



Activation: What's it all about?

Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed

Araby House,
8 North Richmond Street,
Dublin 1

Tel: 01-856 0088

Fax: 01-856 0090

Email: policy@inoue.ie

Web: www.inoue.ie

www.redundancy.ie

1 INTRODUCTION

The "Ireland in Social Europe" project was funded by the European Union and led by the European Anti-Poverty Network (Ireland). The EU's Active Inclusion Recommendation underpinned this project in which the INOU led the 'Active Labour Market Inclusion' element. The other partners in the project were: Community Workers' Cooperative; Cork City Council Social Inclusion Unit; Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network; and Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice and their project work focused on inclusive services and adequate income.

As part of its work the INOU:

- Ran 4 focus groups of unemployed people in Dublin; Dundalk; Cork; and Galway.
- Worked with the EAPN in training 8 participants from the focus groups who wished to further their understanding and participation in national / European policy structures and debates.
- Wrote a 'Burning Issues' paper on activation highlighting the issues raised during the focus groups and training discussion which would feed into the overall Burning Issues paper on active inclusion.
- Built on the work of the four focus groups by organising 3 regional roundtables and 1 national seminar targeting key policy makers and practitioners to discuss active labour market inclusion.
- Worked with the other project partners in identifying and disseminating key messages/stories for a public awareness initiative in the context of the EU 2010 Year.

This document explores the issues raised at the four focus groups of unemployed people and scheme participants, and followed through at the three regional roundtables of local and regional practitioners, and finally in the national conference. The three regional meetings took place in Dundalk, Galway and Cork and the national event took place in Dublin.

At the four focus groups participants discussed their experiences of using social and employment services; seeking employment; accessing education and training; and what they feel is required to build more effective services. At the regional meetings issues arising from the four focus groups were presented and discussed under the headings of 'what is working'; 'what is not working'; and 'building better service outcomes'.

This paper will explore what activation should look like based on the issues raised and discussed through this project; the opportunities and challenges presented by the realignment of Government Departments and FÁS; and the much vaunted but yet to be delivered on client centred approach outlined in a range of Government policies.



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2 WHAT IS ACTIVATION?



At the four focus groups the meeting started with a presentation of what activation should look like and who is delivering it. It was not surprising to find that most unemployed people or people participating on Community Employment or Jobs Initiative were not familiar with the term. What was surprising was how little currency the term had amongst officials who have responsibility for delivering such services on the ground. Some participants in the project queried the term 'activation' and in particular its negative implications:

as one participant noted it implied *"that somehow unemployed people are lazy and so need to be activated"*.

In October 2008 the European Commission¹ *"put forward a set of common principles to help guide EU countries in their strategies to tackle poverty. The Recommendation is based around three key aspects: adequate income support, inclusive labour markets and access to quality services. National governments will be encouraged to refer to these common principles and define policies for 'active inclusion' on this basis so as to step up the fight against exclusion from society and from the labour market."* In many respects 'Active Inclusion' is a more constructive term as it is clearly not feasible without the State creating the right conditions and supports for unemployed people and other welfare recipients to participate in the economy and society.

In its 2009 Annual Report, the Department of Social Protection noted that activation is *"namely to facilitate people of working age in taking up employment, education, training or development opportunities"*. (p20) The INOU believes that activation should be built around the unemployed person supporting him or her to move off a welfare payment ultimately into a decent job. It should offer people real choices and seek to meet their needs. And to do that demands quality and accessible services and supports including access to all the necessary information to make the right decision.

3 WHAT'S HAPPENING ON THE GROUND?

Feedback from unemployed people on social welfare and employment services varied from good, to could be better, to you needed to know more than they do in the first place. Their experiences of education and training courses also varied from the positive to the critical: in particular there were criticisms of content relevance; length; availability; accessibility; lack of aftercare and follow up. These concerns were reflected in the regional roundtables with service providers. Providers noted that the speed at which the labour market is changing leaves services far behind the reality on the ground; and that services are not geared for 12%+ unemployment. Service providers also raised questions about the 'smart economy' and whether or not it is an employment strategy or a policy objective – either way they noted that it lacks implementation and funding on the ground to become meaningful.

Amongst unemployed people there was a strong sense that information provision was inadequate and that the potential of information technology was not being fully utilised. One unemployed participant noted that *"it's not what you know but who you know"* when it comes to finding a job. This was reflected in the important role of personal contacts commented on by service providers which influenced both their ability to work together and provide a better service.

