



The Irish Association of Non-Governmental  
Development Organisations

## **Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, Trade and Defence**

**Thursday 4 October 2018**

### **Introduction**

Chair, deputies and senators, firstly I'd like to thank the Committee for this opportunity for Dóchas, the Irish platform of international development organisations, to brief you on i) the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals post United Nations High Level Political Forum 2018 in New York and, (ii) the future of EU Development Funding.

I last appeared before you in October last year to feed into your review of Irish Aid, and we were then present at the launch of your report in February this year, which was very welcome. It's also a useful frame for today's discussion because you raised a number of key issues in your report that remain very pertinent, in particular I would ask you to keep in mind your own conclusions in relation to:

- The importance of the SDGs underpinning not only Irish Aid's new policy, but also all Government policies and programmes.
- The need for the Government to significantly increase its funding on ODA if it's to have credibility as a leader on the SDGs – after all, it will be a vital lever to its success.
- The need to have much more robust structures and oversight mechanisms in relation to policy coherence for development - both in the delivery of Ireland's overseas programme and the SDGs. It's also relevant for our discussion on the EU budget process as we have to be comfortable that the EU's policies are consistent with our own.
- Finally, then there is the overarching theme of needing to maintain a strong principle-based aid policy that is also reflected in and through our funding to the EU. Such a policy needs to fully respect, and be willing to strengthen the role played by civil

society, as well as maintain the poverty-focused definition of ODA that sees poverty eradication and untied aid as essential criteria. These principles will need to be robustly defended in the ongoing negotiations on the EU budget.

As I was in New York for the High Level Political Forum in July this year, I will start by giving you a small flavor of the event, and sharing some key takeaways that will be important if we are to keep the momentum on the SDGs. Specifically, we feel there is a real opportunity for this Committee to get involved, both as a stakeholder in shaping this agenda, but also in your critical oversight role.

I will then give some insights on the EU's budget process with respect to Development Cooperation, and where we see some of the opportunities and challenges in that regard. My colleagues, Dr. Róisín Hinds, senior policy Coordinator at Oxfam Ireland, and Niamh Garvey, Head of Policy in Trócaire, are also joining me today to answer any other questions that you may have.

## Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

In July, Minister Naughten presented Ireland's first Voluntary National review (VNR) at the UN High Level Political Forum in New York. It was a very important first step in Ireland's journey to implementing the SDGs, and it is to be welcomed that the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment, who are charged with coordinating the SDGs, were willing to support a number of civil society actors, including the UN youth ambassadors, to participate on the official delegation.

However, for all the fanfare that comes with these kind of high-level meetings, we need to ask ourselves, three years into the process, why has Ireland only just got into the starting blocks. While we led in the negotiations of this transformative agenda in September 2015, we now find ourselves playing catch up.

In particular, we would like to draw your attention to the limited time given for genuine stakeholder engagement to get us ready for New York. For example, an outline of the VNR was shared at a stakeholder meeting but there was no detail or opportunity to give considered input. As a result, Coalition 2030 developed its own separate shadow report, which we are happy to share with you today, and which gives quite a different perspective on progress to date.

Similarly, whilst we were allowed to feedback on the first draft of the National Implementation Plan in December last year, we've struggled to see that any of our suggestions were taken on board when Minister Naughten finally produced it on 26 April 2018. We are concerned that the implementation plan is far too general, with no effort at prioritisation or funding; and very weak mechanisms for stakeholder engagement and oversight.

While in New York at the HLPF, we feel it's helpful to share the four key themes that emerged from our meetings with other civil society, namely:

- Civil society's voice is not being heard in the VNR process. Indeed, a very worrying trend is the fact that it is being silenced all together in an increasing number of countries. This threat to civil society space is a growing reality, both internationally and in Europe.
- Countries continue to report at the HLPF as if it's a tourist profile, rather than an honest reflection of the challenges and obstacles to transformative change for the poorest in their communities.
- Policy coherence is absent in most Member State reporting, and the accountability mechanism is too weak to hold countries to account, including for serious human rights violations.
- The UN has not been playing a strong co-ordination role that allows all stakeholders into the room, and ensures greater political accountability. It's important to note then that at next year's HLPF the reform of the process will be discussed, so Ireland will need to be fully engaged.

Each of these reflections resonate with our own experience – comforting to know perhaps that we are not alone – but we do acknowledge that some progress has been made. Here, we would like to acknowledge in particular, the Department of Foreign Affairs, who we feel have genuinely engaged with and are internalising the Agenda through the white paper consultation process to develop a new international aid policy. We are encouraged by their commitment to the 'leaving no-one behind' principles and the fact that they have gone into a robust critique of what that really means in practice. Similarly, we very much welcome the consultation process, which has allowed our members to engage fully with the process.

On the SDGs now is the moment to look to the future, rather than ponder what 'might have been,' and in particular then to ask how we can Ireland do more, better and with greater urgency. In particular, the next 12 months will be critical given the reform process, and indeed the growing momentum behind Ireland's own implementation plan.

