

Africa Centre Annual Lecture - 21st September 2011

Olive Towey, Acting Head of International Advocacy, Concern Worldwide

The relationship between Ireland and the African continent is a rich and colourful tapestry. Last Tuesday's launch of the 'African Strategy for the Department of Foreign Affairs' show some of the threads. Last Friday's launch of Irish Aid's 2010 report shows more threads. This evening I would like to focus mainly on our development efforts and my own reflections working with Concern.

I'd like to begin on a positive note. Ireland has a long and strong tradition of overseas development and going back over 40 years, many of the strongest ties have been with countries across the African continent. The depth and diversity of those relationships aren't fully appreciated and very often it is Ireland's development work which is the predominant relationship that's spoken of and given prominence in the media. This is a double edged sword but it certainly marks us apart from many other countries that our Development programme sits at the heart of our foreign policy, that many of our NGOs are so widely recognised and that our missionary past appears to continually ripple through to the present.

Ireland's Development programme is recognised for its quality. The 2009 OECD-DAC Peer Review commended Ireland for the effectiveness of its programme, its focus on the poorest countries and its emphasis on social sectors and emergency relief that directly affects poor people. The Government has committed itself to the so-called "Aid Effectiveness" agenda – a set of commitments made by governments to work to make aid more effective – and preparations are underway at the minute for the 4th high level meeting which will take place in South Korea end of this year.

Irish NGOs are also responding to the call for greater effectiveness. While donors signed up some years back to the Paris Declaration (a set of 5 commitments to make their aid more effective), civil society has since agreed on the Istanbul principles - which were developed in consultation with groups across the global locally, regionally and internationally. We recognise that it is our duty and responsibility to ensure our work is as effective and impactful as possible. The current climate and difficult economic challenges ahead means that it is not enough to be more effective. We must also be better at communicating that effectiveness and – more importantly – the end result of our work.

Last Friday, Minister Jan O'Sullivan launched Irish Aid's Annual Report for 2010. Titled "Aid Works – Delivery on Results" the report delivers some very clear messages about positive changes which have happened across many countries – good stories which the media aren't always that interested in or drawn to. This work of communicating the work that is being done, the partnerships that have been forged and the positive difference that is being made to the lives of ordinary people needs to be actively promoted by us all. The report also reflects a deliberate and continued focus by the Irish Government on the issue of Hunger.

Ireland has also carved out a specific role for itself in relation to the fight against Hunger. The Irish Hunger Taskforce established in 2007 produced a detailed report which was launched in the UN in 2008 setting out policy framework for the Government's programme to eradicate hunger.. Last year, in the context of the UN MDG Summit, the then Foreign Minister Michael Martin and Secretary of State Hilary Clinton co-hosted a high-level on Hunger. And, this week - one year on from that Summit, a follow up meeting is taking place in New York. Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs Eamonn Gilmore continues those efforts alongside Hilary Clinton... This deliberate focus on Hunger draws on the work being done through the government programme but also many of the NGOs. It is an opportunity for us to step up to the plate, play a leadership role in advocating for action in this area and to use whatever influence we can to harness political will at European and UN levels.

The most recent and possibly the most public recognition of this work was when President Obama spoke in College Green here in Dublin... *"This is a nation that met its responsibilities by choosing to apply the lessons of your own past to assume a heavier burden of responsibility on the world stage. And today, a people who once knew the pain of an empty stomach now feed those who hunger abroad. Ireland is working hand in hand with the United States to make sure that hungry mouths are fed around the world -- because we remember those times. We know what crippling poverty can be like, and we want to make sure we're helping others."*

At a time when our international reputation has been damaged it is important that we find ways in which this small country can play a big role. Harnessing political leadership on the issue of hunger can serve Ireland well. More importantly, it will serve even more those who suffer hunger on a daily basis. Making a meaningful difference to those people has to be the end goal.

This also requires us to show leadership in another area – and that is our aid promise. Ireland has promised to invest 0.7% of our national income in overseas development by 2015. The Programme for Government cites this commitment and we are on track to reach it. Sticking to this promise through these tough times would strengthen even further the international reputation I spoke of earlier. It would prove beyond doubt that Ireland's leadership is watertight, that we keep our promises in good times and bad. We know promises have been broken in the past. Indeed the ODA budget has been cut by 25% since 2008. But this new Government has expressed a determination to stick to the international target and deliver on it. It's also worth noting that the 0.7% target has cross-party support and that in a recent IPSOS MRBI poll 80% of people questioned said that – in spite of the current economic hardships – Ireland should still stick to its promise.

However, we don't underestimate the challenges ahead. The economic crisis is hitting everyone. The political uncertainty seems only to grow by the day. Support of civil society organisations – including support for cross-sectoral collaboration (linking for example organisations involved in overseas development, community development diversity and multi-culturalism here in Ireland,) is both vulnerable and fragile. The aid promise is not a given and it is critical that we do all in our power to protect and promote the work that has been nurtured over many years. We have a campaign called 'Act Now on 2015' which seeks to maximise public and political support for Ireland reaching its 0.7% target by the international deadline.