Unemployed people were concerned about the cost of participation in meaningful courses and what next if you are deemed as too highly qualified for available courses because of existing qualifications? Or what next if there is no obvious progression option to the FETAC course pursued up to that point? Concerns were also raised within the focus groups that employers don't value the courses unemployed people are expected to undertake.

There was also a strong sense amongst some of the participants that *"you were damned if you do and damned if you don't when you try to keep yourself occupied"*. Both groups agreed that the lack of jobs is the real problem and *"being activated into what"* came up for both unemployed people and service providers. In particular, providers noted that the system is not working anywhere near effectively enough: that it is crisis management with a top down approach that is not properly informed. There was also a strong sense that there is a disconnect between policy makers at the national level and practitioners on the ground.

Unemployed people queried *"why threaten to cut people's social welfare payments when provision is*

1. Ref: IP/08/1448, Brussels, 3 October 2008, www.europa.eu

2. The International Labour Organisation defines 'decent work' as productive work which generates an adequate income, in which workers' rights are protected and where there is adequate social protection — providing opportunities for men and women to obtain productive work in conditions of freedom, equality, security and human dignity.

inadequate?” This was reflected by practitioners who queried using the big stick approach of threatening to cut off people’s entitlements unless they go on a course as it creates resentment. A major issue arising for both groups is that demand for education and training courses is greater than the supply.

Amongst the barriers identified were the perennial issues of childcare; transport; and a lack of mainstreaming of successful initiatives. Of immediate concern were the delays in getting Garda clearance for scheme workers working with children, young or older people; the cost of insurance for voluntary organisations; and accessing broadband to make available a broader range of education and training options particularly in rural areas. Amongst the barriers identified by unemployed people were: the difficulties in proving that you’re ‘genuinely seeking work’ when you don’t hear back from employers; the challenge of working on temporary contract and lack of supportive interaction with the social welfare system. Unemployed people also noted that social interaction suffers when you are unemployed that you aren’t a part of the informal networks and so don’t get to hear about jobs that are coming up.

4 CHALLENGE OR OPPORTUNITY?

The re-alignment of Government Departments and effective splitting of FÁS announced by the Taoiseach³ in March presents both interesting challenges and opportunities. Employment and community services provided by FÁS will be incorporated into the re-named Department of Social Protection (DSP). The training element of FÁS will be incorporated into the re-named Department of Education and Skills (DES). Along with this move the Labour Force Division of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Innovation⁴ was moved into a new division in DES called the Training and Further Education Division.

A key question to be addressed is: how will this re-alignment of Government Departments and agencies transfer into better services on the ground for unemployed people? Will FÁS Employment Services and the Local Social Welfare Office be brought together? How will that link into the work of the Local Employment Service? How will the training provided or supported through FÁS fit into the Department of Education and Skills’ further education agenda and the re-configuration of the Vocational Education Committees? Who will ensure that unemployed people are well informed about the range of education and training possibilities that should be available to them? On the policy front it should be noted that FÁS has

been a key delivery mechanism for DETI on its active labour market programmes. As responsibility for FÁS has moved from this Department an important question arises: who will now be responsible for the future development and implementation of active labour market policy? And in particular who will ensure that future policy development and implementation is inclusive. The resolution of this issue is crucial given the vision within Europe 2020⁵ is underpinned by 3 mutually reinforcing growth priorities: smart; sustainable; and inclusive.

The recommendations coming from unemployed people and service providers on how to build better and more effective services is both timely and pertinent as these announcements move to implementation.

5 BUILDING EFFECTIVE SERVICES

Unemployed people called for the system to be geared towards the individual’s needs and be more innovative in its responses. They felt very strongly that this demands a different thinking within the systems and that, for example, the culture in Social Welfare Offices needs to shift from an authoritative and processing role to one that truly assists people to move from welfare to work.



Service providers noted a need for smoother transition between social welfare, employment, education and training options. Such a transition requires improved quantity and quality of person centred guidance coupled with a proper and robust assessment of individuals’ abilities and their possible future areas of employment. They called for improved integration between services and for a more proactive rather than reactive approach to service design and delivery. To that end they agreed that the system needs to: be client focused; think outside of the box; and move away from being rules based.

