Public and civil society attitudes towards the European Union, Ireland and Global Development

Engaging with the EU and on global development is important for Ireland, public opinion poll and CSO survey suggest

June 2013

A majority of people in Ireland agree, wholly or partly, that addressing the global forces which influence human development at the international level is important to Ireland’s own development as a fair and just society, according to the results of a number of public opinion polls commissioned by Dóchas, the umbrella group of Development NGOs.

The polls, conducted by RedC for Dóchas, show that a majority of people agree that the European Union plays a positive role in building a fair and just society in Ireland, and also on the world stage.

With Ireland holding the Presidency of the EU from January to June 2013 and development NGOs keen that Ireland and the European Union should use its influence to promote progress on a range of global development issues, Dóchas undertook public opinion polls at the start and towards the end of the EU Presidency, to explore people’s views of the links between the EU, “fair and just” development in Ireland, and development issues in the wider world.

A second and complementary poll, targeted at members of The Wheel, a leading support network for the community and voluntary sector in Ireland, aimed at exploring how the Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in that sector – many of them tackling poverty and inequality in Ireland – viewed the interplay between Ireland, the EU and global development efforts.

Analysis of the survey responses suggests that these ‘domestically-oriented CSOs’ do not think global forces play a very strong role in supporting efforts towards achieving a fair and just society in Ireland, but that the EU plays a positive role in this regard. This poll also showed weak awareness and understanding among these CSOs of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as a global framework for addressing poverty – but, contrarily, conveyed a strong feeling that Irish civil society should play an active role in influencing the replacement for the MDG framework post-2015 in order to achieve the vision of “a fair and just society” in Ireland.

The public opinion polls involved RedC interviewing 1,000 people through its Red Express phone poll, using a random digit dial sample to ensure all households (including ex-directory, mobile phone users and dual phone houses) were covered. Data was mapped to known profiles on age, gender, class region and phone type to ensure that the sample was representative of the total Irish population aged 18-plus years. The profile of the poll group was 49% male and 51% female; and the social class profile was 41% ABC1 (what polling companies characterise as ‘higher social classes’), 50%C2DE and 9% F (or ‘lower social classes’). The respondents included 12% aged 18-24 years, 22% aged 25-34 years; 20% aged 35-44 years; 17% aged 45-54 years; 13% aged 55-64 years; and 16% aged 65-plus years.
The Public Opinion Polls

Dóchas commissioned two public opinion polls, one undertaken in August 2012, and one in June 2013. Both polls were undertaken by RedC, based on telephone conversations with 1,000 respondents in each poll.

1. People in Ireland believe global forces shape our society.

Asked if they agreed with the sentiment that “our ability to build a fair and just society here in Ireland is influenced by global forces, and unless we look for change at the global level we will not succeed in eradicating poverty and inequality here at home,” half of the respondents indicated that they did.

Both polls showed similar levels of agreement with a slight increase in the strength of respondents’ disagreement. Young people under the age of 24 were most likely to agree. There were no significant differences in the responses broken down by region, social class or work status.

Thus, a simple majority (51%) of the public agrees that global forces do influence Ireland’s ability to achieve a just and fair society. This number is more than three times the number of those who (partly or fully) disagree.

2. The EU plays a positive role in Ireland, but we are becoming less convinced.

Respondents were asked about the role played by the EU in Ireland towards its becoming a ‘fair and just society.’ The poll found that 54% of the public has a favorable opinion of the
EU’s role in Ireland’s development, down slightly from 2012, when the corresponding figure was 59%.

19% of respondents agree fully with the statement (compared to 22% last year) and 35% agree to some extent that the EU plays a positive role in promoting fairness and justice (compared to 37% in 2012), while 21% disagreed partly or completely (up significantly from 12% in 2012).

Thus, over 5 out of 10 adults have a fully or partly positive opinion of the EU’s role in Ireland in this regard, outnumbering those who hold a partly or fully negative opinion by two-and-a-half to one.

Those in full employment and those living in Dublin are more likely to agree with this proposition. The data show a sharp decline in support amongst Dublin residents and among the unemployed, dropping from 63% in 2012 to 50% in 2013 and from 57% to 48% respectively.

3. Nearly 7 out of 10 believe the EU plays a positive role in the world - but support is decreasing.

A third question focused on exploring the EU’s place in world affairs, especially on whether it played a positive role in “building a fairer, more stable and safer world”.

On this issue, 59% of respondents either agreed fully or partially with the statement that “Irrespective of what you might think about the impact of the EU on Ireland, it has to be said that the EU plays a positive role on the global stage, when it comes to delivering a fairer, more stable, and safer world.” This is down from 63% in 2012.
Further analysis showed a drop in support among respondents from higher social classes (62% down from 69%) and among the unemployed (51% down from 61%). Still nearly 7 in 10 people in Ireland believe that the EU plays a positive role in efforts to bring about a better world.

Dóchas Survey of Civil Society Organisations in Ireland

In a second poll, Dóchas itself undertook a survey within Irish civil society organisations (CSOs) which are members of The Wheel, a leading support and representative network for the community and voluntary sector.

