

Attitudes towards Development Cooperation in Ireland

Report of a National Survey
of Irish Adults by Amárach Research

September 2013

“This was the first such survey to be carried out in 10 years, and at last we have sound and concrete data about public opinion on development issues in Ireland. The findings of this research will be a major asset as we intensify our activities in the fields of development education and public information and communication about our aid programme.”

Minister of State for Overseas Development and Human Rights Tom Kitt TD, June 2003

SUMMARY

In 2013, Dóchas members decided to address the lack of data in Ireland about public attitudes towards development cooperation, overseas aid and development NGOs.

The survey, undertaken in June by Amárach Research, confirms the picture from earlier polls suggesting that a big majority of people support the principle of overseas aid. The survey also shows, however, a great level of uncertainty among respondents on whether overseas aid actually is working or whether developing countries are making any progress in the fight against hunger, poverty and disease.

Key findings from this research include:

- **A strong and abiding public interest in overseas development** and a desire to support poor people. A majority of 54% of respondents are in favour of the Irish Government spending money on overseas aid, compared to 22% against. This is a significant level in the current economic climate.
- **A high level of expressed concern, combined with low levels of knowledge.** Two-thirds (66%) of respondents indicate that they are 'fairly' or 'very' concerned, but only 19% consider they have 'above average' knowledge of global development issues. Compared to 10 years ago, people rely more heavily on friends or colleagues for information on global development and relatively less on the media and the government.
- The survey reveals a **worryingly high level of public powerlessness.** A full 53% of respondents say they "feel helpless in bringing about positive change" and only 32% feel confident in their ability "to influence decisions affecting my local area." Not surprisingly, this number is even lower when it comes to societal and global issues.
- **A clear relationship between the degree to which people have engaged with NGOs and the likelihood of them taking further action on poverty.** Irish NGOs and the internet are important sources of information for people on development issues – with NGO sources more likely to successfully prompt action. People who have volunteered, or donate on a regular basis, indicate higher levels of global solidarity activity than others.
- **A relatively pronounced absence of perceived linkages between people's lives in Ireland and instances of global poverty.** Despite many public information campaigns by NGOs highlighting global linkages, the vast majority of respondents feel the causes of poverty reside within developing countries themselves. 53% of respondents agree with the sentiment that "my day to day actions don't really affect people in the third world."
- **Strong concern about perceived levels of corruption in developing countries** is leading people to feel that aid is being wasted. This level of uncertainty also impacts, though to a lesser degree, on people's views of the effectiveness of NGOs and the 'value for money' they represent.
- **A big majority of people feels aid is making a real difference – but they don't see progress in Africa.** Although 54% of people are in favour of government aid to developing countries and 83% agree that "Aid is making a real difference", over half of respondents feel that Africa is in a similar, or worse, situation than 2 decades ago, suggesting that they do not believe that aid is sufficient to bring about positive change.

- ***An appetite for more positive stories of change.*** People participating in the survey want to see aid for ‘self-help’, giving people tools and skills to lift themselves out of poverty, with 62% prioritising this option. 54% of respondents say that if NGOs provided more success stories they would conclude the NGO is worth supporting – contrasted with 15% who would conclude that success means the NGO’s job is done.

Introduction and Background

In June 2013, the member organisations of Dóchas decided to undertake a major study of public attitudes to development aid and global poverty, in an attempt to fill the gap in knowledge on how people in Ireland obtain and respond to information about developing countries.

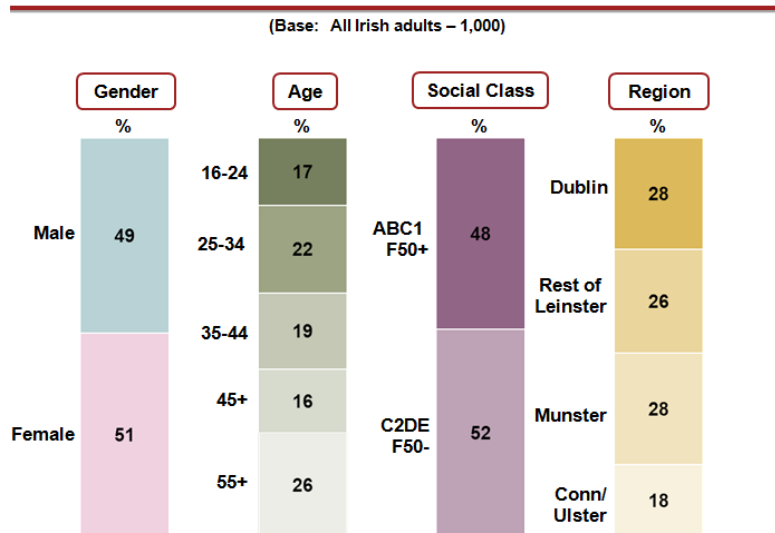
Ireland’s overseas aid programme has grown substantially since 2000, the year in which then Taoiseach Bertie Ahern pledged that Ireland would reach the UN target of spending 0.7% of national income on development cooperation. This growth marked a remarkable shift in Irish “overseas aid” which until then had been mostly a matter of Ireland’s development NGOs, and has not been without its critics. There are not many aid critics in Ireland, but those that do question the Irish Government’s spending on Official Development Assistance (ODA) tend to focus not on the work of the many non-governmental organisations, but on the Government’s aid budget in general, and its “bilateral” (government-to-government) programme in particular.

Yet the amount of data on whether or not “the public” support the aid programme has been limited. The annual mini-surveys undertaken by Ipsos MRBI at the request of Dóchas in the period 2010-2013 show very high levels of public support for aid – a result largely mirrored in the regular “Eurobarometer” surveys undertaken by the European Commission. But the most recent full-scale survey dates back to 2003, when Irish Aid presented its report “Attitudes Towards Development Cooperation in Ireland.”

Convinced of the importance of public engagement with issues of global justice and development, Dóchas decided to undertake the next major studies, ten years on. The aim of the study, undertaken by Amárach Research, was “to gauge the knowledge, attitudes, information sources and engagement of Irish people in the context of overseas aid, in order to promote reflection among Dóchas members about the impact of their public communications strategies on those attitudes, and to explore ways to shift them.”

