Poverty and Equality: 
Ten reasons why anyone who wants to Combat Poverty should Embrace Equality as well

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Introduction
Many people believe that there is an important distinction between the issues of poverty and equality. They think that the alleviation of poverty is a more limited, attainable, justifiable and urgent aim than the promotion of equality. The two aims are not necessarily considered incompatible, but equality is seen as a secondary, remote and utopian project which can distract us from the serious business of eliminating poverty.

I argue below that there is no such need to distinguish between these two goals: that anyone serious about eliminating poverty should pursue a more ambitious egalitarian agenda. The first step is to say something very briefly about the concepts of poverty and equality. I then put forward ten arguments to show that anyone who wants to combat poverty should endorse equality as well. I conclude by considering some objections and outlining some implications for policy.¹

Dimensions of Equality
Although there is a well-known debate about the concept of poverty, we are in the relatively fortunate position here in Ireland of having a broad consensus on its definition. The consensus is expressed in the National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS) like this:

People are living in poverty if their income and resources (material, cultural and social) are so inadequate as to preclude them from having a standard of living which is regarded as acceptable by Irish society generally. As a result of inadequate income and resources people may be excluded and marginalised from participating in activities which are considered the norm for other people in society. (Government of Ireland 1997, 3)

That is the definition I employ below, although I return to its critics before ending.

There is an equally extensive literature on the definition of equality, but no similar consensus in Ireland or elsewhere. In my view, equality has a number of inter-related but conceptually distinct dimensions. Quite how to characterise these is open to question and probably varies according to one’s purposes, but for this discussion it is useful to distinguish five key dimensions of equality. They have to do with:

1. the egalitarian distribution of resources;
2. equality of opportunity;
3. equal respect and recognition;
4. equality in power relations; and
5. equality in relations of care, love and solidarity.

Let me say a little about each of these in turn (for fuller, similar presentations, see Baker 1998, 2000; Lynch, Baker and Cantillon 2001). The first idea is the egalitarian distribution of resources, or what might (with some reservations) be called economic equality. Economic equality is difficult to characterise. For a start, resources include not just income and wealth, but also access to public services. Moreover, an egalitarian distribution is not necessarily a strictly equal distribution. Everyone recognises that equality must pay attention to differences in need, implying that some people ought to have more resources than others. In addition, I would argue that an egalitarian distribution must also be sensitive to differences in work, so that people who work longer or harder are entitled to higher incomes, provided that these income differences do no more than compensate them for the extra burdens they have taken on. Regardless of these complications, I think we can safely assume that an egalitarian distribution of resources would involve a much more equal distribution of income, wealth and access to public services than we have at the moment. The economic inequalities in Irish society are seriously unjust. That is the central idea to keep in mind for what follows.

**Equal opportunity** has a number of interpretations. Its most basic meaning is non-discrimination. If you’ve been barred from a pub because you’re a Traveller, you’ve been denied equal opportunity in this first sense. A stronger idea, which the philosopher John Rawls calls ‘fair equality of opportunity’, is the principle that people should not be advantaged or hurt by their social background, and that their prospects in life should depend entirely on their own effort and abilities (Rawls 1971, 73). If you got a better education and ended up in a better job than other people because you came from a well-off family, you have benefited from inequality of opportunity in this second sense. A still stronger view, which might be called equality of real options or real choices, means enabling everyone to develop their talents and abilities, and providing everyone with a real choice among activities that they find satisfying or fulfilling, including a range of combinations of paid and unpaid work. If you find yourself stuck in a meaningless, tedious job, you know what inequality of opportunity in this third sense involves. I refer to all three interpretations of equal opportunity below.

The idea of equal respect and recognition might also be called cultural equality or, more explicitly, ‘critical inter-culturalism’. It is the principle that we should celebrate individual and cultural differences while at the same time engaging critically with others in an open and dialogical spirit, recognising that both our own cultural assumptions and those of others are open to challenge. The person who openly despises Jews or Muslims is reinforcing cultural inequality. But so, too, are upstanding, middle class people who are smugly superior about their own world view.

Equality of power—political equality—is a principle of radical democracy in all areas of society. It means, first of all, the promotion of a stronger, more participatory form of politics in which ordinary citizens, and particularly groups who have been excluded from power altogether, can have more control over decision-making. Secondly, it means challenging power in other areas, such as the economy, the family, education and religion. The wife who resists a domineering husband, the child who stands up to an authoritarian teacher, and the worker who opposes the dictates of management are all part of the struggle for equality of power.

