Making food poverty history

Labour’s Blueprint for Eliminating Food Poverty
Contents

Food Poverty: the problem .................................................................3

What Food Poverty is .................................................................5

Incidence of Food Poverty in Ireland .........................................7

Existing Government policies on Food Poverty and their shortcomings . . .10

Food Poverty: What the Labour Party will Do .............................12
Executive Summary

Food Poverty affects up to 20% of the Irish population who do not receive adequate nutrition. It is a problem that affects rich and poor alike. However, the elderly, children, Travellers, the unemployed, asylum seekers, and the disabled are particularly susceptible to Food Poverty.

Current Government initiatives do not address the prevalence of Food Poverty amongst at risk groups or amongst the general population in a co-ordinated or effective fashion.

The Labour Party will introduce a nutrition strategy for everyone in Ireland. We will nutrition-proof all relevant Government policies. We will ensure that every meal delivered using Government funding fulfils nutritional goals. And we will make sure that school children all over Ireland will receive at least one piece of fruit every day.
Food Poverty: the problem

19% of boy-children and 14% of girl-children in Ireland “always or often go to bed hungry”. 270,000 people in Ireland who live in consistent poverty either experience Food Poverty or, along with the almost 800,000 people in Ireland whose level of income means they are “at risk of poverty”, are extremely susceptible to Food Poverty.

The ESRI has recently reported that 1/14th of the Irish population (about 285,000 people) are vulnerable to maximal deprivation meaning they exhibit high risks of deprivation across a range of life-style deprivation dimensions, including ones related to Food Poverty. However, Food Poverty does not only affect those officially classed as “poor”. Recent research by NUI Galway for the WHO found that nearly 16% of middle-class children reported experiencing Food Poverty. The same research also reported that nearly 15% of children from higher social classes also experience Food Poverty. This is a problem of famine-like proportions which needs to be addressed in a resourced and targeted manner. The Labour Party is committed to ending Food Poverty and the following document constitutes our road map for achieving this.
What Food Poverty is

Ireland together with the other signatories of the UN International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 1966 promised in Article 11 that it shall take the measures which are needed “to ensure an equitable distribution of world food supplies in relation to need”.

Ireland is a party to the Food and Agriculture Organisation’s 1992 World Declaration on Nutrition which acknowledged “that access to nutritionally adequate and safe food is a right of each individual” and recognised that “globally there is enough food for all and that inequitable access is the main problem”.

So, at its most basic, the experience of Food Poverty in Ireland is a breach of individuals’ rights in International Law.

In nutritional terms, Food Poverty is defined as the consumption of food whose nutritional content is too low to provide its consumers with their basic nutritional requirements so that their health, cultural and social participation is adversely affected.

Obese people, for instance, can consume a lot of food, yet still be deprived of the essential nutrition they need to remain healthy.

Being Food Poor - being without an adequately nutritious diet - impacts not only on the health and well-being of individuals and households. But also, so recent research in Ireland and the UK demonstrates, Food Poverty impacts on the social behaviour of poor households and their dependents.

One of the primary components of a solution to Food Poverty is for Government to ensure that everyone can access affordable and nutritious food, wherever they live.

Another part of the solution is the provision of information about which foods in what quantities provide people with sufficient nutrition without adversely affecting their health.
Implementing a solution to Food Poverty, both locally and internationally, throws up many of the same obstacles, in a variety of apparently un-connected public policy areas, such as Planning; such as Justice; such as Healthcare, of course, but also in Public Transport, or Governments’ (and of course the EU) Agriculture policy, and Food labelling regulations.

In the Labour Party we don’t doubt that the solution to Food Poverty in Ireland is achievable. In Government we will put into place certain policies outlined in the final section of this document so that all those who experience Food Poverty in Ireland no longer have to do so.
Incidence of Food Poverty in Ireland

The incidence of Food Poverty in Ireland is well documented. St. Vincent De Paul, Cross Care and Combat Poverty presented a survey in 2004 of the Ireland-specific research on Food Poverty.

The concept of Consistent Poverty as a way of measuring poverty takes into account both the level of income and being deprived of basic items because of an inability to afford them. In the current definition of Consistent Poverty in Ireland three of the eight basic deprivation items are food-related. Given the significance of food in the basic deprivation indicators it is reasonable to assume that households living in Consistent Poverty are seriously at risk of experiencing Food Poverty.

6.8 per cent of the population lived in consistent poverty in 2004 which equates to 272,000 people. Many of the 19.4 per cent of the population in 2004 – 776,000 people – whose level of income means they are classified as being “at risk” of poverty already would be experiencing Food Poverty. Households which experience the highest levels of consistent poverty include lone parent households (31.1%); families with large numbers of children (9.6%); and persons living alone (9.9%).