1) Methodology

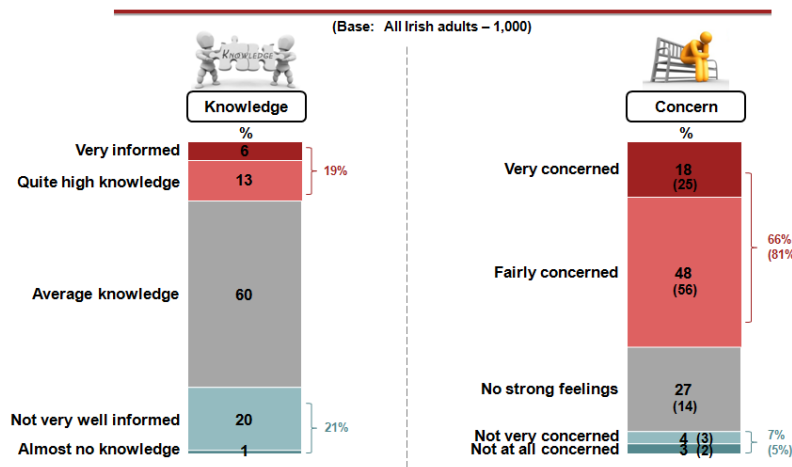
Amárach designed the survey, using an online methodology to gather responses from 1,000 Irish adults. Quotas were set on gender, age, region and social background to ensure the final sample was nationally representative, and aligned with CSO Census 2011 figures. Interviews were undertaken in the period of 17-23 June 2013.



2) A high degree of concern, but relatively low knowledge of development aid

When asked “How informed do you consider yourself on global issues including development aid?” a relatively small number of people (19%) indicated that they felt well or very well informed. Male respondents, and those in the higher income brackets tended to rate their level of knowledge slightly higher than others.

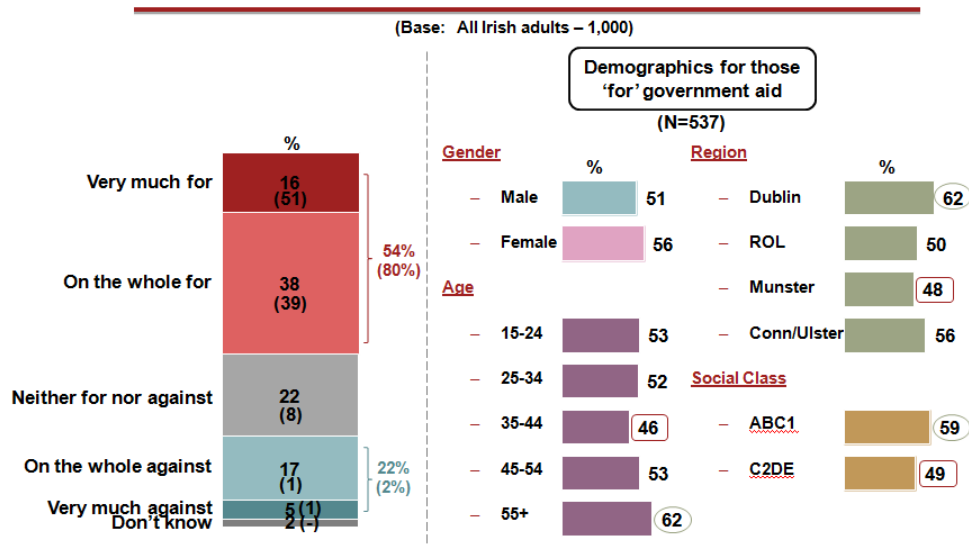
In contrast, a large majority of people (66%) feel “fairly concerned” or “very concerned” about global poverty. This figure, however, constitutes a drop from 81% in the 2003 Irish Aid survey.



3) The majority of people support overseas aid

Responses to the question “which of these statements best indicates how you feel about the Irish Government giving aid assistance to developing countries?” showed that just over half of Irish adults (54%) are in favour of government aid to developing countries. Those opposed are a small minority of 22%, meaning supporters outnumber opponents 2.5 to 1.

The importance of the phrasing of the question is illustrated by the responses to a related question asked in the Ipsos-MRBI survey in 2013 and a similar question in the 2003 survey, when 77% and 89% respectively said they were in favour of overseas aid – Both questions did not single out the Government as the one that should provide overseas aid.



It is important to note that support is relatively higher among people on higher incomes and in the 55+ category, while people in the “squeezed middle” (young families in the 35-44 age group) are relatively less supportive.

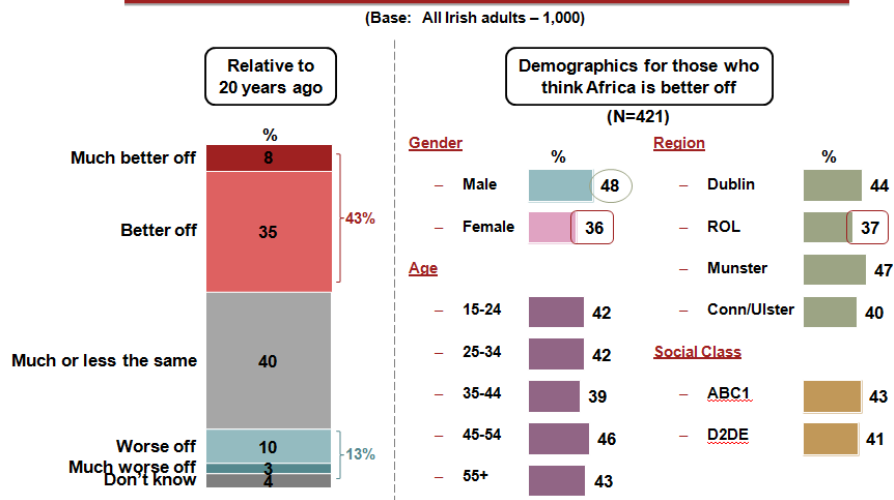
4) Aid is making a real difference – but maybe not for Africa?

When asked “Do you think Africa is better or worse off today than it was 20 years ago?”, over half of respondents stated that they feel Africa is in a similar or worse position now than 2 decades ago. 43% of respondents think the situation in Africa has improved – a figure similar to earlier surveys commissioned by Dóchas (2012: 49%) and Suas (47%).

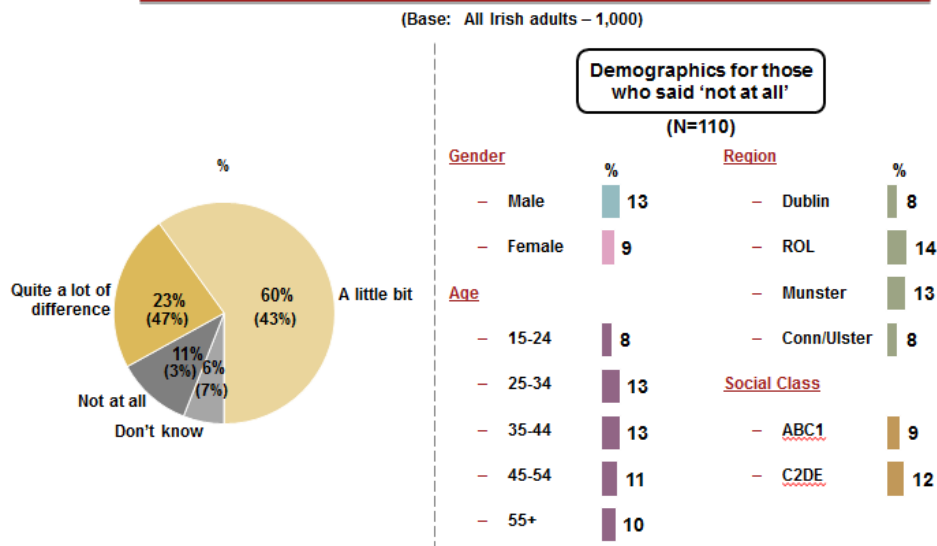
Male respondents (48%) and those on higher incomes (65%) are relatively more optimistic than female participants (36%) and people living in Leinster but outside the Dublin area (37%).