A final key dimension of equality has to do with relations of love, care and solidarity. This idea of affective equality has not been thoroughly explored by egalitarian
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theorists, but it is a dimension that deserves more attention. Such relations matter profoundly to both individuals and society generally. If our society systematically makes it harder for some people to engage in relations of love, care and solidarity than for others, that is a matter of social justice that ought to concern us. (For further discussion, see Lynch, Baker and Cantillon 2001.)

Having spelled out these five key dimensions of equality, my object in the next section can be expressed more precisely. It is to provide ten reasons for believing that even if our primary aim is to eliminate poverty, we will achieve this better if we also work for real equality of opportunity, and for full economic, cultural, political and affective equality.²

Dimensions of Equality: Summary

Economic equality: The egalitarian distribution of resources
Equal opportunity:
  Non-discrimination
  ‘Fair’ equal opportunity
  Equality of real options
Cultural equality: Equal respect and recognition
Political equality: Equality in power relations
Affective equality: Equality in relations of care, love and solidarity

Reasons for connecting poverty and equality

Reason 1: Relieving poverty is intrinsically redistributive.

The first and most obvious connection between poverty and equality is that allocating resources to the relief of poverty necessarily means that poor people get more, and better-off people less, than would otherwise be the case. We should not think of this as taking from the privileged some resources which are rightfully theirs and giving them to the poor, since that implies that the privileged are entitled to those resources in the first place. But we should recognise that every anti-poverty action necessarily entails a greater equality of resources than would have occurred otherwise. To this extent, it is conceptually impossible to distinguish relieving poverty from promoting equality. At a national level, it is clear that the elimination of poverty would involve a very substantial

² The five key dimensions of equality can generate a more general statement of the problem with which we started. Within each dimension, it is natural to distinguish what might be considered a minimum standard of provision from the idea of full equality. And it might be said that it is surely more urgent, attainable and justifiable to ensure that everyone reaches these minimum standards in their lives than to achieve full equality. The argument below could be adapted to answer this generalised view, by claiming that even if our primary aim is to ensure the minimum, we achieve this better by aiming at equality as well. But to do so would make for a more complicated and less accessible discussion.
increase in resources for, say, the poorest 20% of the population, with correspondingly lower resources for the privileged. If we widen our vision to a global context, it is easy to see that the relief of world poverty would entail a massive increase in the resources of the poor–resources which would otherwise be appropriated by the well-off.

Although this argument is important, it has a limited reach. It certainly shows that relieving poverty right away–this week, this year–would require a much more equal distribution of resources. But it does not refute the claim that economic growth allows us to eliminate poverty over time without reducing inequality. To do so, we need to move to additional arguments.

Reason 2: The ‘poverty line’ is a function of the overall inequality in society.

A second connection between poverty and equality has to do with the way poverty has been defined: in terms of the resources necessary for ‘a standard of living which is regarded as acceptable by Irish society generally’ and for ‘participating in activities which are considered the norm for other people in society’. These very phrases suggest that poverty is a matter of distance from the average standard of living in society, even if it is not quite so simple as calculating straight percentages of income. It follows that there is a broad convergence between promoting equality and eliminating poverty, since both policies involve the narrowing of the gap between the worst off and the average. But this reason, like the first, is so obvious as to be relatively trivial. The other reasons are less so.

Reason 3: Equal opportunity improves the prospects for working a way out of poverty.

It is taken for granted in anti-poverty circles that for most people the best route out of poverty is through paid work. Although social welfare benefits or their equivalent, such as a guaranteed Basic Income, should lift people out of poverty, they are unlikely to provide more than a meagre standard of living that is at the margins of poverty. But poor people cannot work their way out of poverty unless they have the opportunities to do so. Those opportunities include both education and training, on the one hand, and prospects for employment on the other. To be sure, a certain amount can be accomplished in this regard without opportunities being anything like equal. Poor people can be discriminated against; their schools and training facilities can be inferior; their prospects for decent and satisfying work can be far worse–all that is consistent with some movement from welfare to work, as American experience in particular has clearly taught us.

