

2010 European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion

ALL ISLAND CONFERENCE ON RURAL SOCIAL DISADVANTAGE 21st October 2010

Organised by Pobal in association with the Department of Community, Equality and Gaeltacht Affairs, the Department of Social Development (NI), the European Union Community of Practice on Partnership in the ESF, the Rural Development Council (NI)

National Context

Four main objectives lie at the heart of the European Year

- **Recognition** of the right of people in poverty and social exclusion to live in dignity and to play a full part in society
- An increase in the **public ownership** of social inclusion policies, emphasising everyone's responsibility in tackling poverty and marginalisation
- A more **cohesive society**, where no one doubts that society as a whole benefits from the eradication of poverty
- **Commitment of all actors**, because real progress requires a long-term effort that involves all levels of governance.

Context of the Conference

While the substance and impact of disadvantage is common to both urban and rural dwellers there are specific contextual differences that need to be taken into any framework of analysis. In urban settings disadvantage in its most primitive economic form is often associated with geographic area, house type or cultural characteristics and is thus readily identifiable. This brings benefits in terms of developing collective responses and organising the implementation of social inclusion measures. The assumed commonality of rural areas - where people are neighbours participating in the same sports and leisure activities, frequenting the same pubs, shops and churches – and the spatial pattern of settlement in rural Ireland, brings a certain invisibility which makes collective responses and effective delivery more complex.

Another contextual factor is that rural disadvantage is experienced against a backdrop of rural underdevelopment - with attendant problems of poor transport, public services and enterprise development – where disadvantage can be subsumed in what are seen as wider and more important regional issues. Because of these parallel needs and the intermingling of different policy agendas it has been difficult to focus responses on the most needy or to prevent spillage from the few dedicated social inclusion responses that have been put in place.

Further complicating factors arises from definitions of *rural*. This is defined by governments as areas outside the boundaries of the major urban centres. Others associate it with an agricultural or pastoral lifestyle, ignoring the reality that smaller provincial

towns, which house a large segment of rural disadvantage, are not considered as being obviously rural in the popular imagination. Border counties introduce an additional context arising from the institutional separation of communities, public services and from the unnatural division of viable economic regions.

The bottom line is that rural disadvantage has not been adequately addressed and those who have experienced this disadvantage over many decades need to be better served. The farm labourers, unskilled workers, subsistence farmers and long suffering women who traditionally constituted the rural poor can still be found in towns and villages, in isolated dwellings or on neglected islands. Informed, viable strategies capable of differentiating between rural development and rural disadvantage, while being capable of fairly and comprehensively integrating both agendas, are necessary and long overdue.

Target audience

Individuals from NGO bodies involved in social inclusion, community development, local development and rural development on the island of Ireland. Staff from departments and statutory providers in the areas of social protection, economic development, employment, equality and social inclusion, health and transport. Policy experts, researchers and European practitioners.

Conference Purpose

The purpose of this major conference will be to develop an **informed framework to address rural disadvantage** in both jurisdictions. The conference will therefore facilitate the emergence of a more comprehensive and challenging understanding of rural disadvantage and will explore and identify the type of strategies now required to impact on social exclusion and poverty levels in rural communities. The seminar will outline the nature, context and dynamics of rural disadvantage, locating it within wider regional development issues, including the all-island context that has emerged from the Peace process. It will identify models of best practice and potential good practice that has emerged from successive rural social inclusion and policies and programmes. The conference will also identify impediments that prevent the development and implementation of effective strategies.

The process of developing the framework will focus on the core issues access affecting social exclusion in rural areas including: access to quality services, transport, employment, economic development and social sustainability.

In line with the conference purpose the format will follow the sub-objectives set out below:

- Gain a comprehensive **understanding** of the nature, context, dynamics and impact of rural disadvantage North and South. Develop a clear understanding of the policy contexts effecting social exclusion in rural areas. *(A scoping document will be compiled to frame the initial discussions of the conference. This will be distributed in advance)*

- Contribute to the development of a comprehensive **strategic framework**, informed by bottom up experiences and capable of decisively impacting on rural disadvantage.
- Discuss and identify clear **policy priorities** that will form a road map for the development of more effective implementation strategies within a broader matrix of regional development and climate change challenges into the future.

Programme format

9.30am: Registration

10am: Conference opening

10.15am: *The nature, context and dynamics of rural disadvantage.* Introduction to the conference and presentation of key points from the scoping document.

11am: Thematic Seminars: The purpose of the thematic seminars is to discuss the issues and themes arising from the initial presentation, adding to or elaborating on these and identifying a set of priorities for inclusion in the *strategic framework*.

The themes are:

- Addressing poverty, income and unemployment
 - The need for focused, quality services
 - Integrating social inclusion goals into regional development strategies
 - Social isolation and quality transport
 - The potential for all-island approaches to rural disadvantage
 - Integrating communities – ensuring the inclusion of Travellers and migrant families
- Max 25 participants
 - Each seminar will be triggered by 2 relevant inputs (this may entail a North and South perspective input, a policy and practice input, or sub theme inputs e.g. education and health)

12noon: Tea/coffee

12.15 pm: Resumption of Seminars

1.15pm: Lunch

2.15pm: Lessons from European partnership approaches to disadvantage in rural areas – EU speaker

2.30pm: Sharing experiences and highlighting priorities. Feedback from the Rapporteur and open discussion.

3.15pm: Response by Minister Pat Carey: Minister for Community, Equality and Gaeltacht Affairs

3. 45pm: Response by Margaret Ritchie: Minister for Social Development

3.15pm: Final plenary

4pm: Closing of the conference