



National Council on
Ageing and Older People
An Chomhairle Náisiúnta um
Aosú agus Daoine Aosta

2007 UNECE Ministerial Conference on Ageing, León, Spain, 6-8 November 2007

Statement to Panel Discussion (B): Participation and Social Inclusion

1. Demographic Context

Those aged 65 years and over constitute approximately 11 per cent of the total population of the Republic of Ireland. While this proportion is currently lower than in many other UNECE countries, projections indicate that by 2050 older people will represent 29 per cent of the Irish population. The Irish Government has acknowledged that this demographic shift will have a significant effect on social protection, and health and social care systems, and has moved to develop national policies that place a particular emphasis on promoting the health, autonomy and social inclusion of older people.

Specifically, these are:

- *Towards 2016, Ten-Year Framework Social Partnership Agreement 2006-2015* (Government of Ireland, 2006);
- *National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016* (Office for Social Inclusion, 2007).

2. Towards 2016, Ten-Year Framework Social Partnership Agreement 2006-2015

In Ireland, since 1987, multi-annual macroeconomic and social policies have been developed through a programme of consensus-building between the Irish Government and the Social Partners (employers, trades unions, and the community and voluntary sector).

Ireland's current social partnership agreement, *Towards 2016* (Government of Ireland, 2006), outlines a new framework within which key economic and social challenges will be tackled using a life-cycle approach. While previous social partnership agreements placed a limited emphasis on older people, the key life-cycle stages identified in the current agreement are: children; people of working age; older people; and people with disabilities.

The measures included in *Towards 2016* demonstrate a commitment to pursuing a coherent and integrated approach to promoting the social inclusion and participation of older people in all aspects of Irish society. The shared vision for the future, set out in *Towards 2016*, envisages an Ireland 'which provides supports, where necessary, to enable older people to maintain their health and well-being, as well as to live active and full lives, in an independent way in their own homes and communities for as long as possible' (Government of Ireland, 2006, p. 60).

To achieve this vision, the Government and the Social Partners have undertaken to work together over the next decade towards a number of long-term goals for older people in Ireland 'in the context of increased longevity and greater possibilities and expectations for quality of life of older people' (Government of Ireland, 2006, p. 60).

These goals are that:

- every older person will be encouraged and supported to participate to the greatest extent possible in social and civic life;
- every older person will have access to an income which is sufficient to sustain an acceptable standard of living;
- every older person will have adequate support to enable them to remain living independently in their own homes for as long as possible, which will involve access to good quality services in the community, including health, education, transport, housing and security;
- every older person will, in conformity with their needs, have access to a spectrum of care services stretching from support for self-care, through support for family and informal carers, to formal care in the home, the community and residential settings.

To progress towards these goals, the Government and the Social Partners have identified and agreed a series of priority actions in the areas of:

- pensions and income supports;
- long-term care services;
- housing and accommodation;
- ensuring mobility for older people;
- ensuring quality health services for older people;
- promoting education and employment opportunities for older people.

The Government and the Social Partners also agreed that the goals and priority actions would be pursued through other relevant national strategies and processes, notably the *National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016* (Office for Social Inclusion, 2007).

3. *National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016*

Since 2001, the Irish approach to promoting social inclusion has been aligned with the EU Open Method of Coordination (OMC). To date, Ireland has produced a series of National Action Plans against Poverty and Social Exclusion, and in 2006 it submitted its first integrated national report detailing its strategies for social protection, social inclusion, and health and long-term care for the period 2006-2008.

In addition, in 2007, Ireland produced its *National Action Plan for Social Inclusion*, to cover the period until 2016. This Plan mirrors *Towards 2016* (Government of Ireland, 2006) in its adoption of a life-cycle approach to promoting social inclusion, and supports the measures for older people proposed in that agreement. The National Action Plan acknowledges that community care services are essential to enable older people to live active, full, independent lives at home for as long as is possible. It also acknowledges that income has a key role to play in alleviating poverty in older age. Therefore, the high-level goals for this life-cycle stage focus on these two areas.

The National Action Plan also highlights the importance of investment in services that optimise quality of life for older people, including housing and accommodation, security, health services, labour market participation, and lifelong learning opportunities.

Furthermore, the Plan highlights a number of institutional structures that have been put in place to underpin the implementation, monitoring and ongoing development of the Government's social inclusion agenda, including the Cabinet Committee on Social Inclusion, chaired by An Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern T.D., the Office for Social Inclusion and the Social Inclusion Forum.

4. Barriers to the Participation of Older People in Irish Society

While current national policies and plans place significant emphasis on the social inclusion of older people in all aspects of Irish society, attitudinal and structural barriers to the full participation of older people in Irish society remain.

A critical barometer of how age friendly and inclusive a society is relates to prevailing thinking, attitudes and behaviour towards older citizens individually and the older population in general. Regrettably, ageist stereotypes and negative portrayals of older people continue to perpetuate a myth around the types of services that are considered as being of relevance to the inclusion of older people in Irish society.

Terminology such as the 'burden of ageing', 'the demographic time bomb' and 'the ageing crisis' quickly projects onto older people and facilitates negatively differential treatment of them in employment, education, pensions, health, social care, and other services and social activities that are important to them.

To assist in combating ageist attitudes and practices in Ireland, a number of national agencies working in the sector, including the National Council on Ageing and Older People, have come together to develop an annual public awareness campaign – 'Say No to Ageism' Week. This initiative, identified in *Towards 2016* (Government of Ireland, 2006) as a priority action, aims to promote awareness of ageism and an understanding of how ageism lies at the root of many of the barriers that older people encounter when accessing goods and services.

While 'Say No to Ageism' Week is a positive step in addressing ageism in an Irish context, it is important to note that age is still the third highest basis for allegations of discrimination under the Equal Status Acts. Ageism in all its manifestations remains *the* most important challenge to be overcome in order to ensure that Ireland truly becomes a society for *all* ages.

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6 November 2007