Silent People & Other Stories

Tina | Helen & Biddie | Gerry | Sharon | Philip | Limerick | John | Michelle | Michael | Mary | Piotr & Bernadette | Jimmy

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Preface

Historically in Ireland, poverty was a visible, tangible thing that undeniably existed and could be easily identified in our midst. However as Ireland has prospered over the past two decades, the widespread signs of economic strain and hardship have been replaced by the outwards signs of an affluent society.

Standards of living have improved across the board and for many what were previously rare luxuries have become the norm. In this better off society, being able to afford a certain lifestyle is a key indicator of success and belonging. Those that haven't kept pace are in a minority, and people are increasingly judged by what they have or haven't got.

Thankfully, as the economy has grown, poverty levels have fallen. Today, unemployment is no longer the biggest cause of poverty as it was in the early 1990's, and economic growth has presented many people with the chance to escape from poverty and social exclusion.

However, that doesn't make it easier for the 290,000 people (7 per cent of the population) who struggle to make ends meet on a daily basis, and who still live in conditions that were barely acceptable a quarter of a century ago. For them, poverty not only means the absence of basic necessities, it also means being stigmatised and condemned for being poor. Society rarely acknowledges the structural inequalities that hold people back and prevent them from improving their lot. It's much easier to assume that those who are poor in this new Ireland are in some way themselves to blame.

Despite the statistics, the existence of poverty is constantly questioned. This is not surprising when our understanding of poverty is drawn from starving children in the developing world or the experiences of our ancestors in the early 19th century.

Yet this misses the point. In any society, people who are unable to achieve the standards considered the norm by the majority will be alienated and discriminated against. This can have long term consequences for people's health, educational outcomes and employment prospects. It also affects their ability to participate fully in society. Unless poverty is understood in relation to prevailing living standards and appropriate action is taken, people will continue to be marginalised and prevented from reaching their full potential, which in turn will undermine Ireland's long-term social and economic development.

The stories in this book provide a rare and valuable insight into the day to day lives of people across the country who, despite the boom, have not prospered in modern Ireland. Their experiences are by no means unique – each story can be directly linked to a number of structural issues that pre-dispose large groups of people to poverty – educational disadvantage, discrimination, rural isolation, health inequalities. What is unique about these people is their willingness to share their stories. In doing so, they help us to understand the
poverty challenge in 21st century Ireland and mobilise actors towards the necessary policy changes. We are grateful to them for their contribution to this book.

We also thank Susan McKay and Derek Speirs who have effectively captured the human side of poverty in Ireland today through their narrative and photographs.

Foreward

In today's brash and wealthy Ireland, many people harbour the view that those who are poor have only themselves to blame. They point to low unemployment and the fact that there is plenty of work for immigrants, without whom our shops and restaurants and hotels would, it appears, have to close. There are signs up all over the place: "Staff wanted." Sometimes "good English" is all that is asked for, and sometimes, obviously, employers settle for less.

Working people who struggle with long daily commutes from distant suburbs, and who juggle huge childcare bills and a mortgage that threatens to overwhelm them next time interest rates go up, may resent those who are supported by the state. Workers on low pay who just about manage to keep their heads above water may have little patience with those who don't. They may see them as chancers who have no right to expect society to look after them. Some people are particularly resentful of the poor who have come to Ireland from other countries.

Irish society is highly segregated, and becoming more so. The very rich are in their mansions, or living a good part of the year abroad, avoiding the taxes that might pay for better social services back home. *"Exclusive housing developments"* stand well back from the estates where those at risk of poverty live. In gated middle class estates, burglar alarms drive people demented day and night. The building of *"social housing"* is resisted.

In the countryside, small, unviable farms disappear behind forestry and even the postman has little occasion to visit the old man who still lives in the small house where he was born. Meanwhile villages and small towns fill up with *"townhouses"* owned by urban investors. Everywhere, houses get cheaper the closer they are to the local *"rough"* estate.

People who work and cope have little contact then, with those for whom ends just won't meet. If they are dismissive of their plight, it does not mean that Irish people have become hard-hearted - though some of those most driven by the need to succeed and to be seen to succeed, certainly have. It is more that we don't know enough about why individuals in an affluent society fail to prosper, and we do not seem to have the time to care.

Poverty is not a lifestyle choice. Nor is it just about how much money a person has or can get – it is about that person's relationship to the rest of society. While fewer people live in consistent poverty in Ireland today than ten or twenty or fifty years ago, some groups are still likely to be marginalised. They include the homeless, people with disabilities, the elderly, small farmers and lone parents.