But the greater the equality of opportunity, in all three of its meanings, the more likely it is that poor people will enter the workforce in a way that operates effectively against poverty in the long run. This is first of all a matter of equal access to work, since discrimination still operates against poor people seeking employment, and there is nothing in our equality legislation which prohibits an employer from discriminating against someone because of their class background. It is secondly about fair equal opportunities for education, since the marginal, low-skilled jobs available to people with limited educational credentials are precisely those least likely to lift anyone out of poverty and most vulnerable to an economic downturn. It is, thirdly, about equality of real occupational choice, since the best way to get people into work is to offer them highly skilled, satisfying employment.
Another connection between poverty and equal opportunity is more political. The greater the degree of equal opportunity, the more likely it is that people from poor backgrounds will come to occupy positions in which they can significantly influence public policy. Not all of them will exercise a progressive influence, but it stands to reason that the greater the representation of people from poor backgrounds in the privileged sectors of society, the more attention will be given to the problems of poverty.

It follows that the relief of poverty, and in particular the effectiveness of welfare-to-work, depends on the degree to which we can achieve equal opportunity, with each form of equal opportunity adding to the prospects of success.

Reason 4: Equal opportunity depends on economic, cultural, political and affective equality.

If the relief of poverty depends on equality of opportunity, we need to ask what equal opportunity itself depends on. Like the distinction between poverty and equality, it is common enough to distinguish between equality of opportunity and what is sometimes called equality of outcome, and to prioritise the one over the other. But in this case, the interdependence is even more striking. It is abundantly clear to any careful observer that we will never have equal opportunity until we have a society which is much more equal economically, culturally, politically and affectively. One reason for this is that the economically and culturally privileged will always find ways of advantaging their children in an unequal society. Whether it is through fee-paying schools, or the purchase of educational extras on the private market, or the direct transfer of academic skills within the family, or the provision of foreign travel, or networks of contacts in the economy, or any of the other advantages that privileged people are capable of passing on to their children, it is clear that equal opportunity is a myth in a context of massive inequality. It is, no doubt, a very useful myth—for those of us who are privileged! It means, for example, that we can use the points system to pretend that our children deserve their places in higher education, and that we can use the idea of merit to pretend that they deserve their high-paying jobs.

I am not blaming individual privileged people for their energetic defence of unequal opportunities. It is a perfectly rational strategy in an unequal society. After all, social mobility up entails social mobility down. And which of us, rich or poor, would voluntarily expose our children to the risk of poverty? This is, in my view, the less obvious reason why equal opportunity is a myth in our kind of society: because inequality itself gives privileged people a compelling reason for ensuring that their own children have as great a prospect of success in life as they can possibly arrange. Inequality provides both the motive and the means for the privileged to sustain inequality of opportunity. It is no wonder that we use our economic, cultural and political advantages to do just that.

So far I have said little about affective equality, partly because we are far less familiar with patterns of inequality in this dimension. But we can surely say this much: that inequalities in people’s access to relations of love, care and solidarity have got to have implications for their prospects of overall success in life. If we want equal opportunity in any robust form, we need also to pay attention to those affective inequalities which stand in its way.
If the relief of poverty requires greater equality of opportunity, and if greater equality of opportunity requires greater economic, cultural, political and affective equality, then the relief of poverty requires these as well. That is the fourth connection between poverty and equality.

**Reason 5: The prospect of effective anti-poverty measures depends on greater equality of power.**

Independently of the argument we have just considered, it is clear that inequalities of power play a crucial role in perpetuating poverty. At one level, this is as simple as the fact that the poor have much less influence on government than the rich. They are neither a cohesive nor effective political force and have none of the bargaining power of the privileged in their dealings with the state. But as I pointed out earlier, powerlessness goes beyond the realm of formal politics. It appears in the legal system, where the poor face greater risks of imprisonment and its consequences for continuing poverty. It appears in the welfare system, where bureaucratic power can sometimes do more to reinforce poverty than to relieve it. It appears in the workplace, where the power of employers operates to keep people in low-paid, dead-end, dangerous jobs. It appears in the educational system, where power operates to sustain the class structure of society. It appears in the family, where the power of men over women and of parents over children can sometimes work in a way that deepens the poverty of both women and children.

It follows that if we are serious about the relief of poverty, we have to be serious about empowering poor people—about fighting the inequalities of power which operate to keep poor people in their place.

