

First Meeting of Ministers responsible for Social Cohesion of Council of Europe Member States

Moscow: 26-27 February, 2009

***Speech: Ms Bernadette Lacey, Secretary General,
Department of Social and Family Affairs, Ireland***

Chairperson,

It is a great honour to be present here in Moscow to represent Ireland at this first meeting of Ministers responsible for Social Cohesion of Council of Europe Member States. At this time of grave financial and economic crisis, I hope that our meeting will send out a clear message on the fundamental importance of social cohesion for European States. .

We are particularly fortunate to have our discussions informed by the excellent Task Force report. I wish to echo the tributes paid to the members of the Taskforce, who compiled the report, and to the Chairperson, Mary Daly. The Secretariat of the Council of Europe and the European Committee for Social Cohesion deserve much credit for the support they have given to the work of the Task Force.

Although for many countries, including Ireland, financial and economic conditions have deteriorated since the report was compiled, its analysis of economic, social and demographic conditions still remains relevant, as do the proposals made on how best to address these in the interest of social cohesion. I wish now to focus on the importance of promoting and facilitating consultation and the participation of stakeholders in achieving social cohesion, based on our experience in Ireland.

After a period of economic growth and relative prosperity in the 1960s and '70s Ireland in the 1980s underwent an economic recession that was similar in many ways to what we are experiencing today. There was a determination, however, to avoid returning to the underdevelopment, poverty, and emigration that had been so much part of Ireland's past. The Government and the social partners realised that this required a national consensus on the policies and measures necessary for social and economic development. The outcome was the development in 1987 of a system of social partnership between Government and employers, trade unions and farmers. The Community and Voluntary sector later joined the process. National Agreements were successfully negotiated on pay and working conditions and the agreements were expanded to cover social protection and other related social issues.

It became clear, however, that a special process was required in addition to tackle poverty and social exclusion. A National Anti-Poverty strategy was introduced in 1997 to apply for 10 years. This was the fruits of detailed and wide ranging consultations with all stakeholders, including representatives of people experiencing poverty. The strategy set clear goals, objectives and targets to reduce poverty. It included concrete Government commitments to take the necessary measures to implement the strategy and to provide the resources to do so. It promoted and facilitated the transversal approach. The process also involves regular monitoring and evaluation of progress, in which the representatives of stakeholders participate. This includes identifying the groups in society that are particularly vulnerable to poverty,

and the additional measures needed to assist them. The process is supervised overall by a Cabinet Committee chaired by the Taoiseach (Prime Minister), supported by a Senior Officials Group. A second 10 year National Action Plan was introduced in 2007

This partnership approach has operated and been developed over 20 years since 1987. It has given all stakeholders a real sense of control over the social and economic fortunes of the country. It is credited with making a significant contribution to Ireland's economic success and social progress over the past 20 years, especially through support from stakeholders and the public generally for sound economic and social policies, and through the achievement of industrial peace. It has enabled all stakeholders have a direct involvement in steadily promoting and facilitating the achievement of greater social cohesion. This has included greatly improved standards of living for all sectors of society, major reductions in unemployment and increases in employment participation, especially among women, a virtual end to involuntary emigration, increased immigration, and significant investment in the improvement of public services. It has ensured through the anti poverty strategies that there is a clear focus on steadily improving the position of those experiencing poverty and social exclusion.

The achievement of social cohesion can also be greatly strengthened and progressed through partnership at international level. The EU supports the strategic processes of its Member States on social provision through the open method of coordination, and the benefits of EU membership generally is a major factor in achieving economic and social development. The Council of Europe, makes a major contribution through its promotion of human rights, democracy and the rule of law and the social rights enshrined in its various social instruments, particularly the Revised Social Charter. Ireland has ratified the Revised Charter. It has become a key guide to the development of our social policy. For example, our National anti-poverty strategies have made it possible for Ireland to ratify Article 30 of the Charter on the right to protection against poverty and social exclusion.

The Council of Europe is also making a major contribution to social cohesion through its impressive and innovative research projects, often on cutting edge issues, and its provision for facilitating the exchange of knowledge, experience and best practice between Member States. Through this meeting, it now provides Ministers and other representatives from virtually all European countries with an opportunity to meet and discuss common challenges to social cohesion, and exchange knowledge and experience on how best to meet them..

In conclusion, I wish to pay tribute to the Russian Government for getting these meetings, which I hope will become a regular series, off to such an auspicious start and for its warm hospitality and excellent organisation. I wish to thank the Secretary General of the Council of Europe and his colleagues for their excellent work in preparing the Conference. Finally, I wish to pay tribute more generally to the Council of Europe and its representatives from all Member States for developing the concept of social cohesion and transforming it into a set of goals and actions for the benefit of all the people of Europe.