

October 2017

Introduction

Concern welcomes the review of the Irish Aid programme by the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, Trade and Defence of the Oireachtas and the consultation with civil society on the programme.

Concern Worldwide's perspective on this review derives from our experience of working on the ground in 27 of the poorest or most vulnerable countries in the world, and from our longstanding partnership with Irish Aid at programme and policy levels, both in the development and humanitarian spheres, a collaboration over the decades that we value very highly. It is critical for Concern that it has a like-minded agency tackling the causes of extreme poverty at national and global levels and in fora which are complementary to the community and district level work where Concern is most effective. We need, more than ever, progressive donors like Irish Aid.

Irish Aid reflecting Ireland's Vision of its Place in the World

In foreign policy terms, Ireland is known for its neutrality with a strong history of compassion for the poorest in the world. The Irish Aid programme is at the heart of our foreign policy, one that represents and projects Ireland's vision for the world and our place within it. Concern believes that it does so very well and should continue to do so.

We see the work of Irish Aid as central to this neutral and compassionate foreign policy which is now framed within universal human rights and the scope and intent of the Sustainable Development Goals. Ireland showed exemplary leadership in the development of the SDGs and Irish Aid should continue to support and advocate for a strong national commitment to Agenda 2030. Irish Aid's continued investment in public engagement in this area, via coalitions and projects such as Coalition2030 and Project Us is critical to ensure that the Irish people understand Agenda2030 and support its delivery.

It is important that the proposed expansion of Ireland's global footprint includes a scale-up of the Irish Aid programme. As greater investment is made in new embassies and trade missions post-Brexit, it is necessary that this is kept in balance with our focus on and commitment to Irish Aid's programme of work. Investment in an ever stronger and more effective aid programme needs to be a key element of Ireland's global footprint. Planned and managed growth of Irish ODA over time, with a clear roadmap to reach the target of 0.7% of GNI, is a strategic imperative.

Irish Aid Policy, Strategy and Defining Characteristics

It is important to ask if the Irish Aid programme is responding as effectively as possible to the changes in the world which have an impact on the nature and pattern of both poverty and humanitarian needs.

These include: a) political insecurity and terrorism and consequent loss of life and lengthy displacement of vulnerable individuals; b) recent challenges to the multilateral system and action; c) climate change with consequent increasing scale and severity of natural disasters; d) greater proportion of poverty in fragile states; e) urbanisation in Africa; f) unemployment especially amongst youth; and, g) the deepening of major inequalities. We believe that “One World One Future” is highly relevant to most of these, but needs to be updated since it pre-dates: i) the SDGs; ii) the World Humanitarian Summit; iii) the migration crisis; iv) challenges to the multilateral system; and v) Brexit.

We see the distinguishing features of the Irish Aid programme as being: a) focused on least developed countries, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa; b) responsive to humanitarian crises; c) politically and economically untied; d) balanced in terms of focus on social sectors alongside inclusive economic growth and strongly supportive of a vibrant civil society; e) committed to tackling gender inequalities (Commission on Status of Women, ICGBV, etc.); f) supporting the need for resilience building, Disaster Risk Reduction and emergency preparedness, while retaining commitment to humanitarian principles. In reviewing and renewing Irish Aid’s programme of work, there is a unique opportunity to put at its heart the principles of “Leaving No-One Behind” and ‘reaching the furthest behind first’.

Concern has three central messages or themes in this submission:

Message 1: Keep aid untied and principled.

The OECD Development Assistance Committee’s (DAC’s) Peer Review in 2014 found the Irish Aid programme to be of very high quality, highly effective and impactful. Irish Aid has been strategic and judicious in its balance of aid channels and has used it to leverage influence in multilateral fora it deems important to its priorities, as well as showing solidarity with multilateral action.

While we understand the wider strategic reasons for increasing funding to multilaterals, we feel that Irish Aid could demand greater accountability of multilateral agencies to show their effectiveness, appreciating that it is harder to measure at this level. Irish NGOs have increased their accountability as a result of the focus on results and yet we do not see the same level of demands and clarity at the multilateral level.

Concern would like Irish Aid to use its considerable “soft power” to resist the politicization and diversion of aid, limiting the extent to which aid funding is utilized *within* Europe as a response to the “migration crisis. This means ensuring that European foreign interests neither undermine the Paris principles on Aid Effectiveness nor the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid.

Irish Aid has rightly prioritized addressing the root causes of economic migration through investment in the economies and development of countries from which migrants originate. This must continue.

NGO FUNDING: A noteworthy feature of Irish Aid’s programme is the high level of funding it channels through NGOs. We believe that this is, in essence, a support for people-to-people assistance, ensuring that a sizeable proportion of aid gets to the poorest communities. While bilateral and multilateral channels are critical in terms of systemic change, these take time and often remain invisible to the poorest people in remote areas.

