

Human Rights and Development: The Essentials for Tackling Poverty and Maximising Economic Growth

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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 children and adults with disabilities as well as their families fail to get appropriate services or respite care? Do we want a society where large numbers, including children, the elderly, those with disabilities and those on low pay, live in consistent poverty or are at risk of poverty? If we conclude that this is not the type of society we want, then we need new thinking and new more appropriate policies.

This paper examines a number of key human rights documents and principles, now widely accepted and ratified by most

governments around the world. The dominant economic philosophy in Ireland and throughout much of Europe, with its focus on economic growth/national income as measured by Gross Domestic Product (GDP), fails to give sufficient attention to these principles. The more holistic concept of “development” (which includes not just income but employment, education, health, housing and equality) is far more relevant to reducing or eliminating poverty. The paper illustrates that the “means” to achieving development are precisely the same as the human rights adopted in the key international covenants and ratified by most governments. Human rights are therefore a prerequisite for development. Furthermore, even the narrow concept of economic growth will be maximised only if we incorporate human rights into all economic and social policies.