Explanations for global poverty: The Irish public 2021-2026

Five years of the Worldview causes-of-poverty question: what people say, who says it, whether anyone changes their mind, and what it means for how members talk about aid.

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A Dóchas Worldview Briefing.



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world view
Exploring Irish attitudes to overseas development aid

Outline

Seven questions, and implications for engaging audiences and communications

The Data

Worldview, seven waves from January 2021 to March 2026, 16,603 interviews, weighted to the population. Q31 asks people to pick up to three of sixteen causes of poverty in developing countries. 3,156 people were interviewed more than once, which allows us to study individuals as well as the public.



Implications

The final two slides set out what the findings mean for members: which causal stories to lead with for which audiences, how to speak to the corruption consensus, and how to use events, segments and generations.



The Seven Questions

1. What does the public think causes poverty in developing countries, and has that changed since 2021?
2. Do different kinds of people give different answers?
3. Does what someone blames for poverty tell us how they feel about aid?
4. Behind the sixteen causes, are there just a few ways of thinking about why poverty exists?
5. Who holds each of these ways of thinking?
6. Does the same person give the same answer a year later?
7. When someone changes their story about poverty, does their support for aid change too?



Question 1

What does the Irish public think are the main causes of poverty in developing countries, and has that changed since 2021?

How we answered it

The method is descriptive. Each wave, respondents select up to three of sixteen causes. We weight to the population, calculate the share naming each cause, and compare waves. One point to bear in mind: almost everyone selects exactly three, so the shares are shares of a fixed budget. If one cause rises, another must fall.



What we found

Corruption, war and government inefficiency, in that order in every wave. Over five years the top of the list has not moved. What has moved, slowly, is the tail: somewhat more blame on the international order and on history, and a small but real rise in blaming the poor themselves.

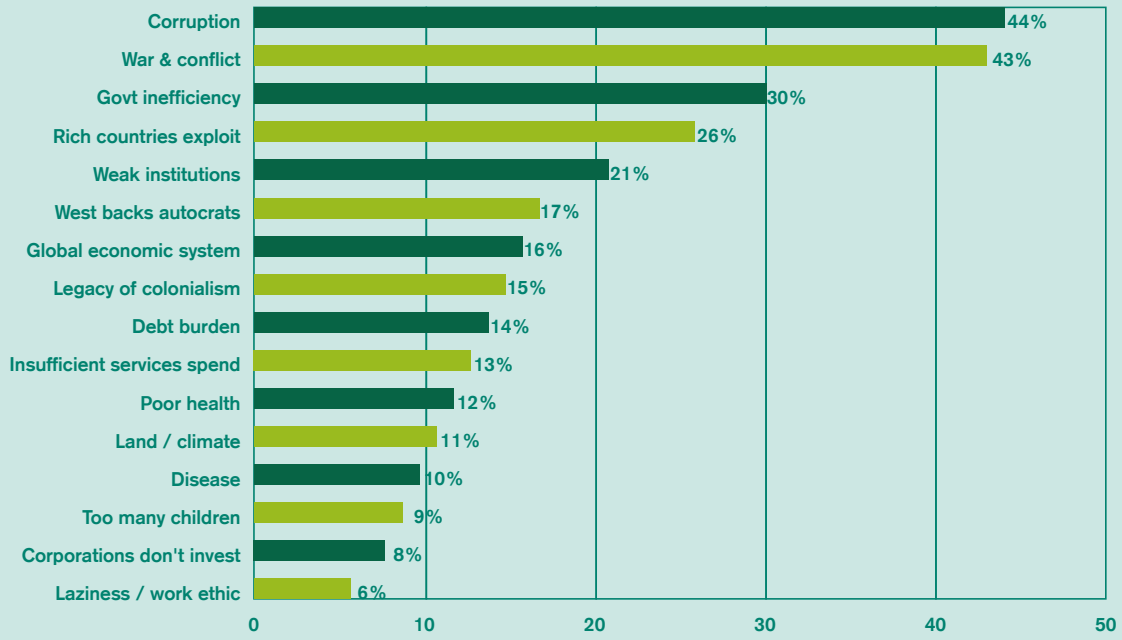


What people say

Three causes dominate, and have done since 2021: corruption, war, and government inefficiency

Main causes of poverty, Feb–Mar 2026

% selecting (up to three of sixteen), weighted



February to March 2026. Exploitation by rich countries and weak institutions complete the top five. Laziness is last.

The Top Five

Corruption 44%, war and conflict 43%, government inefficiency 30%, rich countries exploit 27%, weak institutions 21%. That order has held in six of the seven waves; the exception is July 2025, when war briefly overtook corruption.

The Middle

Autocrats, the global economic system, colonialism, debt and services all sit at 13 to 17%. This is the structural group of explanations, named by roughly one person in six.

The Tail

Health, land and climate, disease, too many children and corporations at 8 to 12%. And laziness at 5.5%: the smallest share, and, as later slides show, the one that matters most for support.

