

Submission on the Social Partnership Agreement

Combat Poverty Agency, Crosscare,
Society of St Vincent de Paul



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Crosscare, in association with the Combat Poverty Agency and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, welcomes the opportunity to alert all social partners to the critical importance of eliminating food poverty in Ireland and to request all pillars to consider the role they might play in this challenge. Being able to afford and access nutritional food should be a reality for everyone living in Ireland, unfortunately this is not the case. The below submission:

- Details the reality of food poverty in Ireland
- Describes the inception and development of the Healthy Food for All Initiative
- Proposes how a Special Initiative can add value and contribute to the elimination of food poverty

Food Poverty: The Facts

While Ireland has experienced unprecedented economic growth in recent years there still exists a significant number of people living in poverty. For many households, dependent on social welfare in Ireland it is not possible to provide themselves with an adequate and healthy diet. Information from the EU Survey on Income and Living Conditions, December 2005, illustrates that almost one fifth of the population are at risk of poverty while almost 7% of the population are living in consistent poverty. Currently one in four children under sixteen live in households where the income is less than 60% of the median income poverty line.¹ 148,000 children live in families with this level of income and experience enforced deprivation (either through debt, insufficient heating, inadequate diets and clothing).

There is a growing awareness of food poverty as a structural constraint on food consumption and dietary intake among low-income groups, and its multi-faceted consequences for health, education and social participation, arising from the extensive dissemination of the research report ***Food Poverty and Policy Report***² (2004). This report shows that low-income households eat less well, spend a relatively higher share of their income on food, have difficulties accessing a variety of good-quality, affordable food, and are restricted socially and culturally from healthy food options through financial and physical constraints. The report developed a working definition of food poverty:

...food poverty refers to the inability to access a nutritionally adequate diet and the related impacts on health, culture and social participation...

Since the publication of this report **Combat Poverty Agency, Crosscare and the Society of St Vincent de Paul** have been working together to raise awareness among a broad range of interests, including the private sector, government departments, health and local government bodies, the community and voluntary sector (schools, local food projects, community development projects), the general public and the media. In order to make an effective impact on the issue of food poverty our three organisations recommend that a

¹ For 2004 this poverty threshold was set at €9,680 or €185 per week

² Friel S. & C. Conlon (2004) *Food Poverty and Policy*. Dublin: CPA.

Special Initiative to be dedicated to the issue in the new Social Partnership Agreement as the topic has resonance for all social partners.

Food poverty is linked to a number of critical public policy issues, notably health inequalities, low educational attainment and constraints on participation in social norms and activities. Our three organisations have been engaging in dialogue with two Oireachtas Committees, the food industry, HSE community nutritionists, anti-poverty organisations, government departments (health, agriculture and social welfare), local authorities and other interests on this broad range of policy issues.

Developing the Healthy Food for All Initiative

Building on the growing awareness at both national policy and the local level, Combat Poverty, Crosscare and the Society of St Vincent de Paul are currently working towards the establishment of a Healthy Food For All Initiative (HFFAI). We are currently seeking funding from a number of government departments and statutory agencies.

The purpose of HFFAI is threefold:

- To support community and sectoral initiatives which promote availability and access to healthy and affordable food for low-income groups, with a focus on community food initiatives and direct food provision, including school meals;
- To develop an all-Ireland learning network to identify best practice on promoting healthy food for low-income groups and to develop links with similar organisations in the UK and Europe;
- To promote awareness of food poverty across all aspects of public policy, with a focus on food availability, food access and food affordability

The vision statement of HFFAI is *an Ireland where no person is denied a nutritious diet for reasons of affordability or accessibility*. Its aim would be to promote policy and good practice on availability, access and affordability of healthy food for low-income groups. This positive approach to the issue of food poverty is encapsulated in the title of the project: Healthy Food For All Initiative. The new HFFAI is very much a partnership initiative with representation across a broad range of sectors. It is a practical measure in the response to inadequate food provision and access to a healthy diet for low-income groups. The HFFAI can be the mechanism through which national health policy reaches low-income groups. It could also play a key broker and support role in the event that a Special Initiative is formed. The HFFAI is convinced that a Special Initiative would serve to integrate and coalesce all relevant aspects of food, nutrition, welfare and production policy into a coherent framework with clear outputs, processes and particularly outcomes.

A Food Poverty Special Initiative

The many issues related to food poverty and social inequalities in food practices are complex and connected to the work of many government departments and agencies. There is currently a lack of coordinated policy in the Republic of Ireland guiding the development of initiatives to redress food poverty and the social inequality in dietary behaviour. A strategic food and

nutrition policy framework, ensuring equal access to food for all members in society needs to be developed. The new Social Partnership Agreement is an appropriate mechanism to address food poverty because of the potential for all the social pillars to contribute. It would also facilitate the work of the various organisations who need to be involved in a coordinated approach to tackle food poverty and inequality in food. Appropriate partnerships should be identified at the national and local level for the delivery of a strategic plan to address food poverty:

- At central government level - joined up thinking between the Departments of Agriculture and Food, Health and Children, Enterprise, Trade & Employment, Environment and Local Government, Education and Science, Social and Family Affairs.
- Community partners - local Partnerships, Community Development Programmes and City and County Development Boards together with voluntary organisations.
- Corporate Social Responsibility - inclusion of corporate business in a strategic framework is necessary to address food poverty.

