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We are currently taking a scythe to the aid budget for the poorest counties – it has been cut by €255 million, or 22 per cent, in the last 10 months, writes **FINTAN O'TOOLE**

LAST FRIDAY, I spent a shocking morning listening to eight Irish politicians. They are candidates in the Dublin constituency in the European elections: Caroline Simons, Mary Lou McDonald, Patricia McKenna, Deirdre de Burca, Eoin Ryan, Gay Mitchell, Prionsias De Rossa and Joe Higgins. They were speaking on a subject that doesn't come up on the doorsteps and has very little potential for gathering votes. All of them would probably have been better off canvassing in a shopping centre. Yet, and this is the shock, every one of them was articulate, engaged, knowledgeable and passionate. They knew what they were talking about and, more importantly, they seemed to care.

So what was it that got a cross-section of Irish politicians talking in a way that wasn't parochial or cynical or waffly? Development. The occasion was a forum on Irish and European development policies organised by Dóchas, the umbrella group for the Irish aid agencies. Talk is cheap, of course, and there's always a "motherhood and apple pie" to discussions about global poverty and the Millennium Development Goals. But it surely says something that the quality of discussion on these issues was far higher than it would be on any others.

What it says is that development work is one of the very few areas in which talk of national pride is not actually a source of embarrassment. Leaving aside sport and the arts, which are driven by individual achievement, I'd go so far as to say that there are just two ways in which we project ourselves with real collective honour in the wider world: peacekeeping and development work. Our official aid programmes are mostly very good (and they're not generally tied to any narrow self-interest on our part). The reputation of our voluntary aid agencies is very high. The one I have direct experience of is Concern, and it has impressed me greatly as a really efficient, thoughtful, innovative and self-critical organisation.

It's not our national pride that matters most, of course, but the immediate and long-term effects on improving the lives of the poorest of the poor. Yet that pride is not negligible either. We've all learned in the harshest way that "reputational damage" is real and economically tangible. Sticks and stones aren't the only things that break bones – contrary to the old saw, names inflict harm as well. And as well as needing other people to think well of us, we desperately need to think well of ourselves. There's a reason why,

in the dark days of the 1980s, we were the world's largest per capita donors to aid agencies. We needed to know that there was more to us than failure and despair.

At the moment, we're taking a scythe to the aid budget. It has been cut by €255 million, or 22 per cent, in the last 10 months. Progress towards keeping our promise of devoting 0.7 per cent of national income to aid by 2012 has been halted. (We're now at 0.48 per cent – the interim target of 0.6 per cent for next year is clearly not going to be met.)

In real terms this means that, for example, Concern's funding for long-term programmes has been cut from €29 million to €21 million and for emergency aid from €6.6 million to around €3 million. On the ground this translates into appalling suffering for people on the brink. We're talking about people who are victims of the global economic crisis just as we are; who have no dole or welfare systems to fall back on; and who are having to pay twice as much for the staple foods on which they survive.

Even with pay cuts, redundancies and the closure of offices, Concern is having to slash programmes. One in Afghanistan which provides work and education to 25,000 women is being drastically scaled back. Two thousand households in Angola will be cut off from training in food production. A project to ensure adequate nutrition for 35,000 slum children and 25,000 pregnant women in Bangladesh is not going ahead. An education and hygiene programme for 6,000 children in Haiti is being closed. And so on.

Many readers will shrug and say "Tough. We're all suffering." But you simply can't compare the impact of these cuts with the hardship and anxiety we're experiencing at home. The direct cruelty that's involved in telling people who have so little that we're not keeping our promises to them is of a very different order to an income levy or a pay cut. It involves a much more fundamental breach of our basic sense of morality, decency and justice.

And it's also bad for us. It does more damage to our international reputation. It hits at one of the few things that makes our politicians think large thoughts about global issues. It cuts out a chunk of our better selves. Above all, it reinforces the kind of short-term, reactive thinking that has created this whole mess in the first place. Charity may begin at home, but if it ends there we are creating an unsustainable world – not just for them, but for us too.