Summary Report

Dóchas EU Presidency Launch 24th June 2026, Dublin.

The Future of Development Cooperation: Civil Society's Ambition for Ireland's EU Presidency

dóchas
The Irish Association of Non-Governmental Development Organisations

PRESIDENCY PROJECT IE LT EL

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Introduction

As Ireland prepared to assume the Presidency of the Council of the European Union (EU), Dóchas brought together policymakers, European institutions, civil society leaders, and development experts on 24 June 2026 to launch its EU Presidency programme. The event provided a platform to discuss the future of EU international partnerships at a time of unprecedented pressure on global development cooperation, and to discuss the role Ireland can play in ensuring that EU external action remains rooted in poverty eradication, human rights, and international solidarity.

The conference took place against a backdrop of shrinking Official Development Assistance (ODA) figures, growing geopolitical tensions, rising humanitarian needs, and negotiations on the EU's next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF).

Throughout the day, one message resonated across panel and keynote speakers: Ireland's 8th EU Presidency presents a critical opportunity to support and reaffirm the EU's commitment to values-based international partnerships, and to place civil society at the heart of development cooperation. The following report presents the key points of the conversations that took place.



Opening Session

Speakers:

Jane-Ann McKenna, CEO, Dóchas

Peter Power, Head of the European Commission Representation in Ireland, European Commission

Opening the event, **Dóchas' CEO, Jane-Ann McKenna,** outlined the sector's EU Presidency recommendations and highlighted the importance of creating spaces for dialogue between civil society and policymakers, especially during the six-month Presidency.

Dóchas' key recommendations:

1. Champion a values-based EU external action agenda reaffirming the principles of the European Consensus for Development, rooted in poverty eradication, human rights, the rule of law, gender equality, and meaningful partnership with civil society.

2. Safeguard an ambitious and accountable Global Europe Instrument that protects ODA integrity, prioritises human development and fragile contexts, and strengthens democratic oversight and civil society participation.

3. Place conflict prevention, peacebuilding, principled humanitarian action, and respect for international law at the centre of the EU's response to global fragility and instability.

4. Place food security and nutrition as strategic EU priorities, through renewed political leadership, sustainable financing, and support for resilient and equitable food systems.

5. Advance a just and equitable EU climate agenda by increasing adaptation and loss-and-damage financing, supporting a fair transition away from fossil fuels, and prioritising the needs of vulnerable communities.

Peter Power, Head of the European Commission Representation in Ireland, recognised civil society organisations (CSOs) as indispensable partners in delivering sustainable development and humanitarian action. He stressed that strong partnerships with local organisations are essential to ensure that EU investments remain grounded in community needs and respect for human rights. Mr Power also underlined the European Commission's commitment to strengthening dialogue with civil society through the recently adopted EU Civil Society Strategy. He also pointed out the Commission's proposal for a significantly increased Global Europe Instrument under the next MFF, with a renewed focus on fragility and tackling food insecurity.

First panel: 'Civil society in a new era of development cooperation: opportunities and challenges'

- **Video message from Commissioner Michael McGrath, Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law and Consumer Protection, European Commission**

Panel Discussion:

- **Dr Moses Isooba, Executive Director, Uganda National CSO Platform**
- **Celia Cranfield, Head of Policy, CONCORD Europe**
- **Marlene Holzner, Head of Unit, Civil Society Organisations, Local Authorities, and Foundations, Directorate-General for International Partnerships, European Commission**
- **Seán Farrell, CEO, Trócaire**

A video message from **European Commissioner for Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law and Consumer Protection Michael McGrath** preceded and introduced the panel discussion. Reinforcing the importance of civil society in protecting democracy, promoting accountability and strengthening resilient societies were among Commissioner McGrath's message highlights. Commissioner McGrath recognised Irish civil society as an example of partnership in action, constantly pushing Ireland to be a champion for Global Justice and sustainable development, and encouraged organisations to keep playing an active role in shaping Ireland's Presidency priorities.