**Reason 6: The prospect of effective poverty relief depends on greater equality of respect and recognition.**

The sixth connection between poverty and equality parallels and interacts with the issue of power. In our society, the lack of respect and recognition that the privileged have for the poor has many facets. One is stereotyping, the belief that the poor have certain common, negative characteristics like laziness and lack of self-discipline. Another is cultural imperialism, the belief that the values and understandings of the privileged are right for everyone, and that such different values and understandings as are held by working class people, by Travellers, by immigrants, by gays and lesbians, by disabled people—by anyone who is ‘different’—are to be disparaged, and educated out of them. A third facet is invisibility, the tendency of the privileged to act as though poor people simply do not exist, aided and abetted by isolating them geographically and ignoring them in the mass media. A fourth facet is internalised oppression, a lack of self respect and a feeling of isolation, alienation and uselessness among poor people themselves (Young 1990; O’Neill 1992).

It is easy to see that such cultural inequality operates to perpetuate and reinforce poverty. If the privileged cannot even see the poor, or if when they do see them can only despise and pity them, what chance is there that the voices of the poor will be heard, and heard accurately, by those in power? If poor people are treated as second class citizens and are stereotyped and disparaged, what chance is there that they will be permitted to participate in the activities others take for granted? If they are alienated from society, blame themselves for their condition and feel powerless to change it, what chance is there of any change at all? Without greater cultural equality, the prospects of a
serious assault on poverty are bound to be weak. Thus the struggle against poverty has
to be linked to the struggle for equal respect and recognition–for the acceptance and
valuing of difference.

Reason 7: The more people care about equality, the more will be done to eliminate
poverty. And the more unequal our society, the less people will care about either
poverty or equality.

A seventh set of connections between poverty and equality operates through people’s
commitments and motivations. It is a truism that reality usually falls short of
expectations—that whatever we aim for, we are likely to achieve less. It follows that if
we aim only at the relief of poverty, rather than at the more demanding goal of equality,
we are likely to be less successful in achieving that very objective. If poverty relief
alone is our goal, we are likely to be pretty happy about cutting the number of
‘consistently poor’ people in half. But if equality is our goal, that target is going to look
like a rather feeble first step.

A related reason for caring about equality and not just poverty is that our efforts are less
likely to be sapped by disputes about what counts as poverty (Dworkin 2000, 3). If
poverty relief is our goal, then the definition of poverty is obviously a crucial concern.
Governments will try to look good by defining poverty in a restricted way, while their
critics will go for a more expansive definition. Of course, similar conflicts occur over
the definition of equality, but they concern a higher target. Aiming at equality shifts the
whole policy space upwards, in a way that is bound to be helpful to the poor.

A third aspect of this set of relationships has to do with the conditions for social
solidarity. There is of course no simple relationship between public sentiment and social
realities, but it stands to reason that the greater the degree of inequality in a society, the
less the privileged are likely to care about either poverty or inequality. This is partly
because such concerns raise serious doubts about the legitimacy of privilege, and so are
deeply uncomfortable for privileged people to entertain. It is also a matter of social
distance and segregation, making it easier for poor people to be stereotyped and
disparaged. Government policies which increase inequality, such as cutting the higher
rate of income tax and reducing capital gains tax, strengthen the assumption that the
privileged have no serious obligations to their fellow citizens–that the state has no right
to transfer ‘their’ money to the poor. Imagine, by contrast, an egalitarian society that is
proud of its egalitarianism, in which political discourse taps into and fosters feelings of
interdependence and solidarity. In that kind of society, support for the elimination of
poverty and the promotion of equality would be a matter of course.

It follows that a society which wants to eliminate poverty will do a better job at doing
so if it has a strong commitment to a wider egalitarian agenda, and that that
commitment will itself be stronger in a more egalitarian society.

Reason 8: If poverty relief depends on growth, then it depends on greater equality.

It is widely believed that the relief of poverty depends on economic growth. Whether
that belief is justified is open to question, for various reasons. One problem is that
economic growth can merely shift the ‘poverty line’ upwards, because it changes what
is considered an acceptable standard of living. Another is that growth carries its own
negative effects, such as environmental degradation and new forms of stress. But it is
plausible to suppose that growth in some sense—particularly in the sense of increased productivity—can be helpful in relieving poverty. The question then arises of the relationship between growth and equality. For a long time it was assumed by economists that growth depended on inequality. They assumed, for example, that inequality was necessary to provide the incentive for investment, technical innovation and hard work. There is now a growing body of evidence for alternative views: that economic growth is fostered by equality, or at least that growth relieves poverty more effectively in more equal societies (UNDP 1997, 73; UNDP 2001, 17; Ferreira 1999). The reasons for these associations are no doubt complex, and open to debate. But if the relief of poverty does depend on growth, and if poverty-relieving growth does depend on greater equality, then there is an eighth connection between poverty and equality.