Recognising how challenging things are here in Ireland, the EU picture is even more daunting in many ways. The prognosis for the Euro-zone seems to worsen by the day as efforts to calm the markets fail and fears of default & double dips loom! A huge challenge at the moment is charting a political solution to an economic mess. The dynamics between member states has changed and the political compass across the Union is pointing more to the right than the left. This in itself has implications for development cooperation. In the Netherlands for example the current government has taken a very blunt knife to areas they see as 'left-wing hobby horses' – these include development, culture and arts. This is a huge departure from the traditional view of the Netherlands as a strong and positive force in relation to overseas development.

Another challenge facing Europe is how to advance the ambitions in the Lisbon Treaty to pursue a more coherent foreign policy. Since last year, Europe has a new Foreign Minister. Her mandate is to pursue Europe's foreign policy interests around the world. Her other responsibility is to ensure coherence across Europe's external actions. But therein lies a massive challenge - how to pursue this foreign policy while respecting the obligations Europe has to pursue its development objectives. Size-wise Europe is the largest donor in the world. In legal terms, the main objective of Europe's development policy is the eradication of poverty. Wider foreign policy objectives should not undermine this objective. In practise this is an ongoing challenge – especially where the institutional structures are set up in a way that draws the two realms more closely together.

The Latvian Commissioner for Development Cooperation Andris Piebalgs earlier this year launched a new initiative called 'Modernizing EU Development cooperation'. This is happening alongside negotiations on the EU Budget which will run from 2014-2020. And we're fast approaching the 2015 deadline for the Millennium Development Goals. The future framework for Development Cooperation will be determined in the coming years at a time when Europe has – as a top priority – the restoration of its own economic stability and growth. This growth agenda is likely to permeate everything. The challenge will be to ensure that this growth agenda is pursued with a broader goal in mind – that of sustainable development.

At that international level, Ireland is also well placed to speak up for the principles which should underpin development cooperation, principles which at EU level have been enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty – and which distinguish Europe's development objectives from its wider foreign policy interests. In the current context, amidst lots of political, economic and institutional challenges at EU level, it is really important there are countries ready and willing to stand up for and defend Europe's development efforts. The values we espouse as Europeans should apply equally within and beyond the borders of the European Union. And those values need to be brought to mind even more so in times of crisis.

This backdrop of crises is a disturbing one. But as the saying goes "Why Waste a Good Crisis?" This is a time for citizens and civil society to make their voices heard – for alliance building and linking. As rule books are torn up, this is a time to look at old questions in new ways – to see that the norms within which we operate don't necessarily serve us well – and that we have a responsibility to do something about it. Next year marks 20 years since the Earth Summit which happened in Rio in 1992. The EC Communication on the Rio+20 Summit says "there are compelling reason to fundamentally rethink the

conventional model of economic progress: simply working at the margins of an economic system that promotes inefficient use of natural resources will not be sufficient in bringing about change”...so big questions are being asked about the efficacy of the structures we operate in. Here in Ireland leading up to the election back in February, there was much talk of the need for political reform, for active citizenship, for mobilisation. The ‘Claiming our Future’ movement reflected – and continues to reflect – a desire amongst ordinary people that we engage constructively with our political system, claim our power and use it appropriately and adequately.

So whether at local, national or international levels, the challenge is to recognise the voice that we each have and to make best use of that voice – to challenge and hold accountable our public representatives, to challenge and hold accountable our own organisations, to protect and promote Ireland’s development efforts and to ensure we support and work in genuine partnership with other development actors.

I mentioned earlier the High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness happening in Korea later this year. The Outcome Document is already being negotiated and a significant concern we have is that the space for civil society will shrink...both Trócaire and ourselves have done research looking at the effect of this aid effectiveness agenda on civil society space and there are clear concerns. Ahead of the Summit in November, we are calling on the Irish Government to use its voice to ensure that the role of civil society in developing countries is protected and promoted.

And finally in terms of the future of Ireland’s development policy, the coming months offer a very welcome opportunity to discuss and debate that very issue - as the public consultation on the Whitepaper on Irish Development Cooperation gets underway. The review presents us with a timely opportunity to reflect on progress made since the 2006 White Paper was first published, to study the current context in which development cooperation takes place and to update current policy accordingly so as to ensure that Irish development cooperation has the greatest impact possible on reducing global poverty. This is an opportunity for us to share our analysis and views, to inform the debate and discussion about the future orientation of Ireland’s contribution to development and humanitarian assistance. I think it’s really important that this consultation engages the widest constituency possible, that it enables public debate and discussion and results in a programme which has greater ownership and support amongst the broader public.

Thank You