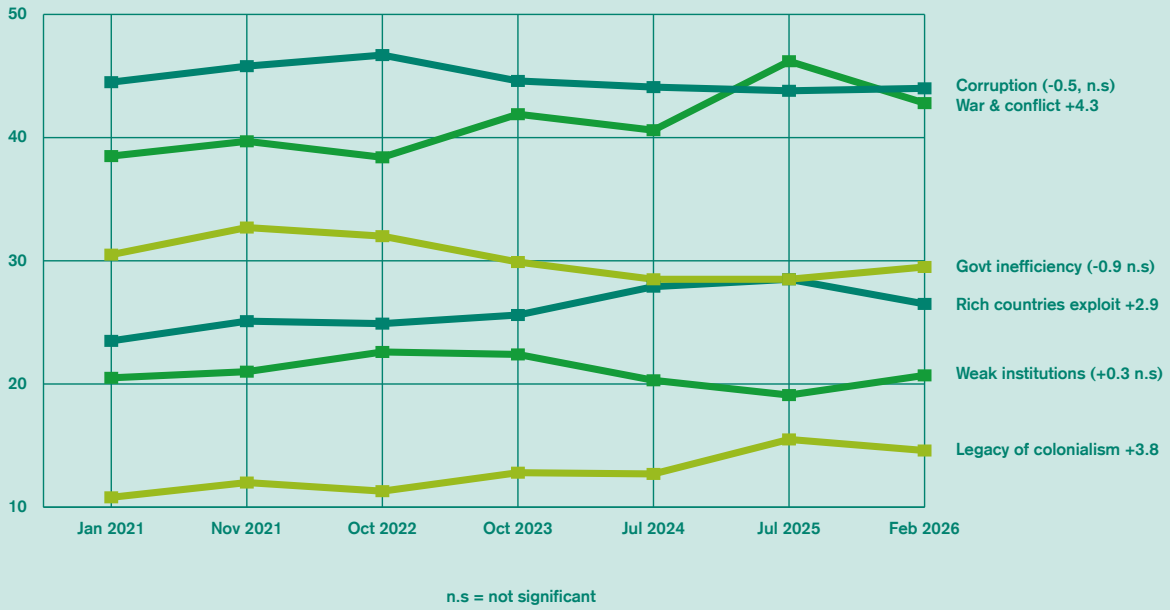
In Short

Ireland explains poverty first through the governments of poor countries, then through war, and only after that through the international order.

Wave on wave, little changes. Over five years, seven of the sixteen causes have shifted

The top six causes, wave by wave, with the five-year change.

% selecting, weighted; change Jan 2021 to Mar 2026 in percentage points



The six most-named causes wave by wave, with the change from January 2021 to March 2026 in percentage points. Three of the six have moved significantly; three have not.

In Short

No wave-on-wave change of note, but over five years the direction is clear: more blame on the world, more on the poor, less on the technical.

Up Over Five Years

War and conflict **+4.3**, colonialism **+3.8**, rich countries exploit **+2.9**, land and climate **+2.8**. The international order and history are gaining ground. War is the only one of the top three that responds to events: 38% in 2021, **46%** in **July 2025** after two years of Ukraine and Gaza, 43% in 2026.

Also Up, Quietly

Too many children **+2.6** and laziness **+1.5**. Small but real, and these are the two causes most damaging to support for aid.

Flat or Down

Corruption (44 to 47% in every wave), government inefficiency and weak institutions have not moved. Corporations not investing is down **2.4**. The technical explanation is falling; the institutional ones are not.

Question 2

Do different kinds of people give different answers?

How we answered it

We divide the public by age, birth cohort, gender, class, region, urban and rural, and by the Worldview segments, and compare the share naming each cause. For the age question we follow birth cohorts across the seven waves, which separates ‘young people think differently’ from ‘young people have changed’.



What we found

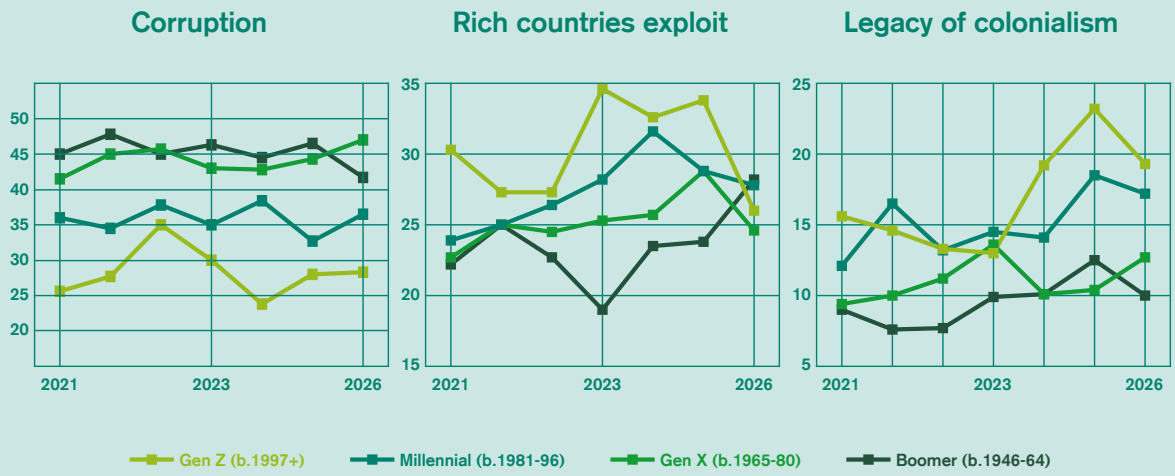
Age is the dimension that matters; gender, region and class barely register. Under-30s are half as likely as over-60s to name corruption and twice as likely to name colonialism. The rise in colonialism explanations has occurred within the younger cohorts since 2024; it is not simply generational turnover.



Corruption is an older person's explanation. Colonialism has become a younger person's, and only recently

Who names what: birth cohorts across the seven waves

% selecting, weighted



Percentage naming each cause by birth cohort across the seven waves. The cohorts run in parallel for corruption; they pull apart on colonialism after 2023.