Irish Aid is one of the few donors to give long-term funding with some flexibility to NGOs to work in fragile contexts where short-term funding predominates. This demonstrates real leadership and we would urge Irish Aid to increase investment of this kind in order to support 'getting to the furthest behind first'.

Message 2: Sharpen the strong poverty focus of the programme

Concern has already acknowledged the strong characteristics of the Irish Aid programme; however, there are some areas on which we would like to see stronger action.

HUNGER: We would like to see Irish Aid build on its longstanding reputation in fighting hunger. While the world has managed to reduce hunger significantly between 1990 and 2015, according to the Global Hunger Index, the FAO's 2017 State Of Food Insecurity report notes a recent rise in the number of people going hungry from 777 million in 2015 to 815 million in 2016. Ireland has been seen as a leader in fighting hunger and we would like to see more visibility of this work and greater political leadership assumed by Ireland on the European and international stage.

GEOGRAPHICAL FOCUS: While we agree with the idea of "key partner" countries, Concern believes that the choice of priority countries for Irish Aid should now be reviewed and realigned with a focus on the poorest places in the world. We would like to see Irish Aid choose more "fragile states" as priority countries, given that an increasing proportion of the poorest people reside in these states. The pattern of expenditure in the bilateral programme shows a strong skew towards Southern and Eastern Africa. We propose that the strong African focus remains, but becomes sharper with the inclusion of a conflict-affected country in the Horn or Central Africa.

URBAN POVERTY: Given that the majority of people now live in urban areas and the ongoing urbanization trend, Irish Aid should consider specific programmes or an explicit approach to addressing extreme poverty in cities. We suggest that this focus should be on informal settlements in major cities as opposed to smaller urban areas.

CLIMATE CHANGE: Concern would like to see Irish Aid continue to support climate change adaptation, resilience building and climate smart agriculture in its programmes overseas while working internally with other government departments to ensure that Ireland is delivering on commitments made at COP 21 and those outlined in SDGs 7 and 13.

GENDER: We believe that Irish Aid should maintain the strong and central focus on addressing inequality and Gender Based Violence throughout its range of systems, policies and strategies. Vulnerability and poverty cannot be adequately addressing without tackling the underlying inequalities people face, above all gender inequality.

HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE: Concern supports the key recommendations from the Dóchas Humanitarian Aid Working Group, of which we are a key member. These are:

1. To provide needs-based humanitarian assistance that is predictable and flexible to respond to sudden onset, protracted and forgotten humanitarian crises.
2. To link Ireland's humanitarian and development approaches so as to prevent, prepare for, support recovery from, and build resilience to crises and disasters.

3. To demonstrate Ireland's leadership and partnership for effective international humanitarian action with a particular emphasis on gender, protection and on targeting forgotten and underfunded humanitarian crises.
4. To contribute to building a humanitarian evidence base and improving humanitarian response through research, good practice and a focus on effectiveness and results.

DEVELOPING COUNTRY CAPABILITIES: Concern's presence at district and community level in fragile contexts has taught us that the major barriers to the achievement of the SDGs are conflict and capacity. The right policies are most often in place; the delivery capabilities are very often not. We would like to see the Irish Aid programme continue to focus on national policies but bring more attention to their implementation and support innovations in addressing barriers to delivery. We face deeply embedded barriers and need funding for innovations to make breakthroughs on these if we are to truly "leave no one behind". Irish Aid should consider establishing an innovation fund to complement its strictly regulated, results focused programme funding. This is linked to incentivising NGOs to work in a more evidence-based way. Irish Aid's investment in action-research has been very positive, but it should advocate with the Irish Research Council for greater coherence in objectives.

MESSAGE 3: Prioritise addressing conflict and Security Council reform.

We have acknowledged Ireland's "soft power" and its high level of influence. Concern sees conflict as the driver of over 80% of humanitarian needs. The international community has to seriously consider the changing nature and pattern of conflict and to find new ways to prevent and resolve conflict or to mitigate its impacts.

The international structures in place aimed at preventing conflict are either antiquated or have become overly politicised, most notably the United Nations Security Council, and the failure to prevent the rising level of global conflict is evidence of the need for change. The recent rise in conflict globally has been facilitated by a number of factors, amongst them the lack of effective early diplomatic intervention. The complexity of many conflicts leads many to be defeatist about the prospects for peace. However, the experience of Northern Ireland, the Balkans and Colombia, where external political intervention was a catalyst for peace, should be remembered.

LEADERSHIP IN CONFLICT: There is a real opportunity for Ireland to become a leader on tackling conflict. Our ambition to obtain a seat on the Security Council, our potential as a neutral country alongside our experience of a long lasting political conflict and its successful resolution, all put us in an excellent position to effectively adopt such a role. Irish Aid should use its influence to call for a renewed and radical approach to inclusive diplomacy. It was heartening to hear Minister for Foreign Affairs, Simon Coveney, at the UN General Assembly on September 23, 2017, voicing Ireland's support for the role of the UN while calling for modernization of the Security Council and we strongly encourage him to continue to pursue this.