> Civil society organisations are indispensable partners in development cooperation and humanitarian action. They bring local knowledge, public trust, expertise and long-term commitment."
>
> European Commissioner for Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law and Consumer Protection, Michael McGrath

The opening panel explored the evolving role of civil society within EU development cooperation, focusing on the opportunities and challenges presented by the EU's Global Gateway strategy and the broader transformation of international development financing. The discussion highlighted differing perspectives on how EU development policy should evolve.

Dr Moses Isooba (Uganda National CSO Platform) emphasised that the EU's transition from traditional aid towards partnership offers significant potential. For that potential to materialise, civil society organisations must be recognised as equal strategic partners rather than solely implementing agencies. Drawing on experience from the EU's Enabling Environment (EU SEE) project, Dr Isooba highlighted the unique role civil society plays in providing evidence, monitoring civic space, and informing policy dialogue. He argued that the Global Gateway should become a people-centred initiative, grounded in accountability, participation, and democratic governance. He also warned that infrastructure investment should not come at the expense of human rights, civic space, and locally defined development priorities.

Celia Cranfield (CONCORD Europe) described the Global Gateway strategy as an evolution rather than a revolution in EU development policy, but raised concerns about its implementation. Ms Cranfield noted that increased reliance on blended finance, private sector engagement, and Team Europe approaches has made funding flows less transparent and reduced opportunities for direct engagement between civil society and EU institutions. While acknowledging the positive foundations of the strategy, she stressed that the forthcoming Global Europe Instrument must reinforce commitments to poverty reduction, human rights, gender equality, and meaningful civil society participation. She also highlighted Ireland's EU Presidency as an opportunity to promote mutual accountability and reaffirm international cooperation based on partnership rather than geopolitical competition.

On behalf of the European Commission, **Marlene Holzner** (DG for International Partnerships) explained the Commission's approach, emphasising that support for civil society remains a central pillar of the EU's external action agenda. Ms Holzner highlighted the Commission's €50 million EU System for an Enabling Environment for Civil Society (EU SEE) – previously referred to by Dr Isooba – an EU programme operating in over 80 countries, as evidence of this commitment. She argued that Global Gateway should not be viewed simply as an infrastructure investment strategy, but as a comprehensive development model, designed to generate jobs, strengthen local economies, and improve long-term prosperity. Ms Holzner stressed that poverty reduction, human rights, and civil society engagement remain embedded in EU policy, and encouraged organisations to engage actively with EU Member States during the design of Global Gateway initiatives.

Seán Farrell (Trócaire) welcomed the EU's continued global leadership on development, while also questioning whether poverty reduction remains a central objective of EU development policy. Mr Farrell expressed concerns over recent aid cuts, which have disproportionately affected organisations working on gender equality, climate justice, and human rights, as well as Global Gateway's increasing reflection of European economic and geopolitical interests. Drawing from Trócaire's 50+ years of programmatic experience, he argued that infrastructure-led investment alone cannot address inequality without genuine community participation, rights-based approaches, and a continued focus on the most marginalised. He also stressed that localisation goes beyond transferring resources, also requiring shared decision-making power with local actors.

Audience contributions reinforced the importance of localisation and inclusive decision-making.

Throughout the discussion, speakers highlighted that sustainable development depends not only on economic growth but also on investment in education, healthcare, food systems, transparency, and accountable institutions. Drawing lessons from Ireland's own development experience, participants argued that economic progress is strongest when built upon inclusive public institutions and human development.

Panellists also agreed that Ireland's EU Presidency presents an important opportunity to strengthen the role of civil society in EU external action, reinforce poverty reduction and human rights as the foundation of development cooperation, and ensure that the Global Gateway strategy delivers inclusive, accountable, and locally owned development outcomes alongside its investment objectives.



Quotes from the panel:

"Communities do not want development done to them. They do not want development done for them. They want development done with them."

Dr Moses Isooba, Uganda National CSO Platform

"Localisation is about much more than money. It is about who makes decisions, who designs programmes and who shares power."

Sean Farrell, Trócaire

"Civil society organisations are not just implementing partners; they are strategic partners, knowledge holders and part of the democratic infrastructure that delivers development."