Reason 9: If the prospects for growth are limited, then poverty can only be relieved by greater equality.

Let us now consider the possibility that we are coming up against the limits to economic growth. These limits are most strongly evident in environmental constraints: in the depletion of fossil fuels, the problem of global warming, the dangers of nuclear power, the crisis in industrial agriculture and so on. In a no-growth economy, we would have to give up the belief that growth itself will eliminate poverty, that a rising tide will lift all boats (Cohen 1995, 9-12). There would then be no alternative to redistribution—to pursuing greater equality. The eighth and ninth reasons together seem to cover all the options. If growth is possible, and necessary for poverty relief, then we probably need greater equality. If growth is either impossible or unnecessary for poverty relief, then we definitely need greater equality.

Reason 10: The central arguments for eliminating poverty are arguments for equality.

We come now to my last connection between poverty and equality. It is that our reasons for deploring poverty are also reasons for the more radical agenda of equality. Why, after all, should we care about poverty? Because we recognise the value of every human being. Because we think that every person is entitled to a decent life. Because we feel compassion for, and solidarity with, others in need. But why should we limit these concerns to the elimination of poverty? Why should our empathy with others stop at the poverty line? Why should we think that the mere escape from poverty is enough of an aim for anyone’s life? Is it enough for your own life, or for your own children’s lives?

Of course the ending of poverty is a worthwhile aim, and an urgent one. But if the moral basis of resistance to poverty lies in the equal value of every human being and in our complex interconnections, then we have to recognise that this reasoning goes beyond the anti-poverty principle. It supports the stronger aim of equality.

Poverty and Equality: Summary

1. Relieving poverty is intrinsically redistributive.
2. The ’poverty line’ is a function of the overall inequality in society.
3. Equal opportunity improves the prospects for working a way out of poverty.
4. Equal opportunity depends on economic, cultural, political and affective equality.
5. The prospect of effective anti-poverty measures depends on greater equality of power.
6. The prospect of effective poverty relief depends on greater equality of respect and recognition.
7. The more people care about equality, the more will be done to eliminate poverty. And the more unequal our society, the less people will care about either poverty or equality.
8. If poverty relief depends on growth, then it depends on greater equality.
9. If the prospects for growth are limited, then poverty can only be relieved by greater equality.
10. The central arguments for eliminating poverty are arguments for equality.

Counter-arguments

If there are ten reasons—at least—for linking poverty and equality, there are also some objections to doing so. In this section I focus on three of them.

Objection 1: ‘Poverty isn’t socially relative.’

The first objection is that the consensus definition of poverty is mistaken. Poverty is not a matter of what a society regards as acceptable and normal, but of basic, universal needs. On that account of so-called ‘absolute’ poverty, we can easily relieve poverty without any great commitment to equality.

This objection would work against my second reason for linking poverty and equality, but would have little impact on the others. It remains the case that a serious commitment to the relief of even ‘absolute’ poverty on a world scale would involve a massive allocation of resources to the poor. More importantly, all the other reasons for connecting the relief of poverty to greater equality of opportunity and to greater economic, cultural, political and affective equality remain valid. So even if we were to concede the distinction between ‘relative’ and ‘absolute’ poverty—which we should not—it would have little impact on the argument.

Objection 2: ‘Experience shows that we can reduce poverty amidst increasing inequality.’

What may seem the easiest reply to my arguments is that however plausible they sound, they are refuted by the facts. In particular, we have in recent years witnessed both a decrease in Irish poverty and an increase in Irish inequality.

Part of the difficulty with this argument is that it depends on how the agreed idea of poverty is measured. Poverty has been going down according to the measure adopted by the NAPS global target, which includes ‘basic deprivation’, but it has been going up according to a simpler ‘relative income’ measure of poverty (Layte et al 2000). One of the questions which has already arisen in response to these facts is whether the list of basic deprivation indicators needs to be revised so that it continues to capture the agreed
concept of poverty. But this is a familiar dispute. The other issues raised above are harder to sort out.