There was some debate about a ‘One Stop Shop’. Some participants felt it was good idea, others felt that improved communication and integration between services including a greater use of IT would produce a better outcome.

3. Ref: Speech by the Taoiseach, Mr. Brian Cowen, TD, Dáil Éireann, Nomination of Members of Government, 23rd March, 2010, www.taoiseach.ie
4. Formerly known as Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE)
5. EUROPE 2020 A Strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, COM (2010) 2020

Information

This is a perennial question but one that needs to be finally and properly addressed in particular if increased activation is to become the norm. To that end access to good information is crucial if unemployed people are to make the right decision to improve their employment prospects. Communication across schemes and providers needs to improve to facilitate this to happen and to ensure that the frontline staff providing these services are well placed to assist unemployed people to meet their current needs and plan for their future.

Following on from this point participants felt that information dissemination needs to be improved so that it's easier for an unemployed person to find information. Greater and more appropriate use of IT was called for and participants felt that Social Protection could learn from www.revenue.ie. It was also recommended that public spaces e.g. Social Welfare Offices should be used more effectively to inform people about their employment / training / education options.

Education and Training

With regard to education and training courses unemployed people noted the crucial importance of supportive and informed service providers leading to participation in well planned and structured courses delivered by good instructors. At a time of limited resources it is particularly vital that this experience becomes the norm and not the exception.

Unemployed people felt that service providers need to understand what qualifications they have already and look at how they can progress onto beneficial education and training courses. This concern was also raised by service providers who were very conscious of the need to tackle the bums on seats mentality. They also noted to the need to work together to ensure that progression routes are clearly identified. Recognition of prior learning was also seen as essential in particular for people with significant work experience but with little formal qualifications.

Accessing a Job

Activation without a proper functioning labour market and job creation is not feasible. An integrated Jobs Strategy that spells out the potential role of the private sector; the public sector; and the community and voluntary sector in addressing unemployment must be developed as a matter of urgency. Participants called for local community organisations and unemployed people to be included in the discussions in where and how jobs will be created.

In the meantime both unemployed people and service providers felt applications for jobs should be acknowledged: there are practical issues with regard to proof of Genuinely Seeking Work for unemployed people. It was also recommended that given increased flexibility in the labour market that the social welfare system needs to adapt. For example, it should look at

total working hours in a week rather than working days. Likewise net growth in full-time work will not be seen in the short-term so it is important to keep unemployed people who could access short-term contract or part-time work as closely linked to the labour market as possible. Such a development requires the smooth transition between social welfare and work called for by service providers.

Experience is seen as key to being able to get a job and calls were made for work placements and work experience to be made available to unemployed people. Participants were equally clear that these placements should be relevant to the person's training; not be used to replace paid jobs; and that the Government should lead by example.

Self employment has been identified by the State, the unemployed and service providers as one route out of unemployment. However for this to be effective requires simplifying the process of starting your own business and getting access to funding for good ideas. It also requires a culture within service provision that seeks to build on the entrepreneurial ability of self-employed and is properly resourced to do so.

6 IN CONCLUSION

Ireland's increased focus on the issue of activation is timely given the emergence of "Europe 2020" which will replace the Lisbon Strategy under which Ireland reported on the National Employment Action Plan. Within 'Europe 2020' there will be "three mutually reinforcing priorities:

- Smart growth: developing an economy based on knowledge and innovation.
- Sustainable growth: promoting a more resource efficient, greener and more competitive economy.
- Inclusive growth: fostering a high-employment economy delivering social and territorial cohesion."

Europe sees 'Europe 2020' as contributing to the post-crisis development of Europe. However a major issue facing Ireland is the negative impact of the current crisis on this country's ability to plan for and invest in its future. This issue also faces Europe overall as a focus on fiscal rectitude is hardly conducive to growth no matter how smart or sustainable. It also creates significant if not insurmountable difficulties in ensuring that such growth is inclusive. In particular how will the headline target "75% of the population aged 20-64 should be employed" be met when Ireland at the height of the expansionary madness did not employ more than 70%?

These are issues Ireland can only address through an integrated Jobs Strategy that aspires to be smart, sustainable and inclusive. The development of such a Strategy must involve all of the key players including the Government; policy makers and service providers; national and local community organisations; and in particular unemployed people themselves.