

What Kind of Society? A Better Vision Needed

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Introduction

The people have spoken in the General Election. They have voted in overwhelming numbers for change. They have done so because the philosophy and policies of the past have patently failed and they want no more of them. The new Government will go down the same tired routes at its peril.

The new Government, and all of us, must now ask, and answer, a number of fundamental questions. Do we want a society where economic growth takes precedence over all else? Do we want a society where market forces and the ability to pay dictate whether or not all of our people have equal access to food, accommodation, health care and education? Do we want a society where the distribution of income and wealth remains significantly skewed in favour of the well-off and the powerful? Do we want a society where considerable numbers of children and the elderly live in consistent poverty or at risk of poverty?

Do we want a society where full access to education at all levels is available mainly to those with the resources? Do we want a society where large number of families cannot afford to buy or rent a home or are forced to remain on waiting lists for social housing for long periods? Do we want a society where timely access to the best health care depends on the individual's level of income? Do we want a society where children and adults with disabilities as well as their families fail to get appropriate services or respite care? Do we want a society where our elected representatives receive pensions, travel allowances and severance payments far more favourable than those received by the vast majority of workers in the public or private sectors?

The above list is not exhaustive but it gives an indication of the challenge facing us. I suspect that the vast majority of our people would say that the kind of society above is simply unacceptable. That is why they have demanded change.

Economic Growth as *the* Goal?

Let us examine a small number of the questions listed above. First, what is wrong with economic

growth? Surely that has been a key objective of governments around the world over many years?

Unfortunately, the precedence given to economic growth – that is, increasing the level of national income – in Ireland and elsewhere has been largely misguided. Increasing national income is, of course, necessary and desirable but a whole range of other economic, social and environmental factors make significant contributions to progress and the quality of life.

The importance of these factors cannot be downgraded in the quest for economic growth.¹ For example, a good health care system contributes significantly to the quality of life, as well as enabling people to be more productive in an economic sense. Similarly, education increases the ability to think critically and to make contributions in literature, the arts and science, in addition to increasing the potential for innovation, productive employment and income generation. By the same token, good housing contributes to health, as well as providing a base for full participation in communities and productive activity.

These three contributions – health care, education and housing – are often viewed as ‘soft’ social concerns to be relegated to secondary positions after economic growth. On the contrary, they play a key role in generating and sustaining growth.

The Dominance of the Market

The second question posed above points to a philosophy (or is it an ideology?) which has been dominant for much of the twentieth century – the philosophy of the ‘free market’. In effect, this view holds that economic growth, and hence society's welfare, will be maximised through the operation of the ‘market forces’ of demand and supply.

Consumers demand (that is, are willing and able to purchase) various goods and services. In return, producers supply these goods and services at prices determined by the decisions of consumers and producers acting in their own self-interest. In a ‘free’ or ‘perfect’ market, large numbers of producers and consumers would provide sufficient

competition to ensure maximum efficiency in the production and allocation of goods and services. This would happen, it is argued, with minimum government intervention or regulation, with the private sector playing a dominant role. Note that questions of equity do not enter this market vocabulary.

Few would dismiss, out of hand, the importance of market forces as a mechanism for organising the production and allocation of many goods and services. Experiments of absolute state control over production (as, for example, in the Soviet Union) led to gross inefficiency and poverty and were eventually abandoned.

However, the market *on its own* is an inadequate alternative. If the market forces of demand (recall that this implies the ability to pay) and supply were the sole determinants of health care, education and housing provision, then those key services would be supplied only to those with the ability to pay sufficient to provide an adequate profit (termed ‘normal profit’ in standard economics texts) to the producers. Those in need but with insufficient resources would simply do without. They are, after all, outside the market.

Is this the sort of society we want? Of course not! This is why governments around the world must accept their responsibilities for providing, or at least facilitating, certain key services outside the market, including good quality health care, education and housing for all who cannot provide for themselves. The market has a place but it must be kept in its place!

A Human Rights-Based Approach

How can we achieve an appropriate balance between the philosophy of the market which caters for those with the ability to pay and a philosophy which attempts to provide for those in need? I suggest we would have a better prospect of achieving this balance if we were to adopt, and implement, a human rights-based approach. The arguments for such an approach have been made in detail over many years.²

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations in 1948, set out a range of rights. These were re-stated and amplified in a series of international human rights conventions, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1966.

The Universal Declaration and the Covenant, together with subsequent conventions, set out internationally accepted standards and illustrate the sustained global support given to a rights-based approach by the international community.

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Article 25 (1) of the Universal Declaration states that:

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself [herself] and of his [her] family, including food, clothing, housing, medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his[her] control.

Article 11(1) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights is as follows:

*The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to an **adequate** standard of living for himself [herself] and his[her] family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions. The States Parties will take appropriate steps to ensure the realization of this right ... (emphasis added).*

Ireland is a party to the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and several other conventions.³ It has thus accepted the responsibility to discharge the rights it ratified in these international treaties within the resource limitations to which the country is always subject. In order to achieve this, legislative change is essential to secure at least an internationally agreed ‘minimum core’ provision.

A human rights-based approach would involve the acceptance of at least five key principles. First, plans, policies and budgets must reflect human rights norms and standards. Second, people must be enabled and empowered to pursue their human rights if these are denied. Third, meaningful participation for all in local and national development must be facilitated. Fourth, disadvantaged or vulnerable groups must be given

priority in a range of plans and policies. Finally, a human rights-based approach must include accountability and transparency and provide effective redress and remedial action for all.⁴

The Concept of 'Development'

It is clear that these principles involve a philosophy far removed from that of the free market outlined earlier and the almost exclusive pursuit of economic growth. But what is the alternative to economic growth as an objective? And what relevance has a human rights-based approach to such an alternative? I suggest that we must seek a more comprehensive concept than economic growth as measured by Gross Domestic Product (GDP) or Gross National Product (GNP). The broader concept of 'development' is one possibility. While used mainly in a developing country context, this concept has equal relevance in so-called developed nations.