Respondents were presented with four questions, the first two of which were identical to the first two questions presented to the public (above), while the latter two explored their awareness of the Millennium Development Goals or MDGs – which, since the year 2000, have framed global efforts towards the eradication of poverty and inequality by 2015 – and their attitudes towards the global development effort.

These Goals, set out by world leaders at the Millennium Summit in 2000 and often referred to as the MDGs, have since provided the framework for global efforts by the UN, governments and many civil society organisations towards the eradication of poverty and inequality by 2015.

To the first question, 45.4% of respondents agreed, fully or partly, that global forces influence domestic efforts to create “a fair and just society” in Ireland.

Although the cohort which agreed with the proposition outnumbered the 36.3% who disagreed (partly or completely), the margin in favour was narrower among respondents in the CSO survey than it was in the public opinion poll. This could either suggest that CSO respondents feel, to a larger extent, that there is not high linkage between global change and
changes for fairness in Ireland – or that a good proportion of respondents consider that there is scope to build "a fair and just society" within Ireland regardless of global forces.

Responses to the second question suggested that CSO members tend to have a more favourable view than pertains among the general public of the EU's role in promoting "a fair and just society in Ireland". In particular, 66.7% of the CSO respondents agreed either completely or partly with the statement that the EU plays a positive role in this regard (11.1% fully, and 55.6% partly), compared with 59% of the public considering this to be the case.

The proportion of those CSO respondents who answered and agreed completely or partly with that the EU plays a positive role in Ireland was just over three times the 22.2% who disagreed (11.1% fully and 11.1% partly).

In addition to the 11.1% who “neither agreed nor disagreed,” 22% of CSO survey participants did not answer this question, also skipping Questions 3 and 4 below.

The third question in this second survey explored CSO respondents’ awareness and knowledge of the Millennium Development Goals. The results showed that more than 6 out of 10 members of Irish CSOs surveyed were not fully aware of the MDGs or had no idea
what they were. Only 28% of the CSO respondents said they were reasonably or fully familiar with them, while 5.6% felt that the MDGs were not relevant to their work.

**CSOs' Familiarity With MDGs**

"To what extent are you familiar with the Millennium Development Goals?"

- Reasonably Familiar With MDGs, or Can List All MDGs: 28%
- Know about the MDGs, but don't think they're relevant to our work: 5%
- Never Heard/ Not Sure What MDGs Are: 67%

The last question put to CSO respondents explored their attitudes towards Ireland’s involvement in shaping the framework and arrangements by which the world tries to establish sustainable development internationally – and the effects of that on achieving “a fair and just society in Ireland”.

**Should Irish CSOs Strive to Influence the Global Development Framework**

“To achieve a ‘fair and just society’ in Ireland, we must seek to influence the global framework for sustainable development internationally.”

The responses to this question were the most clear-cut of the data in either survey: more than 8 out of 10 of the CSO respondents (29.4% completely, and 52.9% to some extent) considered that Irish voluntary organisations should seek to influence the global development framework being formulated through the auspices of the United Nations to replace the Millennium Development Goals. No respondent directly disagreed with the proposition, while 11.8% were split, and 5.9% said they did not know.
Analysis and Conclusions

The survey findings point to a favourable opinion among the general public on the positive role played by the EU on development towards “a fair and just society” in Ireland, as well as its efforts for a fairer, more stable, and safer world on the global stage.

They also present evidence of an outward-looking, engagement-friendly attitude towards influencing the global framework for tackling poverty, even among CSOs that are primarily focused on the domestic voluntary and community sector rather than international development or humanitarian concerns.

There is a noticeable difference in the responses between CSO respondents and those from the general public on the question of whether global change affects Ireland’s own ability to achieve a fairer society and eradicate poverty. While only 18% (14% in 2012) of the public disagrees partly and fully with this proposition, 36.3% of CSO members disagree partly or wholly with it.

On the whole, civil society members seem a bit more sceptical, and may be less inclined to believe in any intrinsic linkage between global forces and the push for changes towards fairness and justice within Ireland.

The lack of awareness regarding the MDGs among a significant proportion of CSO respondents suggests that engagement between domestically-focused civil society and the international development community, which Dóchas has tried to foster, is still underdeveloped.

This notion tallies with anecdotal evidence suggesting that members of the public, CSOs – and even many overseas development NGOs – view poverty, exclusion or human rights in Ireland as separate and distinct from overseas development (or ‘aid’) issues internationally.

Raising awareness of the MDGs in the first place, and the discussions of the global framework for tackling poverty and inequality which is expected to replace them, is clearly an important and sizeable task for Dóchas and its member NGOs if they are to engage ‘domestic CSOs’ on efforts to eradicate poverty and inequality at the global level.

It is encouraging, nonetheless, that a strong majority (8 out of 10) of CSO respondents feel that Ireland ought to influence the international process to formulate the global development framework that will succeed the Millennium Development Goals.

This echoes the outward-looking trend that is reflected among the general public, and perhaps points to an increasing awareness of the interconnectedness of the world as Ireland struggles with the effects of an EU and global economic crisis.

--o0o--

This report was made possible by funding from the European Commission and Irish Aid