Corruption

Every cohort flat, and ranked by age the whole way through: **Boomers around 50%, Gen Z around 33%**. A generational difference, not a period one.

Colonialism

Gen Z and Millennials go from roughly 12% to **19 to 21%** between 2023 and 2026. Gen X and Boomers remain near 10%. Something has changed among younger people, and recently.

Exploitation

Younger cohorts higher throughout, and a modest rise across everyone since 2024.

In Short

The structural vocabulary is spreading among the under-45s, recently and within the cohort, not simply through slow replacement.

Question 3

Does what someone blames for poverty tell us how they feel about aid?

How we answered it

We compare people who selected a cause with people who did not, holding age, class, region, gender and wave constant, and ask how much more or less likely the selectors are to say aid is important. Because everyone selects three, each cause is read relative to the average cause. We estimated it three ways (ordinary, Bayesian, and treating the three selections as a choice) and obtained the same answer each time.



What we found

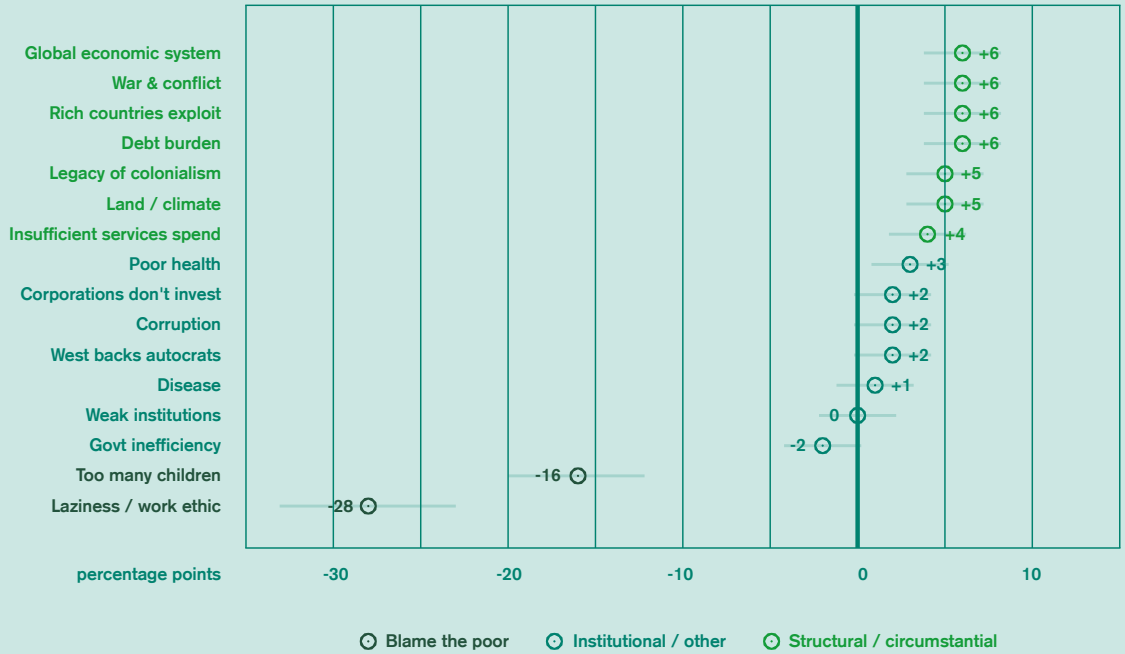
Yes, strongly, and in the order the psychology of blame would predict. Blame the poor themselves and support falls sharply. Blame the international order or circumstances and it rises. Blame corrupt governments and the effect is neutral. The causes tell us more about support than age, class and region combined.



Support for aid falls by a quarter among those who blame the poor, and rises among those who blame the world or circumstances

Naming a cause and thinking aid is important

Change in P(aid important), pp, relative to the average cause; 95% CI



Change in the probability of saying aid is important, in percentage points, for naming each cause rather than the average one. Same wave, same demographics.

Blame The Poor

Naming laziness: **–28 points.** Too many children: **–16**. Rare causes, large effects, and the two that have risen over the period.

Blame The World

The global economic system, war, exploitation, debt, colonialism: +5 to +6. Land and climate, under-spent services: **+4** to **+5**.

Blame Their Governments

Corruption +2, weak institutions 0, government inefficiency –2. The institutional frame is not an anti-aid frame; it is a neutral one, and that matters for what follows.

In Short

How controllable the cause appears governs support. The Irish public behaves exactly as attribution theory says it should.

Question 4

Behind individual causes, are there just a few ways of thinking about why poverty exists?

How we answered it

Two different methods. First, a network: which explanations are chosen together more often than expected, given how popular each one is. Second, a latent class model, which sorts people into a small number of groups by their whole pattern of selections.