Interestingly, the vast majority of people think aid from Ireland is making a difference for poor people: when asked “Do you think that aid from Ireland makes a real difference to the lives of people in Developing Countries?” 83% of participants reply positively, with nearly a quarter saying aid makes “quite a lot of difference.”

Answers to this question did vary slightly according to geographic region, but not among different age or income groups.



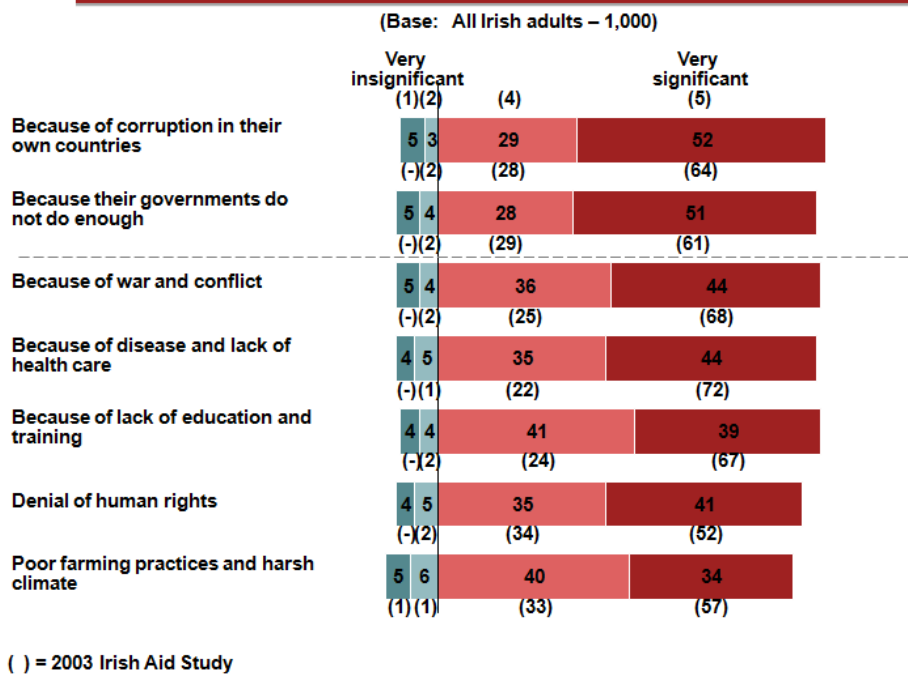
Positive response rates are highest among those who feel 'informed', those who donate regularly and those who volunteer regularly. This suggests a correlation, though not necessarily a causal relation, between engaging with development organisations and seeing the results of overseas aid.



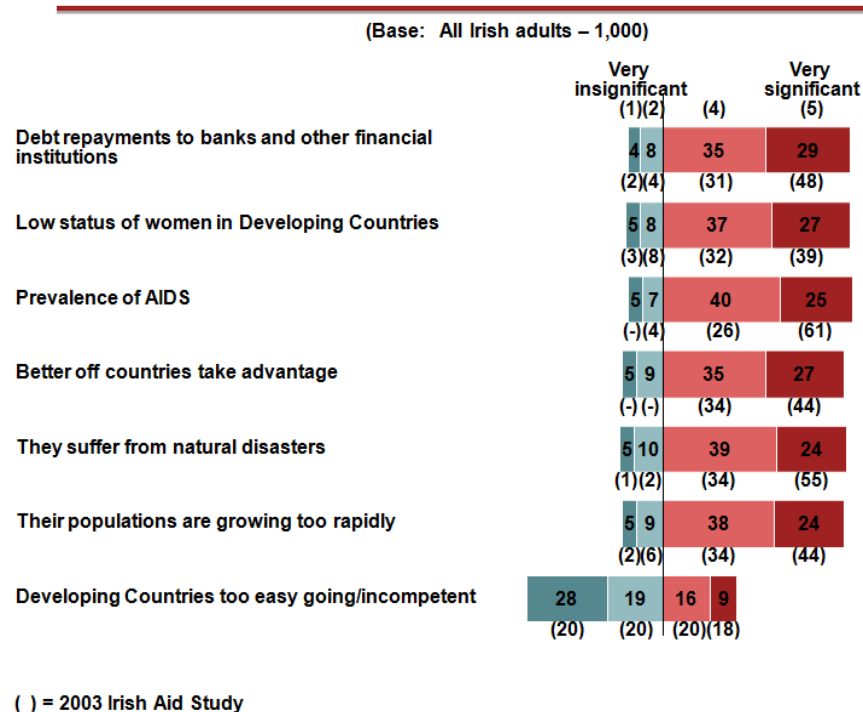
5) The causes of poverty are not considered global, but local in nature.

Respondents were asked to indicate the main factors causing poverty in developing countries. In response to the question “There are various reasons why Developing Countries are poor. To what extent do you feel each of these factors plays a role in creating poverty in Developing Countries?”, respondents felt that the main causes have to do with bad governance: Corruption (81%) and ineffective government (79%).

In short, it seems people in Ireland feel that they are trying to help through overseas aid, but that there are factors in the recipient countries that undermine the impact of the aid.



Interestingly, when comparing the answers with the 2003 survey a pattern emerges where the 2013 respondents have opted for the ‘significant’ option in far greater numbers than the ‘very significant’ answers popular ten years ago.

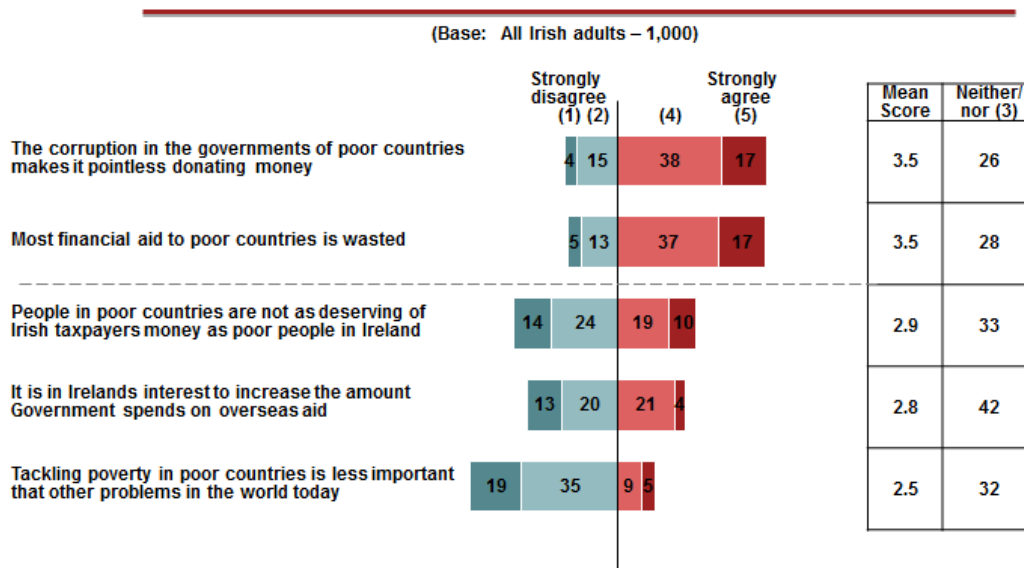


Other causes suggested in the question got very similar responses, except for the inherently racist argument that “developing countries are too easy going/incompetent” with which 47% of respondent disagreed – nearly twice the number of people who agreed with the statement. However, a relatively high proportion of people (29%) had no opinion about this particular question.