### ***Key Recommendations:***

- Coalition 2030 has consistently called for the Office of the Taoiseach to take the lead responsibility for the delivery of the SDG - only then will the 'whole of government approach' demanded by the SDGs be delivered upon.
- We need to see a much more credible stakeholder forum established, to include members of the Oireachtas. This forum then needs to consider an independent oversight function, as well as allow a space to critically dialogue the challenges we all face in delivering this ambitious agenda.
- We would ask this Committee to support proposals that the Committee on Budgetary Oversight request Government to SDG-proof the Government's budget each year. Only then will we know if we are on track.
- Underpinning the success of the SDGs for developing countries, will be funding through ODA. We support this Committee's ask that the Government publish a roadmap with sustainable percentage increases to ensure we meet the 0.7% of GNI target on ODA. We go further and ask for this 0.7% target to be reached by 2025 if Ireland is to remain credible in this process. To deliver on the Goals by 2030 requires financing ahead of time.

Finally, public awareness of these global commitments is very weak, including across Europe. That should be a concern for us all. In Ireland, Minister Naughten accepts that insufficient effort to raise public awareness of the SDGs, either at home or abroad. There seems to be an expectation that civil society will do this but without any serious financing.

Let's be clear, without the Irish citizen getting behind the vision and plan of the SDGs, the Agenda will struggle to get the political traction and prioritisation that it deserves. We need to see the Government putting effort into a meaningful public participation strategy that will ensure a 'whole of society' approach to the delivery of the SDGs.

### **The Future of EU Development Funding – the multi financial framework (MFF)**

As the committee knows, the Multiannual Financial Framework will determine the budget spend for the EU for 2021-2027. Current negotiations are an opportunity for the EU and its member states to translate their development and humanitarian aid commitments into reality; it is an opportunity to agree on how to implement a global vision for development

cooperation rooted in European values with the European Neighbourhood, the African continent and beyond.

Discussions on the MFF are taking place against the backdrop of Brexit and a political context in Europe that is becoming both divisive and more inward looking. Migration and security preoccupations, and attracting private sector investment - not always with sufficient safeguards in place - have become new priorities.

The European Commission published its overall MFF proposal in May 2018, outlining the main priorities, budget and architecture. In relation to development funding, a major change is proposed - namely to bring the European Development Fund and other external instruments into a single instrument, known as “Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument” (NDICI). This will combine 12 previous external instruments.

The proposal for the Regulation, which will determine the framework of the NDICI, was released in June 2018. It contains some positive elements, including an increase in funding for development and a commitment to devote 0.7% of GNI to ODA. We also welcome the Commission’s proposal to keep a separate Humanitarian Aid Instrument and efforts to increase the humanitarian aid budget from €7.1 billion to €11 billion in recognition of the reality that humanitarian needs worldwide have more than doubled.

However, the overall direction of the proposed Regulation is taking a worrying turn as EU self-interest appears to be prevailing over the need to keep the EU’s actions focused on poverty eradication and the achievement of the 2030 Agenda.

As such, we are concerned that the proposal as it currently stands will not achieve the balance required to reconcile the different policy areas, while remaining true to the values already agreed in the EU Consensus for Development. For example, poverty eradication, which should be the primary aim of the EU’s development cooperation, is not explicitly mentioned in the objectives of the instrument. Less emphasis has also been given to the work carried out by human rights defenders and role of civil society, and there is a real concern that funds for Sub-Saharan Africa won’t be sufficiently protected.

It’s important to remind the Committee that Ireland’s commitment to the EU is a significant part of its ODA spend, running just below 30% of the annual aid budget. We very much

recognize the added value of working with the EU in development and humanitarian action; acting jointly provides economies of scale, efficiency and can enable a stronger impact.

However, we also need to acknowledge the expected deficit in both funding and policy influence that will be left by the UK's expected departure after Brexit. Ireland may decide to increase the amount it gives to the overall EU budget, but in doing so, it will be essential that it strengthens its engagement at all levels.

### ***Key Recommendations:***

- We need to see significantly more resources to ensure strong oversight of the strategic direction of the development instruments within the new MFF. This will need to include more resources for DFAT and Irish civil society to play a strong policy role.
- We would ask that the Committee write to the Minister for Foreign Affairs ahead of the next Foreign Affairs Council meeting on the 26th November to share civil society concerns, and request regular reports to the Committee on Ireland's position on the MFF and status of negotiations.
- This committee should have a strong oversight role, calling on DFAT to, at a minimum, meet with the Committee once a year, providing information on whether funds are being used in line with its stated policy. It is essential that we ensure Ireland's ODA contribution is being used for its intended purposes to alleviate poverty and reduce vulnerability and that it does not undermine the high quality of Ireland's own aid programme.
- We welcome the fact that Brian Hayes MEP is part of the Development Committee of the European Parliament, and would urge that having an Irish MEP on the committee is continued into the future to enable strong oversight of this funding.

#### **Key Dates for MFF negotiations**

**18<sup>th</sup> October** – European Council - at this point we will see some financial and policy direction

**12-15 November** – European Parliament – interim report on the MFF regulation

**26 November** – Foreign Affairs Council - Discussion on the NDICI – key date to influence ahead of

**13-14 December** – European Council – state of play statement

**May 2019** – Possible agreement and finalization of the MFF (ahead of the MEP elections)

**23 – 26 May 2019** – European elections