What we found

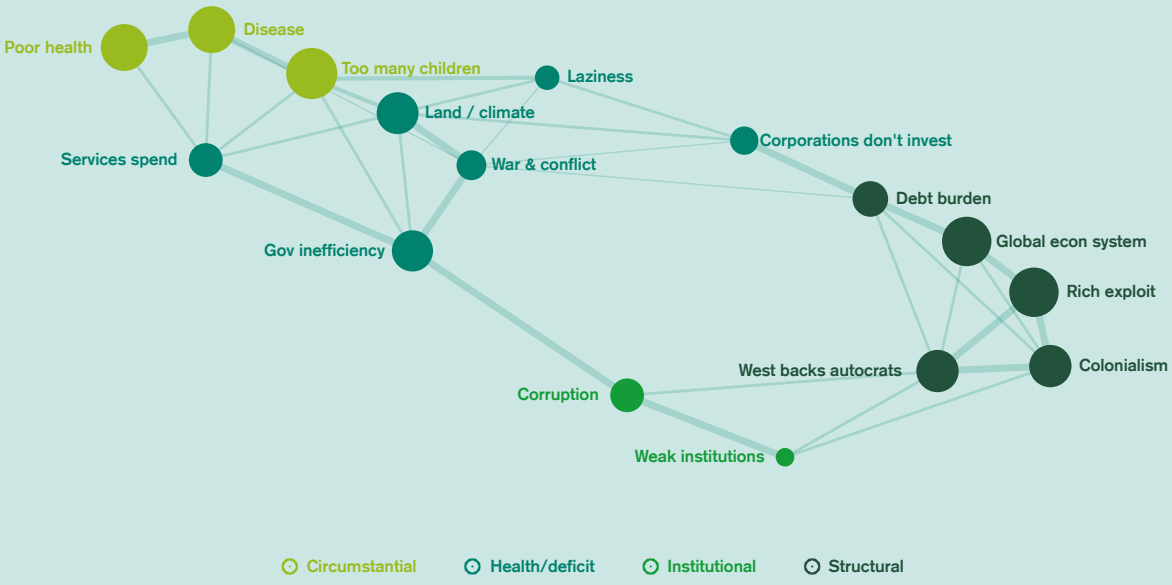
Three frames and a corridor. Structural (the international order), institutional (their governments), circumstantial (war, climate, disease), plus a small health frame. Corruption is named by every frame at close to chance, so it is a consensus item. Government inefficiency is the hinge between the institutional and circumstantial frames.



Three clusters of causes are chosen together; corruption sits between them, tied only to weak institutions

Which causes are ticked together

Lines: excess co-selection (z >= 2), thicker = stronger.
Colour: latent class the item belongs to.



Excess co-selection between causes, pooled across waves. A line means two causes are chosen together more than we would expect; colour is the latent class (next slide) each cause belongs to.

Structural

Exploitation, colonialism, the global economy, autocrats, debt: tightly bound together. A person who names one will probably name the others.

Circumstantial

War, government inefficiency, land and climate, services, corporations: a looser cluster, with disease, poor health and too many children hanging off it.

Corruption

Its one strong tie is weak institutions; otherwise near zero to everything. Government inefficiency is the bridge between the circumstantial and institutional clusters.

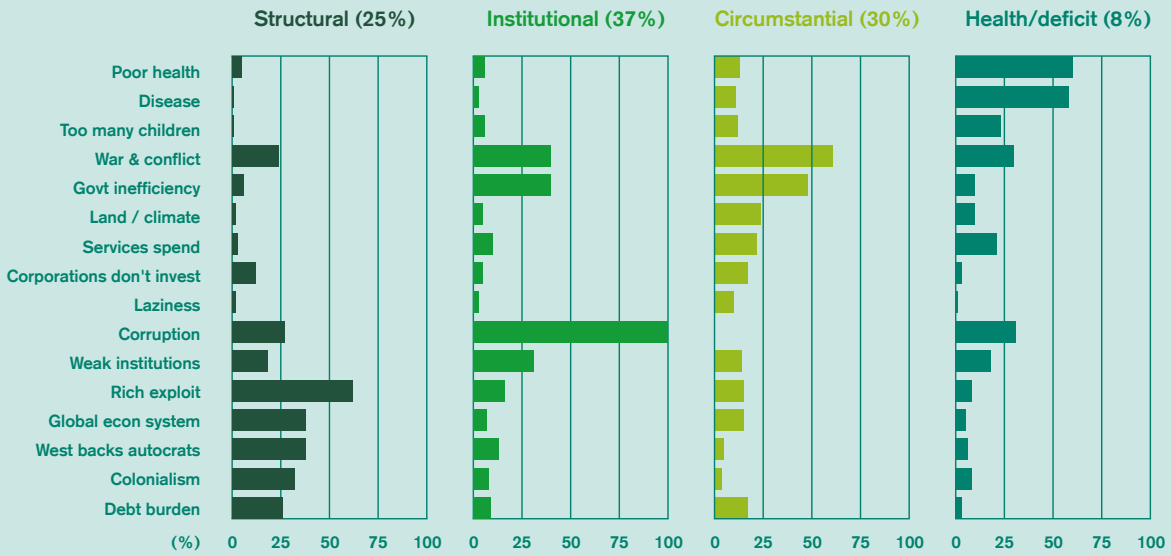
In Short

Corruption is not a camp. It is the one cause almost everyone agrees on, and for that reason it tells us little on its own.

The class model finds the same three frames, plus a small health frame, and it cuts the public on corruption

Four latent classes: how likely each is to name each cause

P(select | class), %; measurement held constant across waves



Probability that a member of each class names each cause. Measurement is identical across waves; class sizes are pooled 2021 to 2026.

Structural, 25%

Poverty is something done to poor countries by the outside world. Exploitation 65%, autocrats 42%, global economy 40%, colonialism 35%, and hardly ever corruption.

Institutional, 37%

Poverty is the fault of the governments of poor countries. Corruption 100%, then war, government inefficiency and weak institutions. This is the largest class, and the one that defines the public's default answer.