This submission recommends that a **Special Initiative** be dedicated to addressing food poverty in order to facilitate the development of an effective response. This would ensure a collaborative approach involving all social partners in addressing this multidimensional issue. This will raise the profile and understanding of food poverty and social inequality in dietary habits and give a guiding framework for the coordinated development and implementation of national and local action. Addressing the barriers to healthy eating is a priority for national health policy. Good quality affordable food should be available and accessible to all and necessitates cross-sectoral intervention beyond welfare provision.

Food poverty is a multi-dimensional issue, with three main policy aspects arising as follows:

a) Food, nutrition and health policy

Poor diet and nutrition is a key determinant of health inequalities and is directly relevant to the Healthy Strategy goal of 'better health for everyone'. In 1996, the Nutritional Advisory Group recommended the development of a targeted programme to promote healthy eating for low-income groups. It also proposed pilot projects for low-income families to provide sufficient food to meet their requirements. These proposals were reiterated in the Cardiovascular Health Strategy. Under the National Health Promotion Strategy, the improvement of healthy eating among low-income groups is a strong focus as part of the expanded community dieticians service. The Department of Health and Children is also finalising a national food and nutrition policy, which has as one of its core themes food poverty. Action to tackle health and poverty is set out in the National Anti-Poverty Strategy. Poor diet due to poverty is also connected with obesity, as is outlined in the National Taskforce on Obesity.

b) *Welfare, poverty and food provision policy*

A core poverty issue is the adequacy of low-incomes to provide for a healthy diet. This issue is central to the National Anti-Poverty Strategy, which seeks to ensure that income levels (welfare and wages) are adequate for people to live in a manner compatible with human dignity. Recent research has shown that up to 80 percent of welfare payments would be required to provide a healthy diet. Direct provision of food is a key component in the care of vulnerable groups by various social service organisations, such as homeless people, older people, young people and children at risk, and asylum seekers in receipt of direct provision. Of particular concern here is school-going children on low-incomes, who are more likely to have inadequate diets and, as a result, are less able to learn in school and more likely to miss school due to illness, contributing to educational disadvantage. Addressing this issue was central to the government review of the school meals programme in 2003. The nutritional inadequacies in direct provision for asylum-seekers were recently set out in a report by the HSE (north west region)/NUIG.

c) *Food production, distribution and access policy*

The Department of Agriculture and Food is responsible for food production and distribution policy, under the framework of the EU Common Agricultural Policy. While Ireland is a food-rich country, low-income consumers experience difficulties in accessing quality and healthy food, resulting in higher costs of food and greater reliance on processed foods. Improving availability of healthy food arose in the recent debate on the abolition of the groceries' order. While food availability is not a statutory responsibility per se, there are two government bodies with policy responsibility for food safety and standards: the Food Safety Authority and the Food Safety Promotion Board (FSPB). The FSPB is responsible for the promotion of food safety and nutrition on an all-Ireland basis. It has funded a pilot project entitled 'Decent food for all' with the Armagh and Dungannon Health Action Zone. Food producers and distributors, meanwhile, have a social responsibility that good quality food is available by all sections in society and that any surplus food is disposed of in a responsible manner. The establishment of the Food and Nutrition Foundation is an industry-led response to this issue. The distribution of EU surplus food is also relevant here. Finally, transport policy and retail planning influences food access.

The three relevant policy areas cited above illustrate the interconnectedness and potential synergies which a Special Initiative could harness to work towards the elimination of food poverty. Joint, integrated and coherent working within these areas would benefit thousands of people, reduce health inequalities and reduce obesity. Creating a structure which allows a common understanding and shared commitment to flourish would reap rewards on many fronts. The potential for cooperation of the various partners is enormous and must be harnessed.

Annex 1: List of activities undertaken by consortium

May 2004	Launch of Food Poverty and Policy report at meeting of European Food Banks
June 2004	Meeting with Department of Social and Family Affairs
September 2004	Meeting with Department of Agriculture and Food
September 2004	Meeting with Dublin City Council
October 2005	Presentation to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Food and Agriculture
October 2005	Roundtable on food poverty with the agri-business sector to coincide with UN World Food Day
November 2004	Presentation at National Conference on Nutrition, Poverty and Health, host by Combat Poverty
January 2005	Presentation to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Enterprise and Small Business on its review of grocery and retails markets
March 2005	Presentation to Health Promotion Unit and HSE Community Dietitian Managers
April 2005	Roundtable with relevant interests on the establishment of HFFAI
May 2005	Meeting with Health Promotion Unit and HSE Community Dietitian Managers re National Food and Nutrition Strategy
May 2005	Meeting with Bord Bia
June 2005	Presentation at National Consultation on National Food and Nutrition Strategy
June 2005	Establishment of HFFAI Working Group
July 2005	Submission to Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment on the Groceries' Order
November 2005	Funding Proposal drawn up to request funding for the establishment of HFFAI
January 2006	Meetings with potential funding agencies
February 2006	Meeting of HFFAI Advisory Group to draft Workplan for first year of initiative.