

Policy Coherence for Development
Dóchas Statement to the Joint Oireachtas sub-Committee on Overseas
Development
29 May 2008

Helen Keogh, Chairperson, Dóchas

On behalf of the 39 member organisations of Dóchas I would like to thank you very much for this opportunity to address the Committee.

Over the years, the Irish Development NGOs have benefited hugely from the support of the Foreign Affairs Committee, and we are grateful for this opportunity to highlight the important steps to bring about a whole-of-government approach to the fight against poverty and injustice.

Dóchas represents 39 Irish member organisations, supported by some 850,000 supporters – one in every 5 people in the country – for whom poverty eradication is a prime goal. As the national umbrella group of Irish overseas Development NGOs, Dóchas also coordinates with NGO colleagues across Europe, who share our view that it is unacceptable to live in a world where one-third of all people endure conditions of unbearable poverty.

Ours is a passionate and committed constituency. A constituency that can give shape to the government's stated commitment to make the fight against poverty a central plank of Irish foreign policy.

For the Dóchas members, it is important to note that the fight against poverty is not merely a matter of providing aid. We are proud of Ireland's record of generosity and professional development assistance, but we also know that aid alone cannot, and will not, bring an end to poverty.

Poverty will only truly become history if we put in place the mechanisms that allow people to live a life in dignity, and provide people the opportunities to develop to their full potential.

To be poor not only relates to lack of food, or money: to be poor is also to lack control over one's life and resources.

Poverty is not simply a matter of scarcity: it is the result of human interaction. Poverty is exclusion, from social, economic and political processes that affect one's life.

As a consequence, fighting poverty is not merely about providing people with the material benefits that they lack. Fighting poverty is about promoting Development: Development is about reversing poverty and inequality, increasing the choices and opportunities available to the poor, and protecting their human rights.

Development, therefore, is about more than aid.

We welcome the government's recognition of this basic, and fundamental, fact. We also acknowledge that there is broad cross-party consensus on this issue. This is also explicitly featured in the White Paper on Irish Aid, and that is brought to life by the creation of – and the high level representation at – the Inter-Departmental Committee on Development (IDCD).

The IDCD was created to ensure a broadly coherent approach to the objectives of our development cooperation programme: Development cooperation is now a central plank of Irish foreign policy, but many areas of government action have an impact on developing countries. With the help of Trinity College and the Advisory Board of Irish Aid, the IDCD is investigating which areas of government policy could undermine the core aims of our aid programme.

We believe that under the leadership of Minister of State Power, the IDCD can become one of the key forces for change, and a vital instrument in determining Ireland's external policies.

Dóchas welcomes the political will that established the Committee and the good groundwork done so far by the members of the Committee – representatives of the 15 government Departments. We are hugely encouraged by the Committee's approach to

date, which has been transparent, open and creative, and which has been based on a genuine desire to engage in dialogue with all relevant stakeholders.

Our core message to day, therefore, is that by setting up the IDCD, the government has taken a hugely significant step in trying to enhance the impact of the Irish aid programme. A significant step, but not the final step. Bringing about a coherent approach to development, or as we call it “Policy Coherence for Development”, is not a technical fix, that can be achieved by setting up a committee, but a matter of achieving the right balance for developing countries in Irish politics and policy.

It requires leadership, energy and persistence. It requires willingness to be a champion for the rights and needs of the millions of people who have no say in Irish or European decision-making, but who are profoundly affected by those decisions.

This leadership and energy must come from the Ministers in charge of the aid programme, but also from the members of the Oireachtas.

Dóchas accepts that incoherence is inevitable in a democracy, and that development priorities will not win out in all cases. For all of us, the challenge is to:

- minimise incoherence and its negative effects on the poor, and on developmental processes;
- mitigate the worst effects where incoherence is unavoidable; and to;
- look for synergies and value-added where they are to be found.

Specifically, what we are looking for is:

1. Political will
2. Responsiveness
3. Effectiveness
4. Transparency
5. Linkages to support decision-making

Political will: If we want to promote development-friendly outcomes of Irish and European decision-making processes, we do need to invest in them. We need to champion the cause of the poor, in the face of sometimes forceful opposition.

Responsiveness: We need to put in place mechanisms where people, be they citizens, politicians or NGOs, can bring areas of incoherence to the attention of decision-makers.

Effectiveness: Any mechanisms and structures set up to promote policy coherence for development must be resourced, and given a mandate to make a difference. Dóchas has done research in this area, and has discussed examples of good practice with the IDCD.

Transparency: It is vital that the results of our analysis, and the nature of our competing demands, be discussed openly and democratically. We would suggest that the Oireachtas host an annual debate about Ireland's performance on Development – not focusing simply on the performance of Irish Aid, but focusing on Ireland's performance in general.

At EU level, the Commission has recently started to produce annual Policy Coherence for Development reports. There has been just one report so far, but the process promises to be a useful one – and could really help galvanise European political will to remove the impediments that hold back, or adversely, affect developing countries. To do the same in Ireland, would be immensely valuable.

Linkages: We feel that it is imperative that the Oireachtas, through the Foreign Affairs Committee and even more explicitly the Committee on Overseas Development, is closely involved and associated with the debate on Policy Coherence. The newly created IDCD should be encouraged to engage with the Committee, and report to it.

Summing Up...

For the members of Dóchas, Ireland's commitment to Development is crucial. We are proud of the results and effectiveness of Ireland's aid programme, but as aid practitioners we are acutely aware of our own limitations. For Ireland to make a genuine

and lasting impact in the efforts to make poverty history, more is required than generosity and charity.

The members of Dóchas have numerous suggestions to make on how this can be achieved. And we know that the IDCD, and indeed the Oireachtas Committee on Foreign Affairs and this Committee are on our side in this regard.

For now, we would like to leave you with 3 main messages:

1. Through the creation of the Inter-Departmental Committee on Development, Ireland has taken a significant step to enhance our overall efforts to bring about an end to poverty. What is required now, is to ensure that the Committee is given the mandate to do its work, and that it is supported by a genuine political will to make a difference.
2. Dóchas and its members will support all initiatives aimed at enhancing Ireland's efforts in this regard. We will do this strongly and energetically, and we will do this on the basis of our experience, expertise and the support of our partners overseas.
3. The Oireachtas in general, and the Foreign Affairs Committee in particular, has a crucial role to play, if this project is to succeed.

We thank you for the opportunity to set out our views on this important issue. And we wish you well in your work.

Thank you.