Circumstantial, 30%, and Health, 8%

Poverty is bad luck and bad conditions. The circumstantial class names war 62%, government inefficiency 51%, then land and climate and services. The small health class names disease 73%, poor health 69% and, for a quarter of them, too many children.

In Short

Four ways of explaining poverty, the same in every wave. The frame a person holds tells us more about their view of aid than their demographic profile does.

Question 5

Who has each frame?

How we answered it

Profiling. Each person in each wave goes into their most likely frame, and we describe the four groups: how big they are, which causes they name, their age, gender, class, education, income and religion, what they think about aid and giving, and where they sit in the Worldview segments. All weighted, all seven waves pooled. Stability comes from the panel, which is Question 6.



What we found

Four recognisable people. The internationalist: educated, well-off, Dóchas's core. The sceptical supporter: the largest group, older, names corruption, supports aid in principle but doubts that it works. The circumstantialist: the average citizen, following the news. The compassionate: young, female, working class, sympathetic but not political.

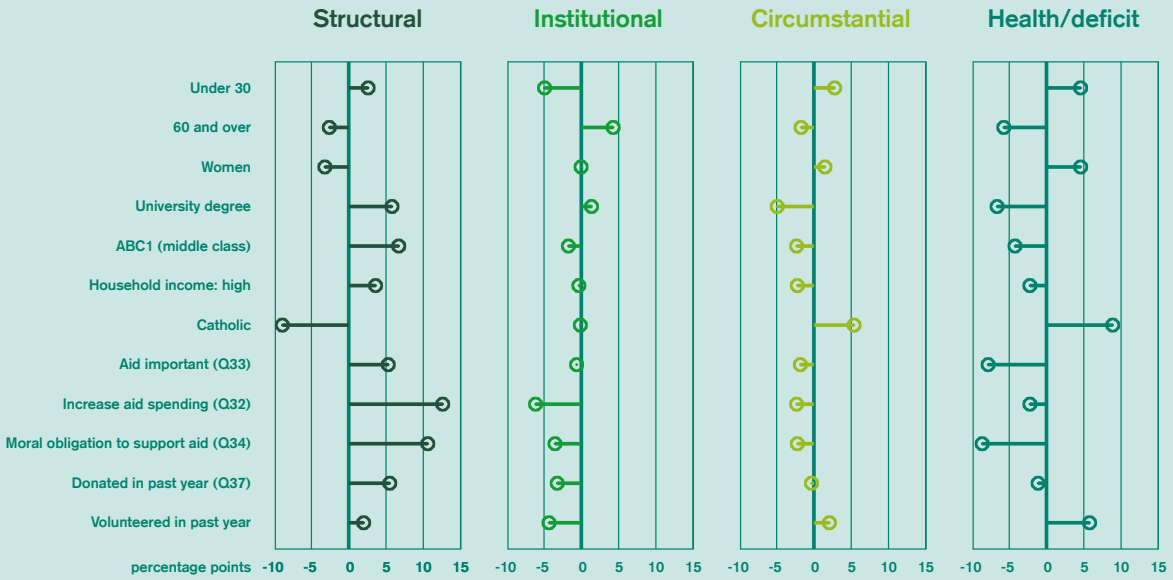


Who has each frame?

The structural frame is educated and well-off, the institutional frame is older, and the health frame is young, female and working class

How each class differs from the public

Percentage points vs all respondents



Percentage-point differences from the whole public on demographics and aid attitudes, by class.

Demographics

Structural: **+6 degree, +7 ABC1, –9 Catholic**. Institutional: +4 over 60, –5 under 30. Health: +4 under 30, +4 women, –7 degree, +9 Catholic.

Aid Attitudes

The structural frame leads everywhere: **+13 on increasing** spending, +11 on moral obligation, +5 on donating. Institutional: –6 on increasing spending, –4 on obligation. Health: –8 on importance, –9 on obligation.

Behaviour

The institutional frame volunteers least (8%); the health frame volunteers most (18%), despite having the weakest attitudes.

In Short

The frames are only mildly demographic. Where they differ is on support for aid, by ten points and more. They are ways of thinking that cut across social groups.

Who has each frame?

Four people

Pen portraits. Sizes are pooled 2021 to 2026; stability is the model-based probability of being in the same frame a year later.

The internationalist
Structural · 25%, rising to 27%

Poverty is something done to poor countries: exploitation, autocrats, a rigged economy, colonialism. Educated, middle-class, best-off, least Catholic. Leads on every aid measure: 83% important, **45% want more spent**, 53% donated. Half are Community champions or Global citizens. 72% still here a year later.

The sceptical supporter
Institutional · 37%, the largest

Everyone names corruption. Oldest (mean 49), more married, more Catholic. 77% say aid is important but only **26% want more spent**; most convinced aid is wasted, lowest trust in NGOs, lowest volunteering. Empathisers, Pragmatists, Multilateralists. **84% still here**: the stickiest by far.

The circumstantialist
Circumstantial · 30%

War and bad government, then climate, services, corporations. Demographically average, aid attitudes on the mean, leans Empathiser. The least stable frame (44% stay) and the corridor between the others. Following the news more than holding a theory.

The compassionate
Health/deficit · 8%, shrinking to 6%

Disease, poor health, and for a quarter too many children. Youngest, most female, least educated, lowest income, most Catholic. Weakest aid attitudes and the most likely to say Ireland cannot afford it, yet **volunteers most (18%)**. Nearly half Empathisers. Sympathy without politics.