One aspect of the problem concerns the choice between relieving poverty now and postponing this till later. Even if it is true that economic growth has led to less poverty than we had in, say, 1971, that is not much solace to the people who were poor in 1971, half of whom are probably dead now. Poverty relief without redistribution is a delaying tactic that protects the rich at the expense of the poor.

Another consideration is that although Irish incomes have become more unequal (Nolan et al 2000), there has arguably been a decline in some other key inequalities. Most importantly, it can be argued that the development of social partnership and the inclusion of the community pillar in national negotiations have been small but real advances in political equality that have helped to counterbalance increased economic inequality. In addition, partly as an effect of the economic boom and partly as a result of legislation, there has probably been a relative increase in the educational and employment opportunities open to poor people. It is hard to judge whether there has been any accompanying increase in cultural equality, but there are some indications that the dominant culture in Ireland has become a bit more tolerant.

At the same time, growing economic inequality in Ireland and globally seems to continue to inhibit rather than facilitate the relief of poverty. To take an obvious example, the resources which have been used to cut capital gains tax might have been used to reduce poverty instead. Moreover, greater economic inequality will eventually and inevitably worsen inequalities of opportunity, with attendant effects on the ability of poor people to work their way out of poverty and to influence state policy. We are also entitled to consider how the increase in economic inequality will affect people’s commitment to social justice, as well as its impact on the prospects for continued economic growth.

We are a long way from eradicating poverty in Ireland. Although we have made a little progress, the evidence is far too weak to show that we can end poverty without tackling inequality. The case for linking poverty and equality remains strong.

**Objection 3: ‘Eliminating poverty may require greater equality, but it does not require full equality.’**

A final objection to my arguments is that they purport to prove too much. Perhaps they do show that the struggle against poverty has to be linked to the pursuit of much more equality, but they do not show that we need anything like full equality.

I mention this ‘objection’ only to accept it. It is doubtful that the elimination of poverty requires full equality: the arguments for equality have to go beyond what I have said here.³ What I hope to have shown is that the relief of poverty requires much more equality than we have. If I have succeeded in that aim, I am happy to concede that these arguments alone do not prove the value of full equality.

³ I have set out some of the arguments in Baker 1987 and 1998.
### Objections and replies: summary

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<th>Objection</th>
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<tr>
<td>‘Poverty isn’t socially relative.’</td>
<td>Even if true, applies to only one argument.</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘Experience shows that we can reduce poverty amidst increasing inequality.’</td>
<td>The evidence is questionable.</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘Eliminating poverty may require greater equality, but it does not require full equality.’</td>
<td>Fine. Let’s have a lot more equality.</td>
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### Implications for anti-poverty policy

The reasons for linking poverty and equality have important implications for anti-poverty policy. For they show that anyone who believes in the eradication of poverty needs to embrace a wide range of policies for promoting economic, cultural, political and affective equality, as well as real equality of opportunity. In this section, I make some general observations about the shape such policies should take.

**Poverty-proofing implies equality-proofing**

For the last three years, the Irish government has been committed to ‘poverty-proofing’, a process which involves assessing policies for their impact ‘on poverty and on inequalities which are likely to lead to poverty, with a view to poverty reduction’ (National Anti-Poverty Strategy Unit, 1999). As we have seen, the inequalities which lead to poverty are wide-ranging. For example, policies which increase economic inequality, such as a cut in the top rate of income tax, have a negative impact on poverty even if accompanied by an increase in the incomes of the poor. Interestingly, both the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs (DSCFA) and the Department of Finance poverty-proofed Budget 2001. The DSCFA guardedly recognised the connection between poverty and income inequality, and commented on the egalitarian impact of the social welfare component of the budget (DSCFA 2000). The Department of Finance faced a more difficult struggle. Unwilling either to deny the connection between economic inequality and poverty or to criticise the budget, it commented that tax had been reduced for low earners and that the social welfare measures had achieved a ‘balance in the distributional effects of this Budget’—whatever that means (Department of Finance 2000). If poverty-proofing is to be taken seriously, then we need to engage in equality-proofing, too, by analysing the effects of policies on economic, cultural, political and affective inequality, and on inequality of opportunity.

