

Environmental Pillar of Social Partnership

Briefing Paper 1

Introduction

The continuing success of human society and social systems depends fundamentally on the preservation of the overall productivity, health and long term sustainability of the ecosystems and environmental services that underpin and supply many of the most basic components of human welfare such as healthy soils, clean water and clean air. This brief summary introduces some of the issues that the environmental pillar will pursue through Social Partnership in order to protect and enhance these underlying systems and services for this and future generations.

An environmentally sustainable economy

We welcome the recognition in this summer's NESC report that the foundations of a successful society include economic, social and environmental sustainability¹. The interdependence of these three dimensions of sustainability is central to the analysis the environmental pillar brings to Social Partnership. This understanding must underpin how Ireland responds to our current challenges. The reality is that we face two crises, the economic crisis and an even more fundamental ecological crisis. We have been living beyond our means not just fiscally but also environmentally. In the first nine months of this year the human population used more natural resources than the Earth can replace in a whole year. In the same nine month period it also generated more pollution than the Earth can absorb in a whole year. In Ireland we had used our twelve month's fair share by 1st of May². The NESC report itself concludes that in the light of the findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change "the current path of global development poses unacceptable risks."³ On a global basis, the notion of economies based on continuous growth has to be challenged and recognised as the road leading ultimately to the breakdown of human civilization. Infinite growth is not possible on a finite planet. The environmental pillar will work with the other Social Partners to explore how, in the context of a rapidly changing global environment, Ireland positions itself to prosper in a 21st century that will see a shift to a steady state economy. In tackling our immediate economic problems it is essential we choose policies that address rather than exacerbate our environmental problems. Any re-assessment of investment priorities must consider the impact on carbon emissions of each project, as promised in the Programme for Government. Whatever steps the Government takes to stimulate the economy should prioritise initiatives which reduce energy use or which produce it from renewable resources. One example would be a major "warmer homes" scheme to combat fuel poverty, unemployment and carbon emissions through supporting and incentivising the retro-fitting of 1 million homes.

Climate Change

Climate change remains the defining challenge of our age. The environmental pillar shares the NESC's analysis that "addressing it will have far reaching economic and social effects", that Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions target for 2020, yet to be finalised, "will pose considerable challenges" and most significantly that "the move to a low-carbon economy will also create many new economic opportunities."⁴ Ireland and other high-income OECD countries must take responsibility for emissions cuts of 40% by 2020 and aim for a carbon neutral economy by 2050 (net zero emissions), as recommended by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. The environmental pillar is ready to begin close and collaborative work with other Social Partners on mapping the path to such a sustainable future, which must address not just decarbonisation but

¹ NESC report 117, *The Irish Economy in the Early 21st Century*, June 2008, Paragraph 2.2.8

² *Living Planet Report 2008*: http://assets.panda.org/downloads/living_planet_report_2008.pdf

³ NESC report 117, page 267.

⁴ NESC Report 117, page xvi.

also energy security, economic competitiveness and social cohesion. Even so, the climate change we have already caused is likely to have very serious impacts on such fundamentals as food security, water management, coastal management, tree cover, peatland and biodiversity protection, tourism and settlement planning. These mitigation and adaptation challenges both need to be addressed urgently in the light of our own self interest but also because of Ireland's tradition of solidarity with the world's poor who are being hit first and hardest by climate change having done least to cause it.

Biodiversity

The complex relationships between plants and animals must be protected in order to maintain and enhance the stability of our life support systems such as wetlands, tree cover and peatlands. These vital resources protect communities from flooding, improve the quality of our air and water and help us deal with the impacts of climate change. Our very existence, our quality of life and our economy depend on this natural infrastructure. In order to protect Irish biodiversity and the public services it provides, we want to work with other Social Partners to ensure the integration of biodiversity issues into all natural resource and land-use management (including agriculture and forestry), into activities in the marine environment and into our ability to deal with a changing climate – through, for example, adaptation strategies and the development of alternative energy systems.

Planning

The need for proper planning of land use, infrastructure and sustainable communities requires the effective engagement of the public in these critical decision-making processes that affect both their health and the environment. Involvement of the public at the earliest possible point in the full assessment of the impacts on the environment of projects, policies and programmes is an essential part of this. Only through ownership of our futures can a real change towards sustainability come about. There is a clear need here for capacity building at all levels of society. In this context meaningful Strategic Environmental Assessment of all plans, policies and programmes is essential.

Water

The management of water resources is an integral part of environmental management and an essential requirement for the continuing viability of all sections of our society. Although much has been achieved in the last 30 years of Irish water protection, progress is too slow to keep pace with the increase of water use linked to growing development, production and consumption patterns. The environmental pillar will work with the other Social Partners to reduce the impacts of domestic waste, forestry, agriculture and drainage on water quality. To this end the environmental pillar strongly believes that public involvement in water management is not just a legal requirement of the EU Water Framework Directive but essential if a new, sustainable water management path is to be taken.

Waste

Reduction and better management of waste is vital to Ireland's long term environmental, social and economic well-being. The environmental pillar will work with the other Social Partners to break the strong link between economic development and waste generation and sees many opportunities for employment and industry in this. Priority must be given initially to the rapid stabilisation and urgent reduction of levels of waste generation; extended producer responsibility; taking ownership in Ireland for the proper management of wastes produced here; and supporting Ireland's and Europe's recycling industry. The benefits of minimising waste in terms of energy efficiency and greenhouse gas reduction can be significant.

Transport

The promotion of public transport through low cost mechanisms, particularly in urban areas, the intensive promotion of cycling, and the introduction of energy efficient electric powered vehicles, are amongst the mechanisms proposed. Taking freight off the roads onto rail and water will also be an essential part of a sustainable transport future.