6) One of the main concerns about aid relates to perceived corruption.

Despite the high levels of support for overseas aid, a very large group of people (55%) feel that it is 'pointless' to donate aid because of high levels of corruption in the recipient countries. A similar majority (54%) agrees with the statement that “most financial aid to poor countries is wasted.”

Importantly, 54% of people also think poverty is a major global issue, as expressed in their disagreement with the statement that “tackling poverty in poor countries is less important than other problems in the world today.”



This confirms the emerging picture that people in Ireland care deeply about global poverty, but that they are not convinced that aid is helping to address it. A slight majority (33% versus 25%) agrees that “it is in Ireland’s interest to increase the amount the Government spends on overseas aid” and a majority of people thinks that global poverty is a genuine issue for Ireland: 38% disagree (versus 29% in agreement) that “people in poor countries are not as deserving of tax payers’ as poor people in Ireland.”

Answers to these statements are also notable for the fact that almost one-third of respondents did not express an opinion either way.

This research suggests that Irish adults do not trust foreign governments to have their own people’s best interests at heart. There is a real fear that aid fuels corruption and does not benefit the intended beneficiaries.

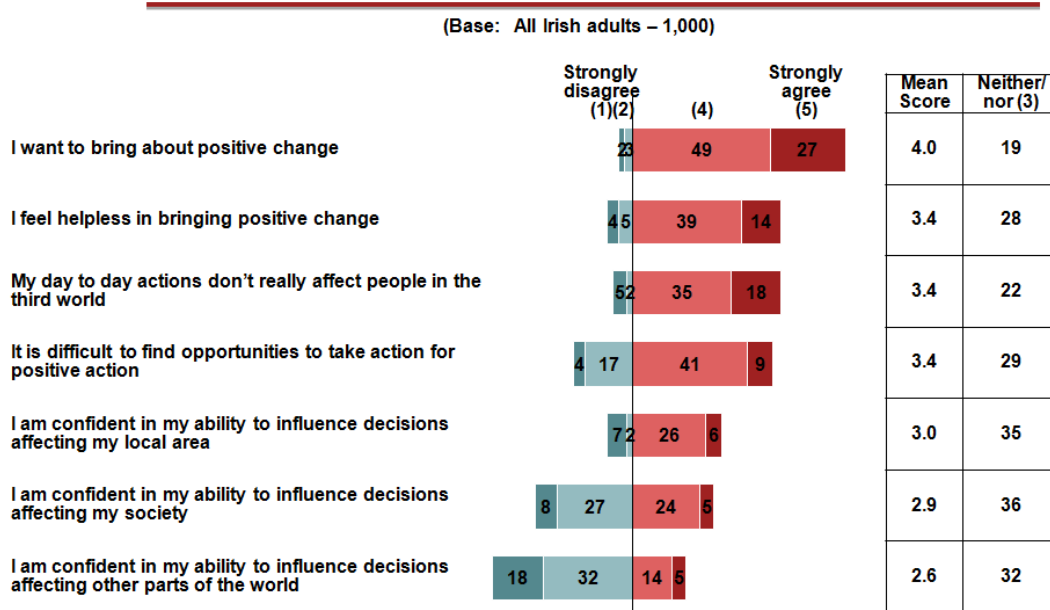
A further notable phenomenon in the answers to the survey is that for most of the options outlined above, roughly one-third of respondents did not express an opinion.

This would seem consistent with the other main observation arising from this research that people have a high level of concern about poverty, but only limited knowledge of the topic.

7) A remarkably high number of people feel they lack the power to affect any change.

It seems globalisation has left people feeling unable to influence their own lives, let alone global issues.

A full 53% of adults responded that they agree with the statement “I feel helpless in bringing about positive change.” And only 29% said they feel “confident in my ability to influence decisions affecting my society.” Even more strikingly, a mere 32% of Irish adults feel confident in their ability “to influence decisions affecting my local area.”



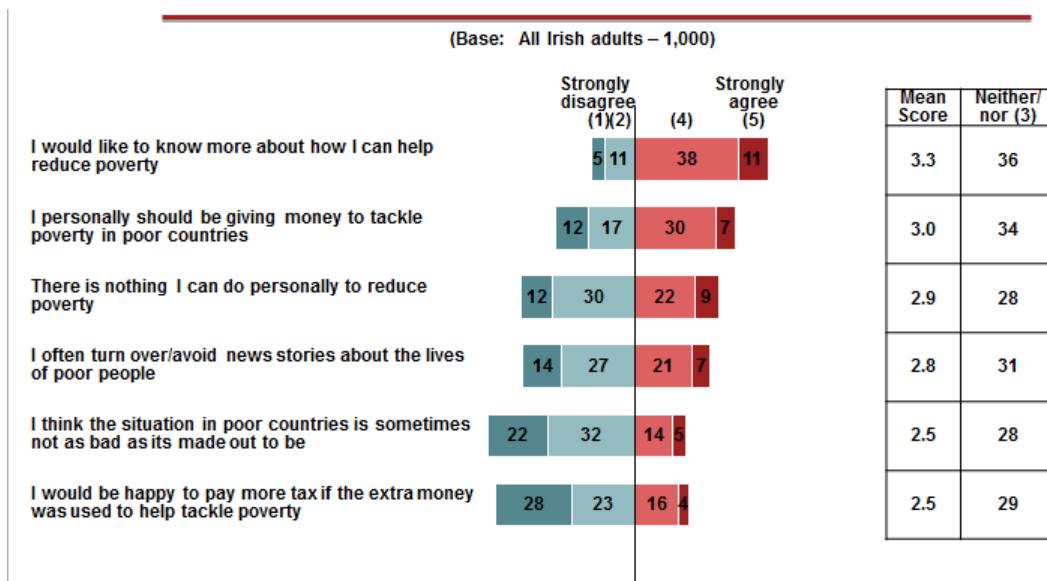
Unsurprisingly, the number of people who feel confident that they can influence global phenomena is even lower. Only 19% are confident they can influence decisions affecting other parts of the world.