**Different groups have different priorities**

Equality does not mean treating everyone the same: it means treating people equally well, in a number of different dimensions. If we review carefully the different social groups disadvantaged by inequality, it is clear that they have different priorities, and that there are significant differences among the members of any one group. To be sure, it is hard to think of any impoverished group that is not affected by inequalities of opportunity and economic, cultural, political and affective inequalities. But for some groups, such as low-wage workers, it appears that economic inequalities play the most...
important role in creating and reinforcing their poverty, while for others, such as Travellers, it seems that the most important inequalities generating poverty are cultural. (For a more detailed discussion, see Lynch, Baker and Cantillon 2000, 2001.) It is important to bear these differences in mind in designing effective egalitarian policies, relying on the participation of marginalised groups themselves.

The importance of political empowerment

I have argued that political inequality is a major factor in perpetuating poverty and other inequalities. Thus, an effective anti-poverty strategy has to include measures to challenge power inequalities, and in particular to empower marginalised and subordinate groups. That is why anti-poverty organisations should support political activity and not just the direct relief of deprivation. It is why the specific inclusion of marginalised groups in local, regional and national decision-making processes is vital, and why their participation should be properly resourced. It is why there is an urgent need to limit the role of private finance in the political system.

The need for ideological change

A fourth set of implications for anti-poverty policy concerns the need for ideological change. Our society seems to have a broad consensus on the importance of reducing poverty but no similar agreement on the value of equality. Yet my arguments imply that the absence of a commitment to equality is a major factor in the failure of our attempts to eliminate poverty. Ideological beliefs in the inherent inferiority of some social groups can easily override general platitudes about the evils of poverty. People who believe that they deserve their privileges can come to think that poverty is bad but that it requires nothing from them. They can deplore poverty in the same spirit in which they deplore the Irish climate or an earthquake in Nicaragua: it is a terrible thing but, sure, nothing can be done about it. If we are seriously opposed to poverty, and therefore need to be seriously committed to equality, then we must work to change these beliefs about social status, social justice and the possibilities of social change. We need to engage in a wide range of actions, including grass-root activism to challenge conventional beliefs, community education projects which allow their participants to think about and analyse poverty and equality, public campaigns against cultural and economic inequality, and academic research and its dissemination.

The need for structural change

A final implication of the arguments of this paper is that the elimination of poverty requires major changes in social structures. Poverty is not a matter of personal pathology which can be solved by curing the poor of their supposed inadequacies. It is a condition which is generated by structures of domination and oppression in our society and in the world more generally. Exactly how to name and analyse these structures and their interaction is a matter of continuing debate, but one way or another they clearly include capitalism (a predominantly market-based economy in which the means of production are privately owned and controlled), patriarchy (systems of gender relationships which privilege men over women) and racism (social systems which divide people into ‘races’ and privilege some ‘races’ over others). They also include structures which systematically exclude people with impairments from participating

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4 A good example of such support is the publication by the Combat Poverty Agency of Working for Change: A Guide to Influencing Policy in Ireland (Harvey 1998).
fully in their societies, structures which socially construct a division between ‘heterosexual’ and ‘homosexual’ persons and privilege the former over the latter, and systems which privilege dominant over subordinate ethnic groups. Thus, people and organisations dedicated to eliminating poverty need to devote some of their energies to imagining alternatives to these oppressive structures, and to supporting the changes necessary for achieving them.

**Implications for anti-poverty policy: summary**

- Poverty-proofing implies equality-proofing
- Different groups have different priorities
- The importance of political empowerment
- The need for ideological change
- The need for structural change

**Conclusion**

The arguments above show that anyone who cares about the elimination of poverty should adopt a strong egalitarian programme of economic, political, cultural and affective equality and of equal opportunity in all three of its senses. These arguments include the intrinsic connections between poverty and inequality, the relations between poverty, equal opportunity and other equalities, and the role of political and cultural inequality in perpetuating poverty. They also concern the effects of inequality on people’s beliefs, the interactions of poverty, inequality and economic growth, and the basic moral principles that motivate our objections to poverty in the first place. The arguments stand up against three common objections.

The links between poverty and equality imply that the poverty-proofing to which the Irish government is committed entails a robust form of equality-proofing, covering the key dimensions of equality. They also imply that differences among social groups should be reflected in egalitarian policies. This report on inequalities likely to lead to poverty contributes to both of these aims.

It is important, however, to place the work of reports, conferences and agencies within a wider political context. If poverty is to be eradicated, it will be through a political movement which empowers subordinate groups, aims at ideological and structural change, and reflects both a commitment to equality and a deep anger at injustice. I hope I have helped to explain the need for that commitment to equality, and that in some small way I have contributed to that anger.

**References**


