

"Resilience in Tough Times – Civic Society's Response"

Áras an Uachtaráin, 29th January 2010

Input by Kieran Murphy, National Director, Society of St Vincent dePaul

President, distinguished guests, I am delighted to have this opportunity to contribute to this forum. I'm going to highlight some of the changes the SVP has experienced over the last 18 months and then offer a few reflections on the subject of 'resilience'.

- Since mid 2008 we have seen a significant increase in the number of people approaching us for assistance. This is particularly marked in urban areas. In some places it is up by 30%.
- The needs that people have are very basic. Things they need to get by week to week: food, assistance with energy costs (gas, electricity, gas, coal, turf), and the basic costs of education (clothes, books, school activities).
- There has been an increase in the number of requests from people who previously would never have requested assistance, and might previously have been donors, who through unemployment find themselves in need of the Society's assistance. This accounts for 25% of the requests.
- However, the majority of the Society's work continues to be with low income families whose circumstances have not changed in the recent past: lone parents, people with disabilities, people in low paid employment and older people.
- It has been a busy time too for our social justice work. We try to shape public debate for example through commenting on the impact of the recent Government Budget on people living on a low income. We are also part of coalitions with other organisations in initiatives such as the '*The Poor Can't Pay*' campaign.
- We have experienced an increase in interest from people wanting to volunteer and have established a number of new conferences. This is in contrast to the previous 10 years where there was little interest from local communities in setting up conferences.

Looking back over the last 18 months they have been characterised by an increasing numbers of people accessing our services, a change in the profile of the type of people coming to us, and continued support from the Irish public.

Now, onto the subject of resilience. Crises are times of great difficulty, pain, even despair for people but also for organisations and countries. There is lots of evidence of this in Ireland in the last 18 months. But crises are also times of opportunity. The things we took for granted, the way we approached problems and the energy we brought to our work are all challenged in a crisis. This opens up the possibility of new ways of thinking and working. The singer songwriter Leonard Cohen has a wonderful line in one of his songs: '*There is a crack in everything, its how the light gets in*'. The experience of Ireland in the last 18 months is not simply of a crack, more like a

fissure, and chasm. A gap between one the one hand, peoples hopes and expectations for the future and of what might be possible for themselves, families, community and country and on the other hand the worrying possibility that things might get worse. We see this gap constantly in our work.

From within this ‘gap’ comes resilience; a capacity to bounce back. Civil society organisations, like the Vincent de Paul, are part of this resilience in three ways:

- Civil society organisations provide a wide variety of essential services to people who need basis supports to get by week to week.
- Civil society organisations also provide an alternative perspective, by challenging policy makers and opinion formers to keep a focus on the needs of the vulnerable in our communities.
- Civil society organisations provide opportunities, through volunteering and employment, for people to get involved in their local communities. People want to respond to the needs and suffering they see around them. They want to contribute to the repair, healing and transformation of the lives of others. And in doing that their own lives are shaped, changed and enriched.

In conclusion, civil society organisations, through their different types of work create spaces from which spring new perspectives, a restatement of fundamental social justice values and hopefulness for the future.

Thank you.