Poverty is relative. Access to wealth for a majority of people can leave the minority more acutely excluded. If nine out of ten people living in a village have a car, there will be no pressure on the authorities to provide a public transport service and local shops may close as people drive to town to buy their supplies. The one in ten people with no car are left stranded. If most children in a class at school have access to a computer at home, the child whose family doesn't have one is left out and likely to fall behind.

Poverty is a condition in which people get trapped, often because of a combination of factors, particular to their own lives, and over which they have little control. Each person living with disadvantage has their own story. That is why we have compiled this book. The people you will read about and see here will give you an uncomfortable insight into the situations of some of our fellow citizens who could, like the homeless Michael, honestly declare, *"Celtic Tiger, my backside."*

It wasn't easy to find people who were willing to be photographed and to talk frankly about what it is like to be poor in Ireland today. When there is an overarching phenomenon like high unemployment, there may be a sense of solidarity and communal anger. Campaigns flourish. Today some who have not prospered feel a stigma about their situation, others have just got weary struggling and have given up in despair.

The middle aged men who left as emigrants when hard times were endemic here may return to find they haven't the means or the skills to make a new start and that few people seem to care. As one man put it, *"the men at the top don't believe there are disadvantaged men"* and don't feel any need to provide for them. Such men become *"literally a silent people"*.

There is apathy too. For many Travellers, for example, things have been so bad for so long that an attitude of hopelessness and dependency has descended, expressing itself in a shrug of the shoulders and a "what can you do?" A lack of investment in hostels, social housing and social services means that homeless people are thrown into conflict with one another, and, dangerously, with homeless people who have come into Ireland from other countries.

Lone parents get caught in poverty traps. It is hard to get by without work, but if you try to get training or to take up a job, you risk losing some of the elements that make up the slender means you already have. Sorting it out is complicated. Highly skilled

people with a disability are left unemployed because, as Michelle told us, too many employers *"only see the wheelchair"* and not the person.

There are whole places which have been left behind, where traditional industries have declined and nothing has been done to replace them or to retrain local workers for new jobs. Donegal has four times the national average rate of unemployment and the highest rate of poverty in the country. *"We might as well be in Iceland, for all the government cares,"* according to Gerry, who used to work in the fishing industry before its disastrous decline.

There are places which have got such a *"bad name"* for criminality and lawlessness that the people who live there become tainted by association. No good is expected of them. *"They shouldn't make out everyone is the same,"* said one of the young people we spoke to us in Moyross in Limerick. There are also places like O'Devaney Gardens in Dublin which are afflicted by the hangover from decades of poverty, where addiction to alcohol and heroin has passed from generation to generation, and the only variation today is that cocaine has
come along. Crime and violence inevitably accompany drugs. Everyone living in such places suffers.

The gombeen man and the rack-renting landlord are alive and well in prosperous Ireland, as some of those who have come into Ireland as immigrant workers have found. Piotr and Bernadette's story is shameful. They were exploited and bullied by a local *'pillar of society'* who tried to bribe them into leaving the country once Piotr had tackled him with the help of a trade union.

Things would be a lot worse but for the many excellent self help and community groups which now exist around Ireland. Many of them were set up in far worse times, their continued existence a measure of continuing need. Some of them struggle with tiny budgets, others get substantial state support. We met some of the people we interviewed and photographed through organisations like Trust and Prosper Fingal and Parents Alone. There are fine initiatives like the Department of Justice's Céim ar Chéim in Limerick. Much is being done to help people gain the confidence and sense of self worth they need to change their situation.

Still. As some of the stories in this book show, it can take exceptional courage for individuals who are disadvantaged to keep on fighting for a good life in Ireland today. As one of the wealthiest nations around, we could afford to do so much more.

Combat Poverty and other agencies have already identified persistent problems. They have also made well researched proposals which, if implemented, could make a real difference. There are still too many people in this self congratulatory little country of ours who have to talk, like Michelle, about fighting yet another battle to get things as fundamental as a job and a place to live. And too many people like Sharon, who says of her dream for a better life: *"All I would want is just not to constantly worry, worry, worry."*

The Government has given a commitment to end poverty in the next two decades. If we are to achieve this goal, it will require not only a series of initiatives and technical schemes. It will also require us to understand the lives and misfortunes of those who suffer poverty. If we no longer think of an amorphous 'poor' and begin to consider

individual stories, it becomes possible to react in a more meaningful and human way. This book stands in the belief that if we listen to voices like these, things may begin to change. That will be better for all of us.
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Susan McKay

http://www.combatpoverty.ie/publications/SilentPeopleAndOtherStories_2007.pdf.

