

**Taking Forward Gender Budget Analysis In Ireland\***  
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What Julia and I want to do today is to give you a picture of where we are in Ireland in relation to our receptivity to and capacity for gender budgeting. To do this I will be referring to my own experience of gender budgeting, to Irish macroeconomic policy as it affects women, and to some of the current political/community activity that might constitute possible vehicles for taking gender budgeting forward in Ireland.

In early 2001 Dr. Linda Doyle from Trinity College Dublin organised a seminar to take an initial look at gender budgeting. The seminar was jointly sponsored by the Centre for Gender Studies in Trinity and the Labour Women's Group in Ireland. Linda (and I am happy to say that Linda is here today) reports that no-one she spoke with at that time – whether in academia or politics or within NGOs – had ever heard of the concept before. She'll be happy to know that at a conference just last month, the Labour party spokeswoman on Finance advocated gender budgeting.

There were three sections to the seminar:

1. A Labour Party spokesperson on Finance gave an input on the budgetary drafting process in Ireland with reference to facility within the system for pre-budget submissions.
2. A presentation by Donna St. Hill from the Fawcett Society on Gender Budget Analysis.
3. An input on Poverty Proofing.

The input on Poverty Proofing was given by one of my colleagues, who brought back to the office information on gender budget

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\* This paper complements that given by Julia Long, NDP Gender Equality Unit, Department of Justice Equality & Law Reform, Ireland

analysis and in particular some of the material from the Commonwealth Secretariat. (I will speak later about poverty proofing as it pertains to addressing women's poverty.)

The information was of particular interest to me and to my organisation, because of the work we have been involved with for over 10 years and more immediately because of our work with the Equality for Women Measure. A major focus of the work of WRC, Social & Economic Consultants is in the area of developing policy from practice, working with projects on the ground to capture policy lessons and following through with national and European government agencies toward influencing policy change. We have worked primarily on initiatives dealing with social inclusion and equality and in particular gender equality, developing gender analysis and analytic tools and training in gender awareness – more recently with political parties through the Equality for Women Measure.

The Equality for Women Measure is the largest ever funding initiative in Ireland targeted to promote equality for women. It represents a new facet of the gender equality agenda in Ireland in that it is a positive action programme which is funded primarily by exchequer funds. Prior to this any similar positive action programme came about through the European Structural Funds.

Administered by the Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform, the Measure has a total budget for the period 2000-2003 of over 14.5 bn Euro. WRC supplies technical support to the Measure and is contracted to extract the policy lessons from some 70 projects operating on the ground.

One of the organisation's in the Measure is Banulacht, which is the Irish Platform of WIDE, Women in Development Education. Its EWM project is about developing a rights based approach to gender equality. Another of Banulacht's project has been the development of a manual on economic literacy which guides to a gender analysis of macroeconomic policy. This manual is in draft stage and just recently I have been invited to join its editorial advisory board.

And now to poverty proofing, the infrastructure for which was set up as a mechanism for the implementation of Ireland's National Anti-Poverty's Strategy. The National Anti-Poverty Strategy was

launched in April 1997. The objective of the strategy was to significantly reduce the percentage of the population in consistent poverty over a ten year period. Poverty Proofing was introduced in government departments in July 1998. It is worth noting that Ireland's NAPS was initiated ahead of the EU's anti poverty/social inclusion strategy..

In terms of the capacity and receptivity of government departments to undertake a gender budget exercise, it is worth looking at what has been achieved in the area of poverty proofing as it pertains to government policy making machinery. The NAPS Institutional Machinery consists of:

- Cabinet Committee on Social Inclusion, chaired by the Taoiseach and including Ministers from relevant departments;
- A Senior Official Group on Social Inclusion comprising senior civil servants;
- The Interdepartmental Policy Committee, comprised of senior civil servants and representatives of state agencies;
- The NAPS unit, which acts as secretariat to the IDPC and has responsibility to co-ordinate and develop cross-Departmental activity in supports of the NAPS.

The explicitly stated aim of the poverty proofing process is poverty impact assessment but it also has the objective of changing the policy formulation process to ensure that assessment of policy impact on poverty becomes a routine element of the public policy formulation ethos. In other words the objective is to make poverty impact assessment a mainstream practice. The process is to be applied to all policies – self-contained proposals and large integrated programmes such as the Budget and the National Development Plan.

The poverty proofing guidelines require that attention be paid to particular target groups which might be more at risk of poverty; these are the target groups cited in the anti-discrimination legislation, and include women. In addition to outlining the potential impact on poverty reduction, memoranda to cabinet, which is the final policy document which goes to Cabinet, is required to state the impact of the policy on a number of other areas – one of which is on women. So, effectively women are

mentioned twice as a target group to be accounted for the in formulation of policy – in the first instance as a target group considered to be more at risk of poverty and secondly as part of the guidelines set out in the Cabinet Procedures Handbook.