Dr Moses Isooba, Uganda National CSO Platform

Keynote Address: Neale Richmond TD | Minister of State for International Development and Diaspora, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

In his keynote address, **Minister Neale Richmond** reaffirmed Ireland's commitment to development cooperation, stressing that poverty eradication should remain the central objective of EU development policy, and that he is committed to using Ireland's Presidency to promote strategic discussions on the future of EU development and humanitarian assistance. Priorities include securing an ambitious EU external action budget and strengthening support for food security, gender equality, global health, climate action, and multilateralism, while ensuring that human rights and democratic values remain at the heart of the EU's international partnerships. The minister also underlined that the Global Gateway strategy should complement, rather than replace, development cooperation, and concluded by recognising civil society as an essential partner in delivering an ambitious and values-based Irish EU Presidency.

"These cuts are affecting most severely the furthest behind, including persons with disabilities in least developed countries and other fragile contexts. To be quite blunt, these cuts are costing lives".

"The primary objective of EU development policy is the reduction and, in the long term, the eradication of poverty. This is not a choice. This is committed to and is a responsibility within the treaties".

'"We will also ensure that our values remain at the centre of Europe's international partnerships precisely because the development ambitions we share with our partners will not be achieved or sustained without respect for human rights, including the rights of persons with disabilities, participation, representation, transparency, accountability and the rule of law".

Neale Richmond TD, Minister of State for International Development and Diaspora, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

Second Panel: ‘Reflecting Ireland’s values in a renewed approach to the EU’s international partnerships’

Panel Discussion:

- **Dr. Alexei Jones, Head of European Foreign and Development Policy, ECDPM**
- **Dominic Crowley, CEO, Concern Worldwide**
- **Nadine Saba, Co-Founder & Director, Akkar Network for Development, Lebanon**
- **Emily Wigens, EU Director, ONE Campaign**
- **Barry Ward TD, Chair of the Oireachtas Joint Committee for European Affairs**

The second panel looked at how Ireland can use its Presidency of the Council of the EU to help shape the future of the EU’s international partnerships, especially at a time of profound geopolitical change and against the backdrop of the ongoing MFF 2028–2034 negotiations.

The panellists considered how development cooperation should be framed within wider European debates, including around security, migration, and competitiveness. While acknowledging the increasingly challenging political environment, speakers argued that long-term investment in development represents an essential investment in global stability and shared prosperity.

Dr Alexei Jones (ECDPM) placed the debate in the broader European context. Dr Jones argued that the challenge is no longer simply about defending development budgets, but about redefining the purpose of EU international partnerships. Initiatives such as Global Gateway have helped elevate development on the political agenda. However, the EU still needs a coherent vision – one that reconciles its geopolitical ambitions with its commitment to sustainable development and poverty reduction. He also stressed that values remain a distinct feature of the EU’s soft power, which partner countries truly value.

Drawing on Concern Worldwide’s nearly six decades of operational experience, **Dominic Crowley (Concern Worldwide)** warned that the consequences of funding cuts are already being felt by vulnerable communities. Mr Crowley stressed that development cooperation should continue to prioritise those furthest behind, especially in fragile contexts. Conflict is the main driver of humanitarian need and, therefore, peace prevention and conflict resolution should be high on the EU agenda. He called on Ireland to champion predictable, long-term investment in development, as both a moral responsibility and a contribution to global stability.

Offering a local perspective from Lebanon, **Nadine Saba (Akkar Network)** reflected on the realities faced by civil society organisations operating in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. Ms Saba emphasised that local organisations must be recognised as equal partners in shaping policies and programmes, rather than being limited to implementation roles. She also reminded participants that sustainable development cannot be achieved without peace, open civic spaces, and genuine local ownership.



Emily Wigens (ONE Campaign) focused on the political opportunities presented by Ireland's Presidency to demonstrate that ODA is a strategic investment that benefits both partner countries and Europe. Ms Wigens highlighted the opportunity to build a group of Member States supportive of ODA and encouraged Ireland to frame development cooperation as an essential component of Europe's security, prosperity, and global credibility. This is an investment to mitigate long-term threats like climate change.