This would be consistent with the view that the causes of poverty are primarily located in developing countries, not in the West. The fact that 53% of respondents agree with the statement that “my day to day actions don't really affect people in the third world” illustrates this view further.

While three-quarters of Irish adults say they want to ‘bring about a positive change’, over half feel helpless in doing so, lacking the confidence in their ability to influence decisions at local, societal or global levels.

Almost half of respondents want to know more about how they can help reduce poverty, but 31% of Irish adults say there is nothing they can do to reduce poverty.

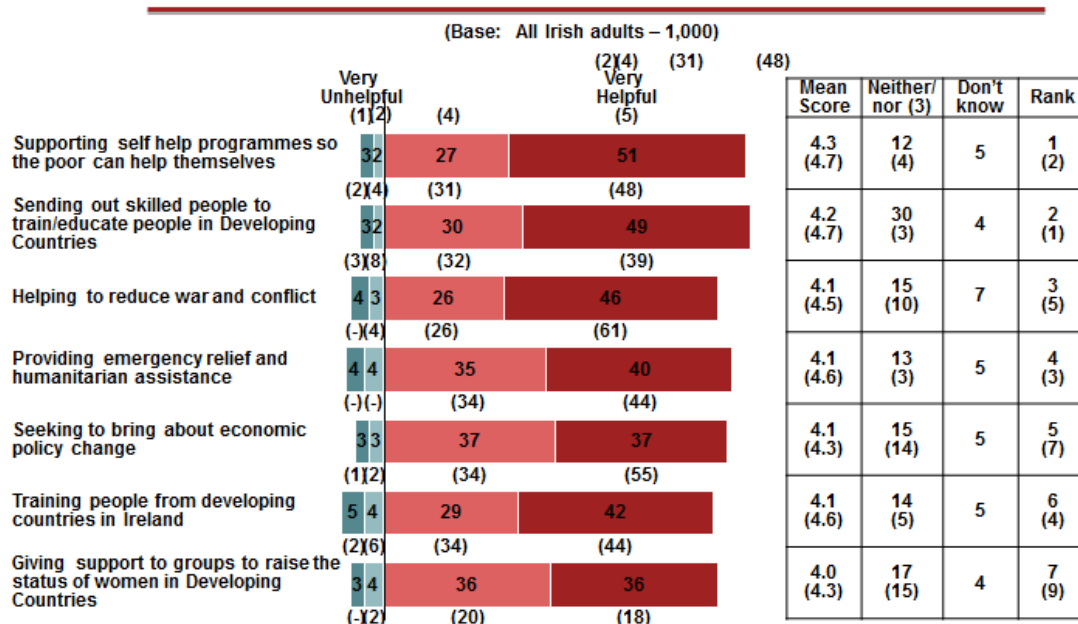
When asked whether they feel that the situation in developing countries is sometimes exaggerated, 54% of respondents disagree with the statement that reality in poor countries is better than it is made out to be.



Interestingly, 37% of respondents feel they “should be giving money to tackle poverty in poor countries”, but a majority of 51% of people disagree that paying more tax to help tackle poverty is worth supporting. (It is possible that this answer reflects people’s overall attitudes to government taxation, not just the use of tax income for overseas aid)

8) “Every little bit helps” when it comes to Ireland’s role in helping poor countries.

Respondents were asked to rate the perceived effectiveness of a range of potential interventions. When asked “There are various ways in which a country like Ireland can help Developing Countries. How helpful or unhelpful do you think each one would be?” respondents gave a range of answers with no clear endorsement for any measure in particular.

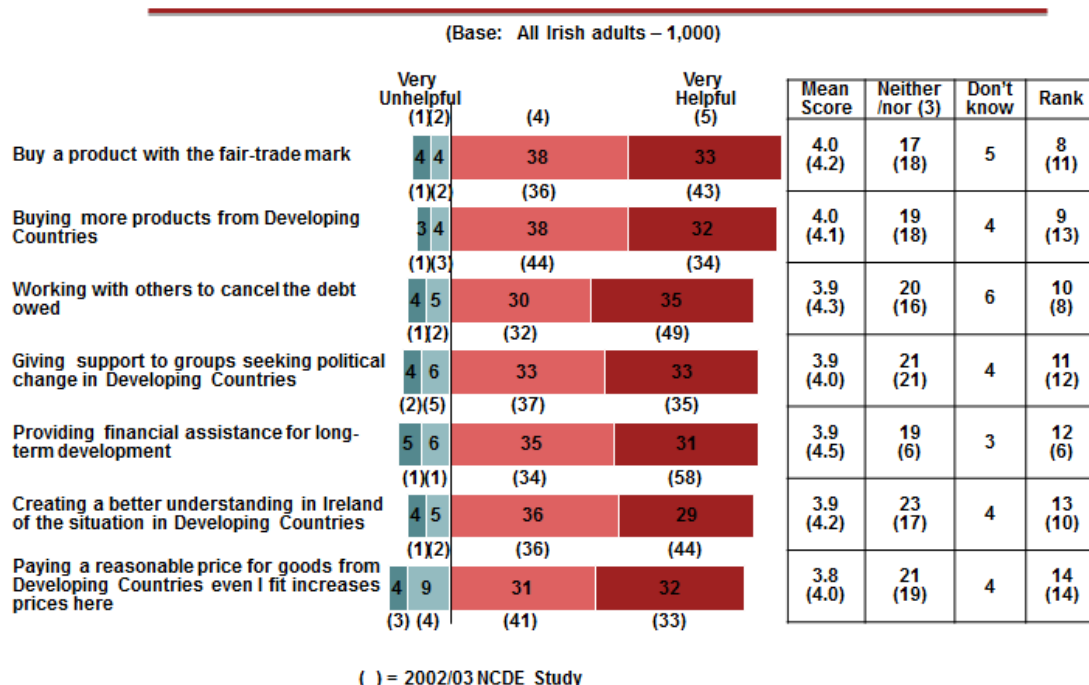


() = 2002/03 NCDE Study

As before, a comparison with answers ten years ago shows fewer 'extreme' answers ("very helpful") and a tendency to go for more moderate answers ("helpful").

Preferred methods for supporting developing countries revolve around sustainable growth, specifically looking to help people create a platform to get out of poverty by themselves. Reducing conflict and providing ad-hoc support are also key priorities.