In 2001 the National Economic & Social Forum undertook a review of the Poverty Proofing process and found that overall government departments have responded poorly to the requirement to carry out poverty impact assessment. It did find that during the period since the poverty proofing guidelines were introduced, policy makers have become sensitised to the need for the exercise but have been hampered by a number of constraints. And these will be familiar to all us. They include:

- Lack of political will
- Little or no training
- No commitment of resources
- Lack of indicators
- Poor data

The good news is that Ireland's level of consistent poverty has dropped significantly over the period since the introduction of the NAPS. It is not clear, however, what contribution NAPS has made to that, with many suggesting that our economic growth brought about the progress and that the NAPS has been incidental to that progress.

In the context of identifying capacity for a gender budget exercise, it is worth looking at the impact of poverty proofing on the national budget. The picture here is not too hopeful. The following statement from Budget 2001 encapsulates the comments of officials in the Department of Finance and elsewhere on the issue of poverty proofing the Budget:

It should be noted that the primary aim of the poverty proofing process is to identify the impact of the policy proposal on the poor so that this can be given proper consideration in designing policy. It is not intended that poverty proofing would require that all policies be fundamentally transformed so that they are explicitly target at the disadvantage. It should also be pointed out that the impact on poverty is one criterion for assessing the Budget. There are many other legitimate goals and targets such as

increasing economic efficiency, rewarding effort and enterprise and risk taking, removing market distortions, controlling inflation and encouraging capital accumulations, all of which improve economic welfare generally.

It is clear from this account that little more than a passing nod was given to the consideration of poverty proofing the Budget. Interviewees to the NESC review of poverty proofing pointed out that the poverty proofing of individual Budget submissions was not only appropriate but desirable. However, officials also point out that time constraints, secrecy and political considerations relating to the Budget do not augur well for the presentation of an impact assessment on Budget day. Yet, some information on the distributional consequences of income tax changes and some combined income tax and social welfare changes are presented as part of the Budget papers.

The NESC review goes on to discuss the benefits of an enhanced poverty impact assessment process as part of a broader movement toward more effective policy making and points to the establishment of a Regulatory Impact Assessment Unit in the Department of the Taoiseach as recommended by OECD.

It is worth noting that work is underway to establish a integrated proofing unit within the government policy making infrastructure, i.e., a unit which would take account of the range of proofing exercises required under NAPS and the NDP. This would include gender proofing, a broader equality proofing, rural proofing, environment proofing. This sounds somewhat like the situation which pertains in Northern Ireland whereby under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (coming out of the Good Friday agreement), all state bodies are to equality proof their policies and programmes. While this has been welcomed there, there is some commentary which would suggest that that system needs some revamping.

I want finally to mention the social partnership arrangement that has operated in Ireland since 1987. It was a partnership agreement that initiated the NAPS.

Partnership brings together representatives from the government, trade unions, business and employer organisations, farmers' associations and, since 1996, community and voluntary

organisations. It was set up when Ireland was in extreme economic crisis – high, high unemployment, industrial unrest, inflation, wage and price spirals, emigration, poverty and massive government debt. All concerned recognised that something needed to be done and the agreements which partnership came to were effectively wage deal. They allow unions to engage in national collective bargaining and they allowed the government to grow competitiveness.

The mantra in Ireland is that partnership has served us well. That we have grown economically is a reality recognised by the world and the envy of Europe. Critics, however, would point to the growth in inequality that has been consistent with our economic growth over this time. Further, they would suggest that because the partnership arrangement was founded the right-wing dominant ideology current in Ireland at the time, it is restrictive in terms of allowing any contribution to beyond that dominant political ideology. This means that each time an agreement is negotiated through partnership (and we are now in our sixth agreement) it is within the same macroeconomic framework based on neo liberal economic policy. The economy had to grow so we had low taxation to attract direct foreign investment. Ireland has one of the lowest tax takes in Europe and at the same time our social expenditure is one of the lowest in the EU and in the OECD.

An adequate discussion of the pros and cons of partnership is not possible here today. What is worth mentioning is that the agreement that was worked out earlier this year was not endorsed by the community and voluntary platform, which represents part of the community and voluntary pillar. A number of these organisations have withdrawn from partnership and there is a growing debate as to the wisdom of staying at the table and of continuing, what some would see to be the sacrificing of equality for competitiveness.

There are four partnership organisations with projects in the Equality for Women Measure. Last year I presented a brief paper on gender budgeting to this grouping on the understanding that the social partnership arena might be a way to progress the issue. There are various reasons why that did not go any further than the initial meeting. Now, given the withdrawal of many of the community and voluntary organisations from partnership, it certainly will not progress through that vehicle. However, those

social partner organisations now have the space for a critique of social partnership and, I would hope, the space to rediscover alternative and broader ways of lobbying for social change.

Finally to summarise and to bring together a range of threads. In terms of capacity and receptivity to gender budgeting we have:

- An infrastructure for poverty proofing – albeit one that needs enhancing
- The prospect of an integrated proofing unit
- A review of poverty proofing which could lead to a strengthening of the process and improved conditions for its implementation
- The beginning of a critique on social partnership and the macroeconomics policy which underpins that arrangement
- A positive action programme for women with the potential to contribute significant policy lessons to the development of the gender equality agenda.
- Evidence of growing capacity within the community and voluntary sector to undertake analysis of macroeconomic policy from a gender perspective.

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