Since at least the 1950s, writers coming from a range of perspectives have been questioning the adulation given to economic growth and have been seeking an alternative. A strong body of opinion has, therefore, emerged which argues that measures such as GDP or GNP fail to capture the complex set of indicators required to improve the quality of life.⁵ To achieve this, we must at least include measures such as education, health, employment opportunities and equality.

The United Nations, in its *Declaration on the Right to Development* (adopted by the General Assembly in 1986), defined development as follows:

*Development is a comprehensive economic, social, cultural and political process, which aims at the constant improvement of the well-being of the entire population and of all individuals on the basis of their active, free and meaningful participation in development and in the fair distribution of benefits resulting therefrom.*⁶

This is obviously a more all-embracing and holistic concept than economic growth. It involves ensuring that everyone has a whole range of what the Nobel Laureate, Amartya Sen, called 'freedoms'. These include 'freedoms' to enjoy adequate food and nutrition, shelter, sanitation, employment, education, health care, equality, peace and security.⁷ Without these and other freedoms, we cannot claim to be achieving development in any meaningful sense.

Note, however, that these 'freedoms' are also key human rights in the various international covenants agreed by the international community. The broad concept of development is, therefore, inextricably linked to the enjoyment of human rights. A human rights-based approach to economic and social policy is, in effect, a prerequisite for development.

Conclusion

It may be argued that a human rights approach is a luxury we cannot afford at a time when Ireland has an enormous debt burden and is constrained by the joint European Union/International Monetary Fund rescue plan. This is an untenable argument. There is now considerable evidence that areas such as health, education and housing (key human rights) play central roles in enhancing rather than reducing economic growth.⁸ Similarly, the pursuit of equality – a further human right – has also been shown to be an important contributor to development.⁹

The pre-eminence of economic growth as a goal and the dominance of the market as a philosophy have served us badly. We must now turn to implement in a meaningful manner the human rights treaties we have ratified: in other words, the commitments which we have entered into must find expression in our plans, policies and budgets. Far from being a luxury, such an approach would play a central role in resolving our economic and social problems as well as providing a caring and just society.

Notes

1. For more detailed arguments on this point see, for example, P.J. Drudy, 'Problems with Economic Growth: Towards a Better Measure of Progress?', in Brigid Reynolds and Sean Healy (eds.), *Beyond GDP: What is Prosperity and How Should it be Measured?*, Dublin: Social Justice Ireland, 2009, and *Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress* (Chair: Professor Joseph E. Stiglitz), Paris, 2009 (<http://www.stiglitz-sen-fitoussi.fr>).
2. See, for example, Jerome Connolly, *Re-Righting the Constitution: The Case for New Social and Economic Rights*, Dublin: Irish Commission for Justice and Peace, 1998; Gerry Whyte, *Social Inclusion and the Legal System: Public Interest Law in Ireland*, Dublin: IPA, 2002; CORI Justice Commission, *Planning for Progress and Fairness: Policies to Ensure Economic Development, Social Equity and Sustainability*, Dublin, 2004; Irish Human Rights Commission, *Making Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Effective*, Discussion Paper, Dublin: IHRC, 2005; P. J. Drudy and Michael Punch, *Out of Reach: Inequalities in the Irish Housing System*, Dublin: TASC at New Island, 2005; Margaret Burns, 'Housing the New Ireland', *Working Notes*, Issue 50, June 2005; P. J. Drudy, *Human Rights: A Prerequisite for Development*, Discussion Paper, Dublin: TASC, 2011.

3. Ireland ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 1989. Among the other treaties it has ratified are the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ratified 1989); the Convention of the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (ratified 1985); the Convention on the Rights of the Child (ratified 1992); the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ratified 2000); the European Convention on Human Rights (ratified 1953); the European Social Charter (ratified 1964); the revised European Social Charter (ratified 2000).
4. See Mary Robinson, 'Bridging the Gap between Human Rights and Development: From Normative Principles to International Relevance', World Bank Presidential Lecture, 3 December 2001; Mary Robinson, 'What Rights Can Add to Good Development Practice', in Philip Alston and Mary Robinson (eds.), *Human Rights and Development: Towards Mutual Reinforcement*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 25–41; Amnesty International (Irish Section), *Our Rights, Our Future, Human Rights Based Approaches in Ireland: Principles, Policies and Practice*, Dublin: Amnesty International (Irish Section), 2005.
5. European Commission, *Growth, Competitiveness, and Employment: The Challenges and Ways Forward into the 21st Century*, Brussels, 1993 (COM (93) 700 final); NESC, *Well-Being Matters: A Social Report for Ireland*, Vols. 1 and 2, Dublin: NESC, 2009 (Report No. 119); *Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress* (Chair: Professor Joseph E. Stiglitz), Paris, 2009 (<http://www.stiglitz-sen-fitoussi.fr>); Michael P. Todaro and Stephen C. Smith, *Economic Development* (tenth edition), New York and London: Addison-Wesley, 2009.
6. United Nations, *Declaration on the Right to Development*, Adopted by General Assembly Resolution 41/128 of 4 December 1986.
7. Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
8. Daniel Gros, *Employment and Competitiveness: The Key Role of Education*, Brussels: Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS Policy Brief No. 93), February 2006; World Health Organization, *Macroeconomics and Health: Investing in Health for Economic Development*, Report of the Commission on Macroeconomics and Health, Geneva: WHO, 2001.
9. Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*, London: Allen Lane, 2009.

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