In Short
Three frames and a corridor. The structural and institutional poles are big, stable and socially distinct; the circumstantial frame is where people pass through.

Question 6

Does the same person give the same answer a year later?

How we answered it

Here we use the panel. 3,156 people answered in two or more waves between 2021 and 2025, so we can place each person's three named causes beside their three named causes a year later: how many are the same, how often is each cause kept, how often does someone stay in the same frame? We check against what would be expected if answers were shuffled at random, and we use a model that estimates frame-to-frame moves.



What we found

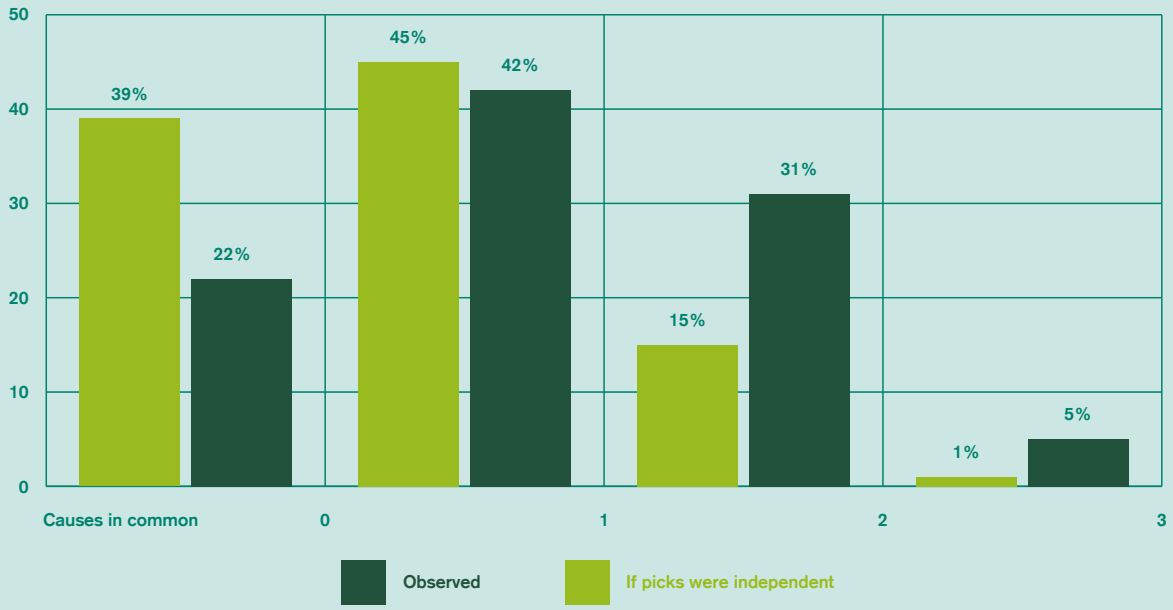
A person keeps, on average, one of their three causes a year later. But the churn is not noise. The frame beneath the selections is sticky, especially the institutional one.



Do people change their minds?

A year later, the typical person has kept one of their three causes

How many of a person's three causes are the same a year later? % of person-pairs, consecutive waves (3,156 people, 2021-25)



How many of a person's causes are the same next time?

The Overlap

On average **1.2 of 3** causes in common, against 0.8 if picks were independent. **5%** give the identical set; 22% share nothing with their previous answer.

Item By Item

Test-retest agreement (kappa) runs from 0.12 for corporations to 0.34 for colonialism. The loaded items are the most reliable: colonialism, too many children, laziness, corruption. A third of the people who named laziness name it again, against a 4% base rate.

Interpretation

The individual causes are a sample from a frame, not the frame itself. The specific explanations move; the overall frame tends to be consistent.

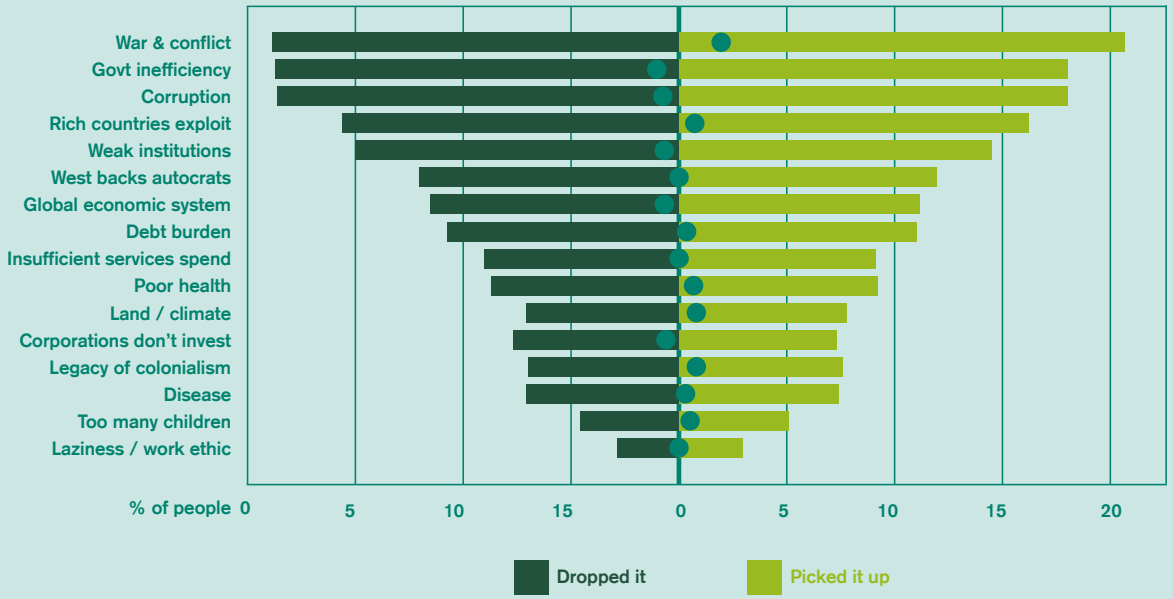
In Short

Aggregate stability conceals a great deal of individual movement. That is why the cross-sectional trends appear so calm.

