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Northern Ireland
Rural Women's Network

**NIRWN's Response
To
Department of Agricultural and Rural
Development (DARD)**

**Anti Poverty and Social Inclusion
Framework**

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Introduction

Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN) is a regional network established to articulate the voices of women in rural areas. It is jointly funded by Department of Agricultural and Rural Development (DARD) and Department for Social Development (DSD).

NIRWN has four key objectives:

- developing weak community infrastructure in areas where little or no community based rural women's groups exist,
- increasing rural women's capacity and opportunities to influence decision-making and policy formulation,
- running Northern Ireland wide communication campaigns with a local focus, highlighting the value of rural women's contribution,
- offering a training and capacity building programme to rural women across the region.

Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN) welcomes the opportunity to respond to Department of Agricultural and Rural Development (DARD) Rural Anti Poverty/Social Inclusion Framework.

We would like to commend DARD on this proactive step to address the issues of poverty and social exclusion in rural areas through this Framework.

At the outset NIRWN would like to declare that we have a potential conflict of interest in this Framework. NIRWN in partnership with the Rural Community Network and the 12 Rural Support Networks (RSNs) have submitted a business case to DARD under the theme of Community Development, as an infrastructure to continue working to address disadvantage and inequality in rural Northern

Ireland. We hope to be a beneficiary of the Community Development Priority of the fund.

Equality between women and men is a human right as well as an effective way of reducing poverty. This applies to poverty in all its forms, lack of access to employment, education, health, transport, information, advice, power and influence. NIRWN's work is intrinsically linked to the struggle against poverty and social exclusion for rural women in Northern Ireland. Poverty is not merely a question of a lack of money or resources. It refers just as much to a lack of power and the possibility to make choices. Discrimination based on gender is one cause of poverty and social exclusion and one of the greatest obstacles to equitable and sustainable development.

To help form our response to the above consultation, NIRWN held a focus group with a group of rural women from South Armagh. The focus group was made up of an array of rural women that work in the community and voluntary sector. At the focus group we made a declaration of the potential conflict of interest detailed above.

Comments

Strategic/Policy Context

Within the broader policy text, we believe that reference to the Gender Equality Strategy from Office of First and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) must be included. The Gender Equality Strategy offers government departments a strategic vision to address inequalities between men and women, including addressing poverty and social exclusion.

Definition of poverty and social exclusion

It would be useful to provide a definition of poverty and social exclusion within the Framework. Although we recognise this is not a simple concept, a definition would provide the general context for the Framework. The European Union uses the following working definition:

‘Persons, families and groups of persons whose resources (material, cultural and social) are so limited as to exclude them from the minimum acceptable way of life in the Member State to which they belong’.

DARD have presented the different types of poverty, however an overarching broad definition on what constitutes poverty should be given. An obvious point for inclusion within this definition would be to include the rural complications of poverty and social exclusion.

Are the aims and objectives of this framework right?

Aims and objectives

In order to make the document more user friendly, the aims and objectives of the Framework should be placed prominently within the introduction.

Have we got the five priorities right?

We believe that yes the priorities highlighted are appropriate; however we have some points/concerns under the themes listed.

Fuel Poverty

We welcome the joined up approach to tackle the issue of Fuel Poverty with Department of Social Development (DSD). We recognise the success of the Warm Home Scheme to tackle fuel poverty. However it has some limitations. Not all applicants that apply are eligible for assistance mainly due to the means tested system. We feel that many householders that are not eligible suffer potential ill health from living in cold, damp and energy inefficient homes. Often those living in rural areas are *'asset rich but cash poor'*. Many living outside of the benefit bracket, but with a small income, would not currently qualify for the scheme. We seek clarification on what resources have been ring-fenced for this focus.

A Briefing Paper by Barnardo's states that even for working families' poverty is still a reality with 47% of children living in poverty in Northern Ireland in a household with at least one parent working.¹ The stark reality is that there are many families and individuals that are not in receipt of benefits, but are living in fuel poverty.

¹ 'It doesn't happen here: The reality of child poverty in Northern Ireland' Barnados

A study carried out by the *Households Below Average Income in Northern Ireland Report for 2005/06* revealed that families with children were more at risk of low incomes than those without children. Lone parent families were particularly at risk². Factors such as those that need to be indoors for longer periods of time (the elderly, long term sick and families with very young babies and toddlers), with the relative amount of time spent at home creating a greater demand for energy. It is therefore not surprising that a greater need for fuel equates with higher proportional spend than for those whose lifestyles allow them to be out of the house for longer periods of time.

We would advocate a commitment to work with the voluntary and community sector in identifying the people who suffer from fuel poverty, informing them of the options available, and providing practical help. Schemes should fund Project Workers similar to that of Health Action Zone, to work with rural communities. Practical assistance for the clearance of attics in preparation for loft insulation needs to be examined, particularly in the case of those who are elderly and living alone.

Transport Poverty

We welcome the focus to address the rural transport needs, as we believe transport provides the lynchpin to accessing other key services. Rural women are often restricted as a result of the poor transport infrastructure. Women have different transport and travel patterns to men. Women are involved in poorly resourced, highly complex, multiple purpose trips (trip chaining), men usually make single purpose trips on higher cost and superior modes of transport.