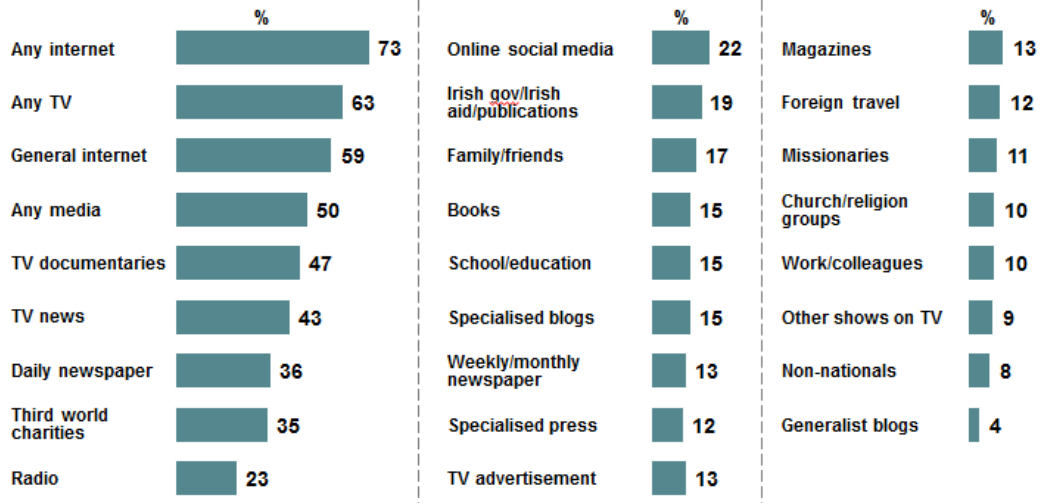
Other methods include buying more products from developing countries. However, support for this method drops when increased prices are mentioned.



9) Internet and TV are the most widely used sources of information about the developing world.

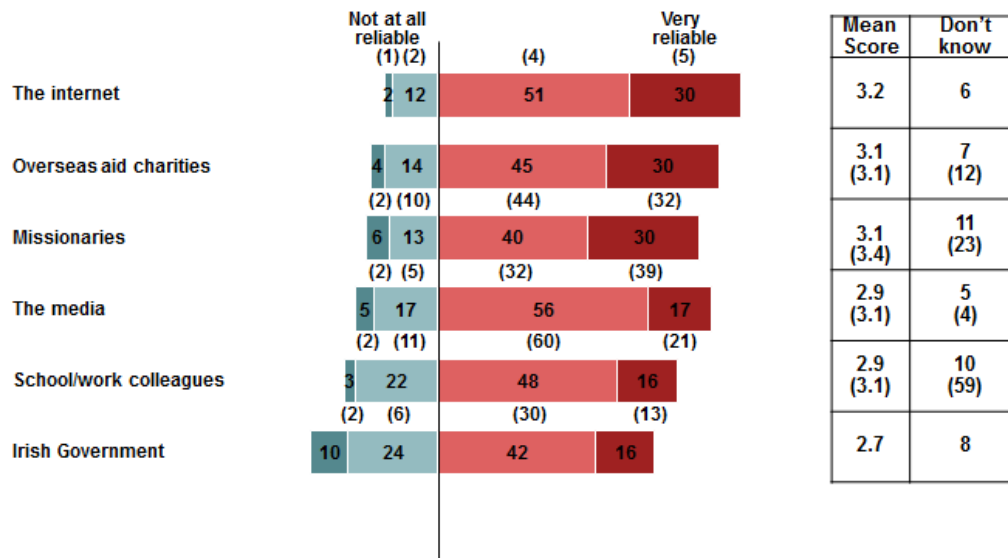
If you were looking for information on issues related to development policy and the global fight against poverty which, if any, of the following sources would you use?

(Base: All Irish adults – 1,000)



The internet is deemed to be the most reliable source of information. Compared to ten years ago, faith in the media has decreased somewhat (from 81% to 73%), and school or work colleagues are given greater credibility (up to 64% from 43%).

(Base: All Irish adults – 1,000)



() = 2002/03 NCDE Study

The internet and work colleagues are also most likely to provide ‘just the right amount’ of information (52% for the internet, 38% for colleagues), whereas satisfaction with the perceived amount of information provided by aid agencies has dipped slightly compared to ten years ago: 75% of respondents think NGOs are reliable sources of information, but 23% think NGOs provide “too little” information, compared to 19% who think they provide “too much”, and 39% who feel the media provide too little information.

(Base: All Irish adults – 1,000)

	Too little	Just right	Too much	Don't know
The internet	17	52	16	15
Overseas aid charities	23 (27)	47 (53)	19 (6)	11 (13)
Missionaries	26 (24)	43 (48)	13 (4)	19 (25)
The media	39 (39)	41 (48)	12 (5)	9 (7)
School/work colleagues	38 (21)	38 (29)	6 (1)	18 (49)
Irish Government	46	30	8	16

() = 2002/03 NCDE Study

A full 46% think the Irish Government provides too little information (and only 8% think the opposite). Interestingly, when asked “Have you seen or heard anything in the past twelve months about what is being done to reduce poverty in poor countries?” 36% of respondents replied that they had not.

10) The internet and NGOs are most successful in prompting people to take action

Answers to the question “Did any of the information you gained from the following sources prompt you to take action in relation to developing countries?” suggest that NGOs are the most effective at prompting people to take action, and that the Government has little influence on people’s behaviour.

56% said charities had prompted them to take action (down from 71% in 2003) and 52% said the internet did. Only 34% said they were prompted by the Government (down from 48% in 2003).

(Base: All Irish adults – 1,000)

	Unsure	To some extent	To a great extent	N/A
Overseas aid charities	23 (29)	41 (52)	15 (19)	21
The internet	27 (34)	40 (51)	12 (15)	22
Missionaries	29 (41)	31 (43)	12 (16)	29
School/work colleagues	28 (40)	31 (44)	11 (16)	30
The media	24 (30)	47 (58)	10 (12)	19
Irish Government	37 (52)	28 (39)	6 (8)	28

() = 2002/03 NCDE Study

Those who have volunteered/donated said that it was news or information they received from NGOs which prompted them to get involved. Among people who have indicated that they volunteer and/or donate regularly the figure for “overseas aid charities” is substantially higher (24%/25% respectively) than the figure for the internet (16%/15% respectively).

Answers to the question as to what form the action prompted by the information sources had taken showed the success of the fair-trade movement as well as the difficulty associated with forms of engagement that require a greater investment on the part of the respondent.



11) The most popular argument for overseas aid is that it helps people help themselves.

When asked “Below are some statements on how aid is helping to reduce poverty in poor countries. I would like you to tell me which statements you feel are the most believable,” the majority of people showed a clear preference for the ‘self-help’ justification for overseas aid.

The slogan “Aid Works” does not appeal to people, nor does “aid helps bring peace to the world”. In contrast, “aid helps many people” and the more basic “a little aid stops a lot of people dying unnecessarily” are seen as more convincing arguments in favour of aid, with 52% and 56% respectively indicating a preference for these statement. With 62% the most supported statement, however, was “Aid gives people tools/skills so they can lift themselves out of poverty”.

Answers to this statement indicate that people consider that skills transfer is the great unmet need of developing countries. The argument that “aid works” or that aid helps build a fairer, more stable global society are less popular.

