

Stream 11.2. Fit for work in Europe? Health, Employability and Challenges for Activation in an Era of Crisis

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This paper explores the challenges faced by welfare to work policies in a society emerging from conflict. There are high levels of economic inactivity in Northern Ireland, with 31% of the working age population dependent on benefits. Many of these people are disabled or have severe mental ill-health as a result of traumatising experiences of conflict. Among those over the age of 34, who grew up during the worst years of conflict, there are extremely low levels of educational qualifications, further distancing them from the labour market.

Good work promotes good mental health. However, for this to be the case, the quality of work available has been demonstrated as particularly important. However, there is a scarcity of work in many parts of Northern Ireland and work available to those with poor qualifications in Northern Ireland is of very poor quality. This situation has been exacerbated by the economic crisis. In spite of this, the devolved administration has continued to introduce activation measures aimed at ill and disabled people, with stringent conditions and potential sanctions attached.

The paper will examine the particular challenges posed by the economic crisis, the nature of the labour market in Northern Ireland and the views of people with long-term limiting illness and disability as revealed in the Northern Ireland Survey of Activity Limitation and Disability 2006, a large-scale government-sponsored survey.