The Combat Poverty Agency

The Combat Poverty Agency is an Irish state agency that works as a advisory body to the government. Set up under the Combat Poverty Agency Act 1986, it is a small organisation with 21 staff based in Dublin.

The aim of the Combat Poverty Agency is to promote a more just and inclusive society by working for the prevention and elimination of poverty and social exclusion. The Agency pursues this aim through the four main functions set out in the Combat Poverty Agency Act, 1986: policy advice; project support and innovation; research and public education.

What is Poverty?

People are considered to be living in poverty if their income and resources are so inadequate as to prevent them from enjoying a standard of living, which would be regarded as acceptable by society generally. This understanding of poverty recognises that people have social, cultural and emotional needs, as well as physical and economic needs. Living in poverty is not just about lack of money, it can also mean feeling excluded, isolated, powerless and discriminated against. The Irish government has accepted this multi-dimensional definition of poverty.

Core Understandings

To achieve its aim the Agency is guided by the following understandings:

* Poverty is a structural problem in Irish society. National and local policies and programmes are key to the elimination of poverty.
* The reduction of inequality and the redistribution of resources and opportunities is essential to combating poverty.
* The involvement, empowerment and representation of those affected by poverty is necessary in order to tackle poverty effectively.
* Partnership between government and the social partners (including the community and voluntary sector) at both local and national levels is vital for effective anti-poverty policies and programmes.
* Tackling poverty involves the promotion of social rights for all.
* Policies and programmes to tackle poverty and promote sustainable development should be complementary.
* There is a need for policies and programmes at a European level which complement local and national policies to tackle poverty and social exclusion.

Strategic Plan

A strategic plan outlining priority areas of work for the Agency is published every three years. During the period 1999-2001 the Agency will influence public policy to combat poverty through policy advice, project support and innovation, research and public education. In doing this it will have four key objectives

* to progress the government's National Anti-Poverty Strategy. Launched by the Irish government in 1997, this is an integrated strategy that addresses several areas of policy that effect the lives of people who experience poverty and social exclusion, including income adequacy, educational disadvantage, unemployment, rural poverty and urban disadvantage. It is the first integrated strategy of its kind in Ireland.
* to narrow the gap between rich and poor
* to reduce child poverty
* to link peace and the promotion of social inclusion in the context of the political conflict in Northern Ireland and the border areas of the Republic of Ireland (see Peace and Reconciliation below).

The Agency's Work

Policy Advice

* preparing policy proposals to government on aspects of economic and social planning in relation to poverty, e.g. an annual pre-budget submission, responses to green papers, working groups, commissions or task forces, and advice to government departments.
* supporting the Government's National Anti-Poverty Strategy.

Research

* commissioning and publishing research on poverty related issues
* supporting the development of a research infrastructure in Ireland
* formulating policy proposals and monitoring policy and provision at national level
* providing research and evaluation grants to anti-poverty groups and a fellowship awards programme to Doctoral level students in Ireland.

Project Support

* supporting local community development as an anti-poverty strategy and acting as a national community development resource centre
* strengthening the anti-poverty infrastructure and assisting groups to make the link between practice and policy
* producing resource materials and supporting training for the community and voluntary sector
* supporting an innovative programme to demonstrate integrated responses to educational disadvantage
* working with local authorities to enhance the anti-poverty focus of their work.

Information and Public Awareness

* developing and disseminating accessible information leaflets and publications
* supporting a schools education programme including curriculum development, in-service training for teachers and resource materials
* running a drop-in library with a collection of books, videos, and magazines on poverty, community development and related issues
* promoting media interest and coverage of poverty and related issues
* production of a quarterly journal Poverty Today which is available free of charge
* maintaining a web site (www.cpa.ie)
* running a grant scheme on poverty related issues.

Peace and Reconciliation

The Combat Poverty Agency is also an intermediary body responsible for administering funds under the EU Special Programme for Peace and Reconciliation. These funds are to support projects which will counter social exclusion in the border counties of the Republic and which will promote reconciliation within the border counties and on a cross-border basis with Northern Ireland.

This work is done in partnership with Area Development Management Limited (ADM). CPA and ADM jointly support a full time office in the Monaghan, and a team of development workers in the border counties.

More information about this programme is available from:

Peace and Reconciliation Programme,
Europe House, Dublin Road, Monaghan.
Tel +353 047 71340,
Fax: +353 047 71341

More information on the work of the Combat Poverty Agency is available from:

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