Big flows, tiny net change: for the top causes, one person in five picks it up and one in five drops it every year

Big flows, tiny net change

% of people switching each cause on or off between waves



Share of people switching to a cause (green) or away from it (orange) between consecutive waves; the dot is the net change in the cause's overall share.

War

20% pick it up, 19% drop it, net +1.8 points. Government inefficiency and corruption: 18% each way, net under a point.

Even The Rare Items

Laziness turns over 6% of the sample a year, for a net change of 0.06 points.

Why It Matters

The flat lines in Question 1 are the sum of nearly balanced flows. A campaign that moved 5% of people would be invisible in the aggregate if 5% moved the other way.

In Short

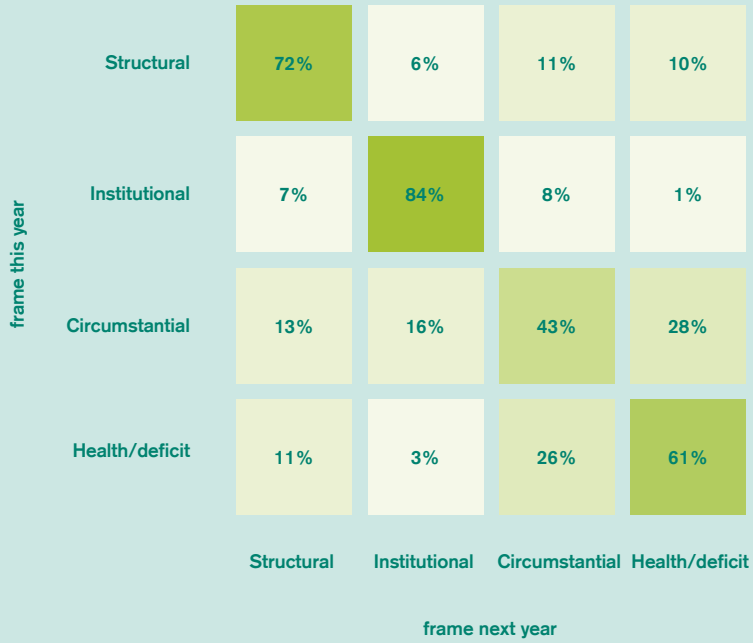
The public's answer is stable because the flows balance, not because individuals are fixed.

Do people change their minds?

The frames are sticky: 84% of institutionalists and 72% of structuralists are in the same frame a year later

Where people are a year later

Row %: latent transition model, classification error removed



Latent transition model: the chance of being in each frame next year given this year's. Rows sum to 100.

The Two Poles

Institutional **84%** stay, which works out at about six years in frame. Structural 72%. Direct moves between the two poles are rare: **6 to 7% a year.**

The Corridor

Circumstantial 44% stay; leavers go to health (28%), institutional (16%), structural (13%). Health 61% stay; leavers mostly go to circumstantial (26%).

Which Way It Drifts

Projected forward, the chain drifts slowly from institutional toward structural and health. That is the five-year trend.

In Short

People move between adjacent frames, through the circumstantial corridor, and almost never straight across the argument.

Question 7

When someone changes their story about poverty, does their support for aid change too?

How we answered it

Three steps, each stricter than the last. First, compare each person with themselves rather than with others: does their support move in the years their selections move? Second, examine the moment of change: when someone adds or drops a cause between two waves, what happens to their view of aid at the same time? Third, separate each person into a permanent part and a year-to-year part, and ask whether this year's change in one predicts next year's change in the other. The third step is what separates 'these go together' from 'one causes the other'.



What we found

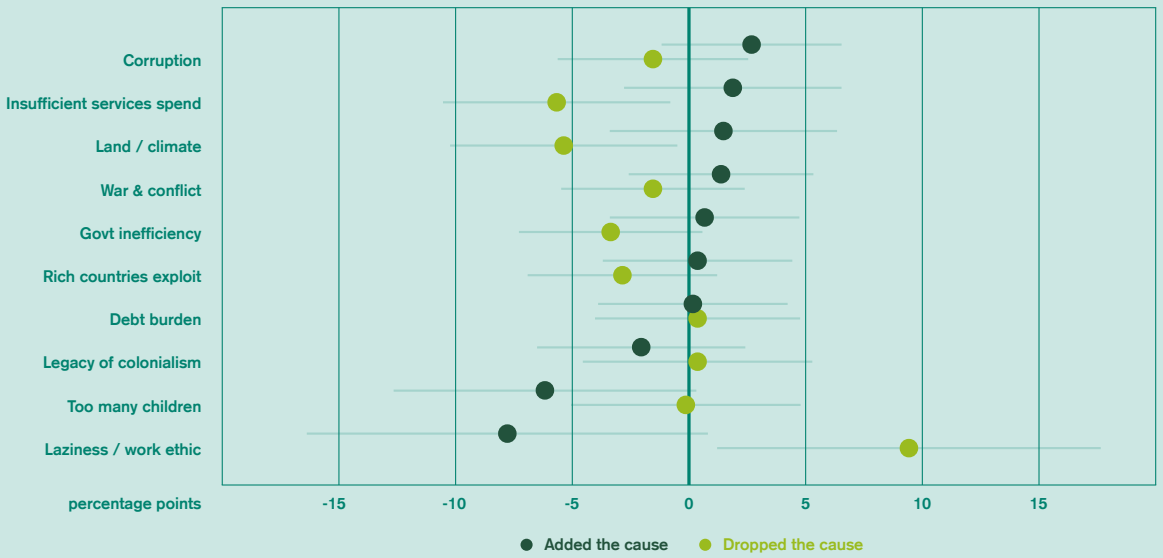
Rarely, and only for the two blame-the-poor causes. People who change their explanations barely change their view of aid. And nothing in one year predicts anything in the next, for support or for giving.