It is worth noting that other kinds of people who may not be living in Consistent Poverty might still be susceptible to Food Poverty. For instance, the elderly who might be unable or unwilling to cook for themselves although they have the material resources, such as money or transport to shops, necessary to purchase food with adequate nutritional content. Other individuals, apart from children and the elderly, who are part of the following groups have also been found to be more susceptible to Food Poverty than others: the homeless, the unemployed, Travellers, asylum seekers, the disabled, and rural dwellers.

Some of the common obstacles which people who are vulnerable to Food Poverty face in trying to exercise their right to adequate nutrition:

Old age can bring immobility, disability and frailty and these can turn every day tasks, such as trips to the shops and cooking a meal into insurmountable challenges.
As part of a recent Living in Ireland survey 7.7% of mothers stated their children had to go without three meals a day because of a lack of money.

A study made of those who are homeless in Galway found only 50% of the people who are homeless comply with the recommended two servings of meat, fish and poultry a day. A nutrient analysis of the reported food intake among this population identified lower than recommended levels of calcium, folate, fibre, riboflavin and vitamin E. This study highlights a number of structural issues, namely lack of finances and lack of physical access to cooking facilities, which impact upon their dietary intake.

The findings of a 1989 study of the dietary habits of the unemployed were substantially similar to a secondary analysis of data relating to unemployed respondents in the 1998 SLAN survey. Mean intakes of fibre are below the recommended minimum value per day. Unemployed respondents (particularly males) consume diets with high levels of breads, cereals, potatoes and vegetables, but low fruit intake.

Of the 24,000 Travellers in Ireland, approximately 1000 Traveller families, according to Government figures, live on the roadside without the most basic facilities such as sanitation and electricity. To date there has been little research carried out on the actual food and nutritional intake of Travellers. But one study of over five different halting sites and which included 421 Travellers found that three quarters of respondents did not plan their meals on a weekly basis. More than a third of participants felt that the lack of a fridge was a reason meals weren’t planned.

Research carried out for the Irish Refugee Council found asylum seekers, due to factors such as being excluded from working, from social networks, having little income or capital and weakened family networks were at risk of Food Poverty. ‘Direct Provision’ whereby asylum seekers receive only small amounts of cash together with their accommodation and full-board has led, according to this research, to malnutrition amongst expectant mothers; ill health related to diet amongst babies; weight loss amongst children; and hunger amongst recipients, as a result of only eating what they’re provided with by the State.
The Disabled are at greater risk of poverty due to their exclusion from participation in paid employment. Two thirds of households headed by a person who is ill or disabled were below the 60% poverty line in 2001. Unequal access to transport is another factor that would exacerbate their risk of experiencing Food Poverty.

Rural dwellers, particularly those who farm non-viable farms are also at risk of Food Poverty. According to Government figures there are 60,400 farms in Ireland which are not economically viable and which have no other source of income other than that gained through farming. These figures reveal – indeed, conceal - an enormous amount of poverty, including Food Poverty.

So taken together the case for Food Poverty in Ireland is just as compelling as the case for Food Poverty existing in countries such as Ethiopia or Sudan. Although people don’t die of starvation in the same way as they do in famine hit parts of the Majority World, there is no doubt that people’s life expectancies are significantly shortened in Ireland as a result of having experienced Food Poverty.
Existing Government policies on Food Poverty and their shortcomings

It wouldn’t be right to say nothing is being done in Ireland to combat Food Poverty. In fact, there are quite a number of disparate programmes which the Government either operates or funds. The Labour Party, however, believes we need a coordinated approach to combating Food Poverty and in the final part of this document we will set out our approach to the problem.

There have been increases in social welfare payments direct to members of many groups which are vulnerable to Food Poverty. However, Food Poverty is not only about financial capacity. So even if social welfare payments were doubled there would still be a persistent number of people who would not be accessing adequate nutritious food because, for instance, the only shops a disabled or elderly person can access may not sell appropriately nutritious food at affordable prices, or at all. Or maybe they, or a family member who has control of the purse strings, suffer from alcoholism or drug addiction so that notwithstanding social welfare increases their children still would suffer from Food Poverty. In 2004 the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice reported that there was a shortfall of 23 Euros a week for a family comprising one parent and two children who live on social welfare, and who might want to live at the lowest internationally accepted standard of living.

For the elderly the Department of Health and Children, through the HSE, provides some funding for meals-on-wheels. Those in receipt of the meals pay some money and in return they receive meals prepared and delivered by voluntary organisations. However, we are far from a situation of universal access to meals-on-wheels for those who want and need them.

For children, two of the main programmes funded from central government are the ‘School Meals Programme’ and the ‘Local School Meals Projects Scheme’, whereby the Department provides grants to parents, teachers and voluntary organisations which undertake to provide meals to children.

There are, at least, three reasons why these schemes make virtually no in-roads into combating Food Poverty amongst children.
Firstly, the amount of spend per child per year in the School Meals Programme works out at 64.95 Euros; that’s per-year!; and in the Local School Meals Projects Scheme funding works out at 238.44 euros per child per year.