Closing the panel, **Barry Ward TD (Chair of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on EU Affairs)** reflected on Ireland's reputation within the European Union: that is, as a constructive and trusted partner, capable of building consensus across diverse positions. Mr Ward emphasised that this EU Presidency offers an opportunity to reinforce Ireland's long-standing commitment to international solidarity, while also helping to ensure that the EU's external action agenda remains firmly anchored in its core values. He noted that while Ireland presents the highest approval ratings for EU membership, the connection between the EU's diplomatic action in upholding and defending fundamental elements of democracy, and developments at home, is not always easily understood by the Irish public. Meanwhile, this connection is increasingly at risk of dilution. While Irish citizens have faith in the EU as a defender of international law, human rights, and the rule of law, ambiguity and inconsistency in the EU's reaction to breaches of international law, risks jeopardising citizens' belief in Europe.

The question is not whether institutions are listening to civil society, but whether they are acting on what they hear."

Nadine Saba

"The job of the Irish negotiators chairing meetings over the next six months will be to constantly steer that decision and to try to include the benefit of overseas development aid as a security concept, not just 'us helping them' concept"

Barry Ward TD

''For Irish people, one of the very important parts of the values that we associate with EU membership is the values of preservation of international law, the rule of law and the human rights elements that come with that"

Barry Ward TD

Closing Remarks: Michael Gaffey | Director-General, Development Cooperation and Africa Division, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

In his closing remarks, **Michael Gaffey, Director General for International Development at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade,**called for a renewed focus on long-term development partnerships, poverty reduction and the EU's founding values. DG Gaffey argued that European values and interests should be seen as mutually reinforcing rather than competing priorities. He outlined Ireland's intention to firmly place development cooperation on the political agenda through the Foreign Affairs Council, as well as advocate for an ambitious Global Europe budget, sustained ODA, and a continued focus on Africa, food security, gender equality and health. Mr Gaffey concluded by stressing that achieving these objectives would require strong civil society engagement with governments and EU institutions.

"Official Development Assistance needs to be understood as a strategic investment, not simply as helping others."

""This Global Europe fund isn't a charity fund […] it is as much in the interests of the European Union as defence and security funding."

“It is really important that we use these months to build a greater understanding of why development cooperation is still important for the European Union. I would say also of why ODA is not just an old-fashioned thing from the past, but it's also really important for least developed countries, for fragile contexts, for conflict, and therefore […] of real importance for the interests of the European Union."

Michael Gaffey, Director General for International Development at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

Closing the event, **Dóchas CEO Jane-Ann McKenna** outlined the organisation's EU Presidency programme over the coming six months. This will include a series of policy conferences, capacity-building activities on EU policymaking, a sub-granting programme to support public engagement on the EU's external action agenda, and regular opportunities for dialogue between civil society and policymakers.



Speakers and Panellists



Keynote Speaker - Neale Richmond TD

Minister of State for International Development and Diaspora, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

Appointed to this specific ministerial portfolio in January 2025, he oversees Ireland's international development cooperation and engagement with the global diaspora. Representing Dublin Rathdown, he previously held junior ministerial roles in Finance and Enterprise, and led the Irish delegation to the EU Committee of the Regions

Opening Remarks - Peter Power



Head of the European Commission Representation in Ireland, European Commission

Peter Power is Head of the European Commission Representation in Ireland since February 2025. He has extensive experience in high-ranking positions within the European Commission and its Cabinets.



Closing Remarks - Michael Gaffey

Director-General, Development Cooperation and Africa Division, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

Michael Gaffey is Director-General of the Development Cooperation and Africa Division at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, where he oversees Ireland's overseas development aid programme and bilateral engagement with Africa. He is one of Ireland's most senior officials working at the intersection of diplomacy and development.

Jane-Ann McKenna



CEO, Dóchas

Jane-Ann McKenna joined Dóchas as CEO in late 2021, bringing extensive experience from leading Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) humanitarian teams in conflict zones like Afghanistan and Sudan. She also serves on the board of CONCORD Europe and the Irish Advisory Board of UCD Business Schools.

