

Tackling Energy Poverty

Ciara Murphy of the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice reports on a new poverty caused by the surge in food and energy costs.



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Energy poverty is defined as a household spending more than 10% of its total income on energy. This includes essentials like electricity and heating, the lack of which can endanger life. Energy deprivation is when households go without these basic services because they are too expensive. The likelihood of someone being unable to afford heating or electricity increases when they live in an older, poorly insulated house or apartment. A lot

of homes in Ireland are draughty and damp, and need more energy to heat than newer, more energy-efficient housing.

As bad as this is, it is not even the whole story. The existing financial burden on vulnerable people including older and disabled people (who may have relatively high medical expenses) and people living in rented accommodation mean that the recent sharp increases in energy bills are likely to

tip many households and individuals into poverty.

There are many others who are at high risk of poverty because of unaffordable energy prices. These include households where, for example, people are living on low incomes, single parent families, people paying high rents in the private sector, and Travelers. Energy poverty is a social justice issue which exposes the inequality of our society. Any attempt to tackle it must ensure that the needs of the most marginalised groups are considered when solutions are being sought. Supporting people financially is a short-term answer to a problem that needs a more in-depth and inclusive solution.

Energy poverty is also intimately linked to the issue of climate chaos and air quality. It is impossible to separate the need for energy from the use of fossil fuels - oil, coal, peat and gas - as they generate a large proportion of our electricity and heat many of our homes. The high price of fossil fuels is one of the main drivers of energy poverty by causing high energy bills. Producing electricity from renewable energy - generated from resources including wind, water and the sun - is relatively cheap.

Ending energy poverty will take more than simply reducing our electricity and gas bills. Ireland needs to

move away from our dependence on fossil fuels, so we can reduce our carbon emissions and reduce social inequality. Retrofitting and insulating older housing is one of the most effective measures to reduce the energy demand in our homes. This measure can also help to reduce energy poverty by supporting households most at risk. Engaging with people receiving the fuel allowance and

prioritising insulating and retrofitting their homes would help to ensure they have warm, healthy homes. It would also simultaneously reduce the financial burden of high energy prices while reducing the amount of carbon dioxide these houses release into the atmosphere.

One example of a simple and effective action that could be taken is the installation of solar panels on roofs. This method of providing energy is a vital part of moving towards a low carbon society. Installing them on roofs of social housing properties, or on the roofs of people vulnerable to fuel poverty, transforms it into a method of reducing inequality.

Energy poverty is a serious problem in Ireland, which is getting far worse, But the solutions we should aim for must enable people to heat their homes without being at risk of poverty, while also being gentle on the earth, our common home. ❤️