The second problem, relates to the fact that there is no nutritional aim delivered by these programmes. If the State funded school meal is the only meal that child has all day, then, it should meet some sort of nutritional objective and not just be ‘what we’ve always given the childer’.

The third reason why these programmes are not fulfilling the significant role Government ministers are only too willing to trumpet them as fulfilling is that in 2003 a comprehensive Review of these programmes was carried out which concluded “the current scheme does not provide an efficient or effective policy response to the need identified”. And despite their promises to implement that review’s recommendations neither the Department of Social and Family Affairs, nor the Department of Education and Science have actually done so.

Although much money is being expended on trying to ensure Ireland fulfils its international human rights obligations in respect of the Traveller community, it is doubtful much if any of it has been spent specifically on addressing the particular problems Travellers face in eating properly. Many Traveller families do not have fridges, they have problems entering many shops around the country, and when levels of educational provision for Travellers who choose to live on the road are pitiful – recent research found that 73% of Traveller girl-children between twelve and eighteen were not being educated – knowing what constitutes nutritious food, even if they can afford to buy it or store it, is a further obstacle.

There are also piecemeal schemes such as the Diet Supplement that certain categories of people are entitled to. However, it is almost insultingly low. For instance, someone whose only means is the supplementary allowance would receive less than ten extra Euros a week, if their doctor certifies them as needing a high protein diet.
And, of course, there are a large number of very dedicated and effective NGOs which are trying to address Food Poverty in Ireland. For instance, Focus Ireland’s low-cost cafeteria. Focus Ireland also teaches cooking skills, budget and home management. Cross Care’s Food Centres which through its cafeteria’s try, not only to give the needy access to food, but also to articulate a flavour of the social dimension of food. And the current Healthy Food for All Initiative.

However, it is important to note that although NGOs do great work in this area, they are not legally responsible for ensuring Food Poverty in Ireland is eliminated, nor, naturally, do they have the capacity to do so.
Food Poverty: What the Labour Party will Do

- We will develop Ireland’s first multi-sectoral policy on Food and Nutrition. This policy on Food and Nutrition will not just take into account the needs of obese children (as current Government nutrition policy does), but also the needs of other categories of people susceptible to experiencing Food Poverty, such as Travellers, women, the homeless, the unemployed, the elderly, rural dwellers, migrants and the disabled.

- We will ‘nutrition’ proof all relevant Government policies.

- Labour in Government will extend the provision of free meals, which fulfil evidence-based nutritional goals to every primary school child and every secondary school child in Ireland who needs them.

- We will identify the gaps within which voluntary groups are not providing school meals and meals-on-wheels and initiate the provision of food itself where such gaps exist.

- We shall set minimum nutritional standards for each meal delivered by statutory or voluntary services, targeted at those at risk of Food Poverty. Hospital food, meals on wheels, school provided food will be required to be of a nutritional content which is consistent with guidelines, if that food is a person’s only nutritious food that day. The implementation of the HACCP system for “Safe Food” by the Food Safety Authority of Ireland in collaboration with the Health Boards’ Environmental Health Service represents a model for the implementation of minimum nutritional standards.

- Labour in Government will concentrate on combating the inequities in food distribution which are a dominant determining cause of Food Poverty in Ireland. Under the next Labour Government, the Department for Agriculture, Food and Rural Development would, in cooperation with the Minister responsible for Food Safety and Nutrition, consider questions about the impact of its food production policies on consumption patterns and Food Poverty in Ireland, as a part of every funding decision it makes.

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We shall introduce a “Food and Health and Action Plan” to benefit groups most at risk from poor health through dietary deficiency by addressing the issue on a number of levels: at the level of food production, manufacture and preparation; at the level of promoting awareness of the benefits of accessing healthier food by, among other things, providing information for consumers about what constitutes healthy eating and nutrition.

We will carry out detailed investigations to develop and implement policies and strategic plans for the people who form part of the groups most susceptible to Food Poverty.

We will provide school children all over Ireland with at least one piece of fruit a day.

We will generate maps at the level of every local authority in Ireland which contain information about, for instance, distance to shops, travelling time and ease of use, cost and availability of healthy food and which employ quantitative and qualitative survey instruments with Geographic Information System software to map the extent of Food Poverty in Ireland, before we can address it in all its dimensions.

We will investigate the feasibility of rolling-out programmes which teach basic cooking skills and increase knowledge about food to everyone who would like to avail of such programmes.

We will also explore the feasibility of policies through which shops in areas of Food Poverty would, in fulfilling certain conditions relating to the cost and availability of certain foods, might be entitled to rates’ discounts.

We shall expand the Food Bank system so it manages surplus, as well as contributions under the social contribution scheme model (eg. allowing donors to commit to supply goods of a specified value and allow the Food Bank to select from among their products those most appropriate to meet the needs of its clients).

Promote the existence of community led food gardens/allotments/local food co-ops, local transport systems, community cafes.