Panel Discussion 1: Civil Society in a new era of Development Cooperation: Opportunities and Challenges



Commissioner Michael McGrath

Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law and Consumer Protection, European Commission

Commissioner Michael McGrath assumed this European Commissioner role in December 2024, steering EU-wide portfolios on upholding the rule of law, protecting fundamental rights, and strengthening consumer policy. Prior to his move to Brussels, he served at the highest levels of Irish politics as Minister for Finance (2022–2024) and Minister for Public Expenditure.

Marlene Holzner



Head of Unit, Civil Society Organisations, Local Authorities, and Foundations, Directorate-General for International Partnerships, European Commission

Marlene Holzner has led this unit within the Directorate-General for International Partnerships since 2020, managing a team responsible for the EU's 2021–2027 Civil Society Programme



Dr Moses Isooba

Executive Director, Uganda National CSO Platform

Dr. Moses Isooba is the Executive Director of the Uganda National NGO Forum (UNNGOF). Dr. Isooba currently serves as the Vice Chair of the Forus International Governance Council and is a member of the Board of the Africa Philanthropy Network. He is also a Member of the Programme Advisory Group of the Finnish Development NGOs.

Celia Cranfield



Head of Policy, CONCORD Europe

Celia has been Head of Advocacy at the CONCORD secretariat since 2022. She joined the team in 2020 as Senior Policy and Advocacy Advisor for Financing and Funding for Sustainable Development. Before joining CONCORD, Celia worked in Brussels for Light For the World and VOICE.



Seán Farrell

CEO, Trócaire

Seán Farrell is Chief Executive Officer of the major Irish international development charity, Trócaire. He brings over three decades of total development sector experience to the helm, including six years leading Trócaire's International Division.

Panel Discussion 2: Reflecting Ireland's values in a renewed approach to the EU's international partnerships

Barry Ward TD

Chair of the Oireachtas Joint Committee for European Affairs



Serving as a Fine Gael parliamentary representative for Dún Laoghaire, he acts as the Cathaoirleach (Chair) of the Oireachtas Committee on European Union Affairs steering Ireland's EU policy scrutiny. In his legislative work, he manages the committee's engagement on strategic EU policy, human rights issues, and regional development initiatives.



Dominic Crowley

CEO, Concern Worldwide

Appointed as Chief Executive Officer of Concern Worldwide in 2024, he originally began his humanitarian career as an overseas volunteer in Liberia in the late 1980s. He is a prominent specialist in emergency programming and security risk management, having previously served as President of the European NGO network VOICE.

Emily Wigens

EU Director, ONE Campaign



Based in Brussels, Emily leads the ONE Campaign's advocacy and political lobbying across the European Union institutions to combat extreme poverty and preventable disease. She focuses heavily on the EU's MFF budget negotiations, advocating against cuts to international development funds.



Dr. Nadine Saba

Co-Founder & Director, Akkar Network for Development, Lebanon

Dr. Nadine Saba is the Co-Founder and Director of Akkar Network for Development (AND), with nearly two decades of experience working with NGOs in Lebanon. AND has been active in Lebanon's Akkar region since 2011, focusing on support for vulnerable women, youth, and children, including work on gender-based violence, education, and psychosocial support.

Dr. Alexei Jones



Head of European Foreign and Development Policy, ECDPM

Dr Alexei Jones leads ECDPM's European foreign and development policy team, with an academic background in international and European law and a PhD from the University of Nice – Sophia Antipolis. Before joining ECDPM, he worked as a policy officer at the European Commission's DG for International Cooperation and Development, and has served as counsellor and adviser to several EU Council presidencies.



Moderator - Shona Murray

European Affairs Correspondent, Euronews

Based in Brussels, Shona Murray covers major European and global stories including EU institutions, NATO, the war in Ukraine, and Middle Eastern affairs. She has a deep background in international reporting across 35+ countries and holds postgraduate degrees in International Peace Studies and International Law from Trinity College Dublin.

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