

Dóchas members' messages on the White Paper on Irish Aid

27 October 2006

- The 38 member organisations of Dóchas, the umbrella organisation of Irish non-governmental development organisations, welcome the clear commitment to a poverty-focused aid programme, based on shared humanity and a vision of global justice, as well as the new emphasis on Irish Aid as a central plank of Irish foreign policy.
- Dóchas members also welcome the commitment to a time-frame for Ireland reaching the UN target of spending 0.7% of GNP on aid and the 'roadmap' for the future direction of the programme that the White Paper provides.
- In the spirit of partnership, one of the core principles underpinning the White Paper, the NGO sector looks forward to working with the government – and with other political parties and partners – to ensure that appropriate mechanisms are put in place to implement the White Paper for the benefit of the world's poor.

This should involve the Irish Aid programme being linked more specifically to achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and being transparent in planning and implementation so that its effectiveness and impact can be evaluated.

- Dóchas members welcome the White Paper's emphasis on coherence for development and will suggest and support mechanisms to help achieve this - both within the Irish government and through its involvement in the EU, United Nations and other multilateral bodies.
- The NGO sector also supports the White Paper commitments on untied aid, transparency, the role of civil society, the long-term commitment to working with and through Southern governments, and the need to reverse the spread of HIV and AIDS.
- However, Dóchas members express considerable unease at Irish Aid's continuing ability to deliver an effective aid programme without additional support on staff numbers and expertise. NGOs' deep anxiety about Irish Aid's management capacity – having the right number and mix of staff to deliver and sustain the quality of the aid programme – has cut across their entire discussion of the White Paper.

Members feel that the quality of Irish development cooperation is being threatened by a number of factors, including inadequate staffing levels for a rapidly expanding aid programme, protracted negotiations between the Departments of Finance and Foreign Affairs in relation to the effective cap on recruitment, and the uncertain position of development specialists in Irish Aid.

- The shortage of staff and expertise in Irish Aid is currently being addressed inter alia by hiring in consultants. Dóchas considers this an expensive and unsustainable way of working, which threatens institutional learning and long-term programme quality. The situation is exacerbated by the upheaval surrounding the planned relocation of Irish Aid to Limerick.
- Dóchas calls on the government to resolve the capacity problems in Irish Aid as a matter of urgency. We recommend that the government:
 - Make a political commitment to resource Irish Aid with the staff and systems needed to secure a quality aid programme, and to fulfil this commitment after the major management review proposed in the White Paper.
 - Ensure that the review is undertaken urgently, and take full account of serious staffing and expertise restraints noted by the Audit Committee of the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Advisory Board for Irish Aid (ABIA) in 2005, as well as in the 2003 OECD/DAC Peer Review.
 - Ensure that this latest management review actually delivers the systems, procedures, staff numbers and expertise needed to sustain and improve a rapidly expanding Irish Aid programme through to the MDG target date of 2015.
- The members of Dóchas are looking forward to working with the government, political parties and other partners on innovative ways to deepen public understanding of the Irish Aid programme. While the White Paper's emphasis on volunteering has its positive aspects, Dóchas members feel it is in danger of creating unrealistic expectations and promoting an oversimplified idea of what good development work is. Members detect a tension between the volunteering initiative, on the one hand, and the White Paper's broader emphasis on responding strategically to the needs of the poor, and supporting the governments and people of partner countries to take a leadership role in their own development.

As the programme expands, we need to build on the Irish people's tradition of solidarity for the world's poor by promoting long-term development education which encourages critical engagement with issues of global injustice, and with Northern governments, corporations and other institutions.

- Dóchas members undertake to meet with enthusiasm and commitment the challenges and opportunities this White Paper presents. The NGO sector will play a full and meaningful role to ensure that the policies and initiatives that flow from the White Paper are implemented in the best interests of the world's poor.