct rule Ministers. The statistics on poverty, deprivation and inequality have been well rehearsed time and time again. **We need to move beyond the debate about defining need and proving the case. We need action and we need it now.**

An anti-poverty strategy should be developed on an island wide basis with National Action Plans that are just that and in a way that will eliminate poverty in the poorest areas and amongst the poorest people.

An Equality Impact Assessment must be carried out on an anti-poverty strategy and real, meaningful consultation with the stakeholders must be carried out. We look forward to engaging in that process.