Coming to blame the poor lowers support for aid; coming to blame the world has no effect

Adding or dropping a cause: change in aid importance

Change in P(aid important), pp, between consecutive waves



Change in a person's probability of calling aid important when they add (orange) or drop (green) each cause between consecutive waves.

Laziness

Add it: **–7.6 points**. Drop it: **+9.5**. The one cause that moves support both ways within the year.

Too Many Children

Add it: –6.1. Drop it: nothing. A one-way ratchet.

Structural Causes

Adding exploitation, debt or colonialism: +0.3 to +0.5, which is to say nothing.

In Short

Sympathy tracks perceived controllability, but only at the controllable end.

The stable part of a person: 60% of aid importance, half of giving, and a third of any causal story

Stable dispositions: frames vs aid importance and giving

Correlation between person-level random intercepts



Correlation between the permanent parts of each person: their frame, their view of aid, and whether they give.

Aid Importance

Blame-the-poor **–0.48**, structural **+0.37**, institutional –0.16. Large by the standards of attitude research, and exactly the ladder from Question 3, now as a link between dispositions.

Giving

Half the size: –0.20, +0.20, –0.11. The causal story sits closer to the attitude than to the behaviour. Stable importance and stable giving correlate at 0.53.

Interpretation

Attributions, support and giving travel together as traits. Messaging works by activating a frame someone already holds, not by converting them within the year.

In Short

The link between how people explain poverty and whether they support aid is real, strong, and dispositional.

Implications For Members

Causal messaging does not convert. It activates a frame a person already holds. The task is to choose which frame for which audience

1. Lead with the international-order story to mobilise, not to convert

Exploitation, debt, the global economy and colonialism are the causes most strongly associated with support for aid, and they are the ones gaining ground among the under-30s. A quarter of the public already holds this frame, and they are the people most likely to call aid important, to want more spent and to donate. This is the natural register for supporter communications, campaigning and anything aimed at the Community champions and Global citizens. It will not win over the sceptics, because people almost never cross directly from the institutional frame to the structural one; its job is to energise the people who already share the view.

2. The 37% who name corruption decide the public standing of aid, and they are not hostile

This is the largest group and the stickiest: 84% are still in it a year later. Three-quarters of them say aid is important, but only one in four wants more spent, and they are the people most convinced that aid is wasted and least trusting of NGOs. What they doubt is delivery, not the case for helping. The message that fits is not ‘it is not their fault’ but ‘here is how the money gets past the problem you are worried about’: transparency, accountability, results and oversight. Aid quality, rather than aid quantity, has a ready public constituency here.

3. Do not argue with ‘laziness’ or ‘too many children’

These two explanations are the only ones that reduce support for aid within the same person, and they are the only ones rising among the blame-the-poor causes. But very few people hold them: laziness is named by one in twenty. Countering them head-on gives them an audience they do not have. The better approach is to tell stories that make the causes of poverty look uncontrollable by the people living in it, because sympathy follows perceived controllability, and to let the blame-the-poor view go unanswered rather than amplified.

Events, segments and generations

4. The circumstantial frame is where events do the work

War, climate and disease are the causes that respond to the news, and the people who hold this frame are the most likely to move: only 44% are in the same frame a year later. Humanitarian appeals are therefore the moment of opportunity. Two cautions follow. When a crisis fades, people leave the circumstantial frame towards the institutional one, not the structural one, so a crisis that passes without comment hands people to the sceptics. And a spike in naming ‘war’ buys no extra support for aid on its own. The practical rule is to attach a delivery story, how the money reaches people and what it achieves, while attention is there.

5. Segments and frames are different tools; use both

A Worldview segment says how warm someone is towards aid and development; a frame says why they think poverty happens. Two Empathisers of equal warmth can hold opposite theories, and the theory predicts whether they believe aid can work. Community champions are 70% structural, Pragmatists are 59% institutional, and Empathisers lean circumstantial and contain most of the compassionate group. Choosing an audience by segment and then a message by frame is more precise than either on its own.

6. The generational split is specific

Colonialism has become a live explanation for the under-45s in the last two years, while corruption remains an older person’s explanation. With younger audiences the structural understanding can be assumed and built on. With older audiences the delivery doubts come first and need answering before the wider argument can land. Nothing else about who someone is, their gender, region or class, tells you much about which frame they hold.

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Source: Dóchas Worldview, waves 1–7 (Jan 2021 – Mar 2026), n = 16,603, weighted; fieldwork by Ipsos B&A.

Analysis by: the Development Engagement Lab.
Worldview reports: dochas.ie/resources/worldview

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world view
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