The most important issue to emerge from a consultation carried out by Department of Regional Development (DRD) on The Draft Programme for

² www.dsdni.gov.uk/publications-hbai_publication_2005_06

Government was the significance of rural transport services and the Concessionary Fares Scheme to equality of opportunity, in particular to women, older people, young people and people with disabilities. Respondents identified a need to increase investment in rural transport services³.

We welcome the focus to gain a better understanding of the social impact of Rural Transport. We believe that a Rural Services Survey should be carried out in conjunction with other government departments which provides data on the availability and accessibility of key services in rural areas. This information should then form the basis of identifying and mapping rural transport needs.

We believe that in order to address the rural transport needs, especially those with dispersed travel needs in deep rural areas, that a partnership approach amongst the different agencies is required. We advocate a joined up approach amongst government departments, local authorities, bus operators, transport planners and social services, education and health providers. We feel that this is the only way that the needs identified by the mapping exercise mentioned above can become a reality and that rural women and communities in general will have a transport service that meets their needs.

Rural Childcare

A recent report 'Investing in the Future' on the demand for and supply of rural childcare found evidence that affordability, availability and accessibility are the main problems in relation to rural childcare for parents⁴.

Finding affordable accessible childcare is one of the biggest challenges for working parents, and one of the highest costs. A review of "Children First", the Northern Ireland Childcare Strategy published in 1999, found that over the five

³ <http://applications.drdni.gov.uk/publications/document.asp?docid=12695>

⁴ Investing in the Future, Rural Childcare, June 2008, Rural Childcare Stakeholder Group

years of the strategy, the number of childcare places increased by only 5.7%. This was largely due to the increase in the number of day nursery places, the majority of which are private. Currently there is the equivalent of one childcare place for every 6.4 children under four⁵.

NIRWN advocate for the provision of comprehensive childcare which is free or highly subsidised for those who cannot afford it, in its pilot projects, as a demonstration of the long-term benefits of enabling parents to receive training and gain employment.

We support rural specific research on childcare provisions as a means of identifying needs required, and DARD's commitment to address the issues through a coherent Executive approach as outlined in the Framework.

Community Development

NIRWN believe that community development is not a theme but rather an underlying approach guided by principles to address inequalities and poverty. Community development is a vehicle for empowerment. The role for organisations in community development is that of enabling and supporting people and communities. We agree that there are a number of challenges that differentiate rural specific challenges for a community development approach. We would seek a clear definition of what Community Development entails within the context of the Framework from DARD. Central to the success of a community development is the importance of an effective community infrastructure to support the community and voluntary sector and community development activity for rural Northern Ireland. Community development work takes time, commitment and perseverance. A two year funding cycle poses problems for organisations, because a longer overall time is needed to set up inclusive structures and address the complex community needs of disadvantaged

⁵ A 2020 Vision Ending Child Poverty in NI, Annual Report 2007, Save The Children

and socially excluded groups. Although we recognize the financial restraints placed on DARD.

The Rural Challenge Fund

We recognise the limitations that £10 million can make to address issues of poverty and social exclusion in rural areas. There are a number of concerns and issues that have been raised with NIRWN that would merit funding under the Rural Challenge Fund. At the focus group session that was carried out in South Armagh a number of concerns and issues were highlighted for funding:

The six Rural Women's Networks carry out sterling work in their local areas to support and empower rural women. Due to the piece-meal funding approach from government departments, the Networks have been driven down a project based approach. Although the work they carry out through an array of projects very much contribute to reducing poverty and social exclusion, most of their time is diverted away from development work with fighting for survival being a priority rather than addressing the core needs within their communities.

Women at the very least face discrimination on two factors, their locality and their gender. However given the multi- identities of women, they are more at risk of poverty and social exclusion. Particular vulnerable groups that were identified at risk of living in poverty and social exclusion were women from the Travelling Community, women with disabilities, women with caring responsibilities especially when caring for a child with a disability and ethnic women.

What kind of projects/actions will contribute to the achievement of priorities?

We agree with the broad spectrum of projects given in the framework. In addition to this we have outlined a number of potential projects under each theme in the previous question.

As part of the appraisal process the budget for the framework will be considered. Do you feel each priority should have equal funding? If not how would you apportion funding?

It is difficult to provide an answer to the question without an indication as to how much has already been considered under the various economic appraisals that are being carried out.

How can we best monitor and evaluate the impact of this framework?

We believe that in order to assess the impact that the funding will have on reducing poverty and social exclusion that a clear set of outcomes need to be established. Monitoring and evaluation needs to be an on-going process, especially given the limited timeframe and budget. We recognise that measuring outcomes around social exclusion can be difficult. When discussing monitoring and evaluation, terminology is vital as people often have differing understandings of how a term should be used. Hence the rationale to have a clear definition on poverty, social exclusion and community development. We would also advocate the need to have a clear set of outcomes against each of the themes, as in its present state, it is very ambiguous.

We would also advocate that DARD baseline poverty, social exclusion and community development in rural areas. It is only through having a reliable baseline that any meaningful measurement of progress against objectives can

happen. Outcomes may prove useful if measured from an understood and identifiable starting point.

Have you any comments/suggestions on the rural proofing, equality impact and social exclusion aspects of this framework.

We are disappointed that an Equality Impact Assessment was not carried out in conjunction with the consultation. The EQIA would provide a mechanism for identifying a clear focus on our most vulnerable. The results of the EQIA could be used as a basis for funding themes under the Rural Challenge Fund.