Ten years on from the Irish Aid report, people in Ireland continue to see global poverty in terms of a skills deficit in developing countries, and not as a result of global inter-linkages or inequalities.

(Base: All Irish adults – 1,000)

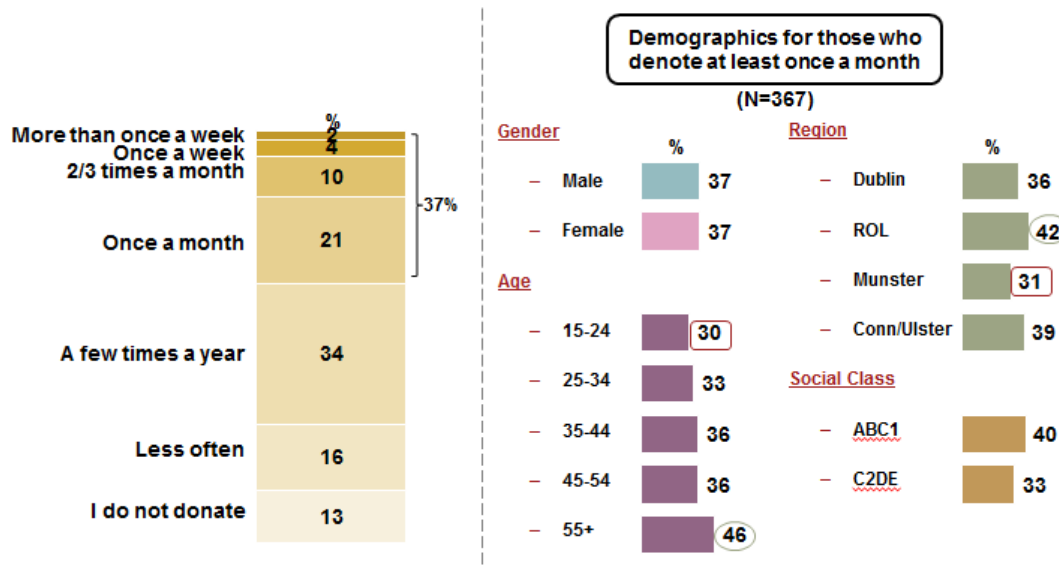
	1 st	2 nd	3 rd	Top 3
Aid gives people tools/skills as they can lift themselves out of poverty	27	20	15	62%
A little aid stops a lot of people dying unnecessarily	22	19	15	56%
Aid helps many people	16	17	19	52%
When we give aid we help others but at the same time we help ourselves	9	10	9	28%
Aid works hard to make sure every cent in your euro benefits those who need it most in the worlds poorest places	8	8	10	26%
Aid works	7	9	11	27%
Aid delivers lasting benefits	7	13	15	35%
Aid helps bring peace to the world	5	6	7	18%

12) Nearly two in five Irish adults claim to donate to charities on a monthly basis

Dóchas members are supported by an estimated 760,000 people in Ireland, and support for charitable organisations is reputedly high throughout Irish society. The answers to this survey also suggest that public support for charities and NGOs remains high.

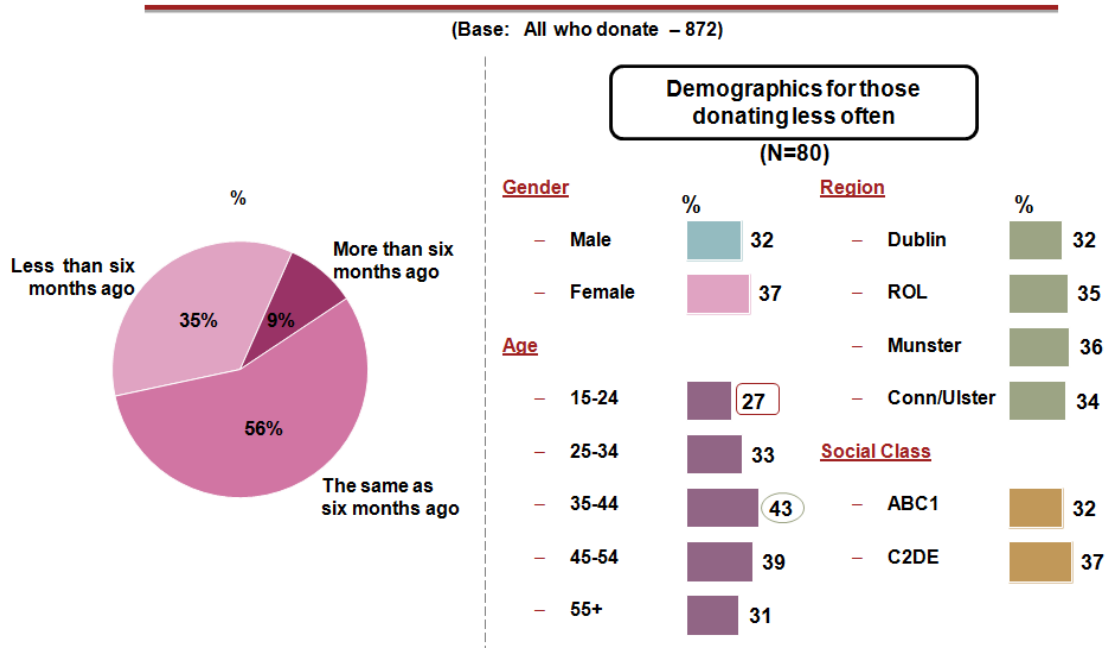
When asked “How regularly, if at all, do you make monetary contributions to charity organisations?” 37% of respondents stated they were regular donors to Irish charities, making contributions at least once a month. (NB: this includes charities with a domestic focus)

(Base: All Irish adults – 1,000)



In the 55+ age category, donation levels are higher, while younger people are less likely to donate on a monthly basis. While there is no significant socio-economic difference in giving patterns, people on higher salaries (€60,000+) are most likely to donate on at least a monthly basis.

Two-thirds of respondents say they have maintained or even increased the frequency with which they donate to charities. In contrast, those in the 35-44 age bracket are most likely to have decreased the frequency of their giving, perhaps reflecting the pressure on young families' incomes.

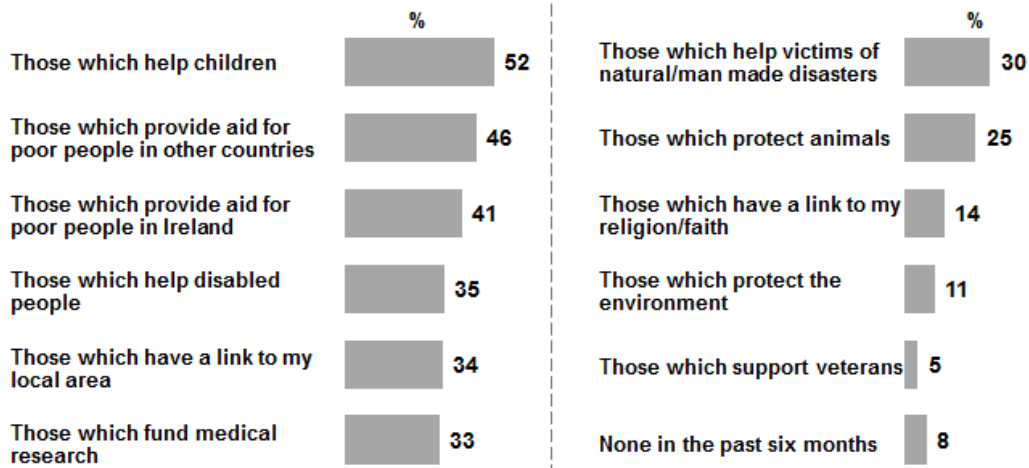


13) Irish adults do not think that “charity should begin and end at home”

Respondents who donate to charities and NGOs indicate that their favourite charities are “those which help children” and “those which provide aid for poor people in other countries.”

In fact, donating to overseas charities is more common than donating to charities providing aid to poor people in Ireland. This finding suggests, again, that people in Ireland do believe that global poverty is a big issue and that efforts to address it deserve support.

(Base: All who donate – 872)

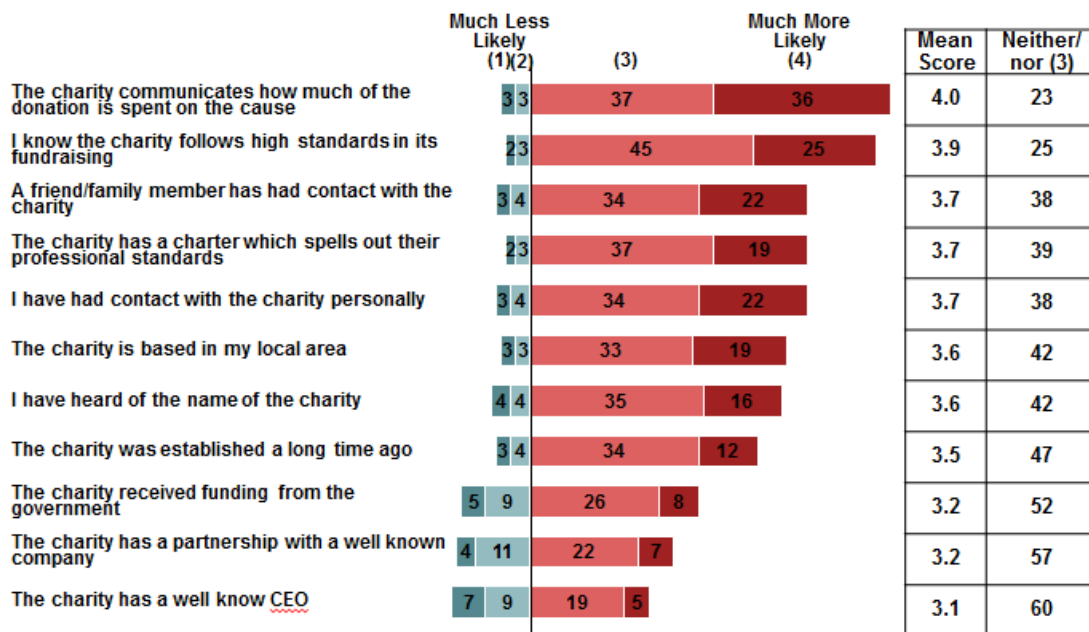


14) People donate to charities if they feel they can trust the organisation

In response to the question “To what extent would the following factors make you more or less likely to trust a particular charity?”, one-third of respondents indicated that greater transparency about the use of their donation would make them ‘much more likely’ to donate.

The existence of publicly declared professional charters and physical or psychological proximity also play a role, whereas the fact that a charity is in receipt of government or corporate funding does not seem to be a factor instilling confidence in the organisation.

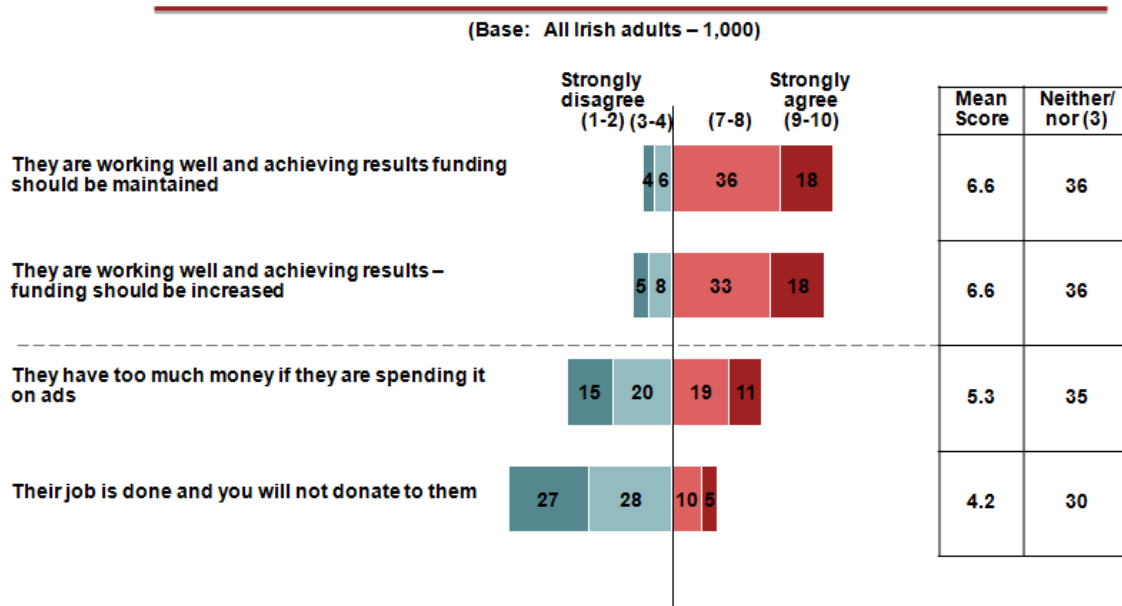
(Base: All Irish adults – 1,000)



15) People in Ireland want to hear more stories of success in global development.

And finally, the survey suggests that people are inspired by organisations' success in the past and that clear examples of impact inspire public support.

“When overseas charities show you images of positive progress and impact of their work please indicate on a scale of 1 – 10 how much you would agree or disagree with the following statements. 1 indicates you completely disagree and 10 indicates you completely agree.”



While about one-third of respondent don't have an opinion on whether more positive stories would make a difference, a majority of 54% of people say they would conclude that success stories indicate that the charity in question was effective.

51% say they would conclude that the evidence of impact warrants an increase in funding for the NGO in question. Only 15% of respondents would draw the opposite conclusion that the NGO doesn't need further funding.

While surveys of people's opinions are not necessarily a good indicator of how people actually behave, it is clear from the responses to this survey that Irish adults feel they would respond well to more news about the impact overseas aid is having.