



The Irish Association of Non-Governmental  
Development Organisations

## **Submission to Department of Environment, Community and Local Government Consultation on the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20)**

**22 September 2011**

### **Introduction**

Dóchas – the Irish Association of Non-governmental Development organisations – welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the position of the Irish Government on the Rio +20 Conference on Sustainable Development.

Agreement reached on Sustainable Development some 20 years ago represented a major change to what was to be understood by social and economic development. For the first time at international level, it was agreed that economic development must incorporate principles like environmental sustainability, public participation, human rights and poverty reduction.

Significant progress has been made since 1992 including through the elaboration of regional, national and local sustainable development strategies and the adoption of a binding agreement on Climate Change. In developing countries, the Rio Declaration allowed for the incorporation of Human Development consideration and greatly influenced the Millennium Development Goals agenda.

Overall, however, tangible change has been negligible as evidenced by the collection of global crises including crises in democracy, global economics and finance, climate change, food security. While much has been achieved through the MDGs, over 1 billion people continue to live in absolute poverty worldwide while the international framework which is expected to help them is fragmented and incoherent. 1 billion people go to bed hungry every night while billions of dollars are being put into saving our banks. Tolerance of poverty and hunger exists alongside an intolerance of banking failure. This contrast points to the scale of the challenge which must be met in Rio+20 – the challenge of changing mindsets, shifting gear and recognising the scale of change necessary to achieve true sustainable development.

Rio 2012 is a major opportunity for states and international institutions to re-commit to and prioritise the achievement of the principles which underpin the Rio Declaration and to agree a programme which moves the world forward in that direction. In the current context in particular, this opportunity cannot be lost.

### **1. The limits of the “Green Economy”**

The UN Commission for Sustainable Development has recognised that despite some progress over the last twenty years, the prevailing global economic model remains at odds with the principles of sustainable development. Against that backdrop, the focus of proceedings at Rio +20 on a ‘green economy’ shows a lack either of ambition or political will

to address this reality. Negotiations towards Rio 2012 must appropriately and adequately challenge the models of development which have shown themselves to fail so many millions of people across the globe.

### **A Green Economy does not guarantee Sustainable Development**

A 'green economy', in and of itself, does not incorporate many of the other core principles of sustainable development. A "sustainable" development model must not just respect environmental boundaries, but also promote social justice, reduce poverty and inequality, encourage inclusive and participatory decision-making and be based on clear principles and mechanisms for accountability.

Furthermore, the definition of a green economy proposed by the UNEP and supported by the European Commission does not represent a significant departure from the current economic model which is driven by the over-consumption of scarce natural resources. While the promotion of the 'green economy' may well move states towards sustainable development, its reliance on efficiency (as per Europe 2020 strategy) fails to address the fundamental changes required to move to sustainability.

## **2. Opportunities for progress**

Dóchas believes that the Rio+20 conference can succeed if it coherently addresses the interconnected major crises of biodiversity, food and nutrition insecurity, poverty and climate change in a coherent and comprehensive way as opposed to merely promoting a narrower focus on the "Green Economy". Indeed, we urge the Irish Government to ensure that the concerns outlined below are fully considered at the earliest possible stage of negotiations.

Within the limits of the "Green Economy", there are a number of issues the Irish Government should prioritise during the negotiations:

### **'Natural Capital'**

Any attempt at 'valuing' natural resources must include at its core the characteristics of a social economy and environmental protection - This could also include a reconsideration of how tax burdens are currently allocated to ensure that environmental impact be incorporated into the allocation formula.

### **Measuring sustainable development**

Dóchas encourages the government to support the formulation of indicators and national accountings systems which sufficiently measure the capabilities or well being of a population, the level of transparency in a country, as well as environmental costs, as central elements in measuring sustainable development. Biophysical indicators should also be developed to record changes in natural resource assets or stocks.

### **Policy coherence**

Any agreement on the promotion of the green economy must include explicit provisions which take account of the special situation in which developing countries find themselves. In particular, this should be the case regarding developing country access to markets such as under the EU General System of Preferences. In addition, promoting a healthy and sustainable EU economy that serves the interests of all citizens must not come at a cost to developing countries through for example initiatives around bio fuels or raw materials. All distortive policies should be removed or minimized, including curtailing biofuel subsidies and removing biofuel mandates.

### **Private Sector Actors**

Any increased role for the private sector in bringing about sustainable development must be preceded by the establishment of adequate regulatory frameworks in developing countries. In particular this should include human rights, environmental and labour standards, and functioning corporate tax systems. Safeguards should also be put in place to avoid 'resource grabs' of land, water, forests and minerals by private sector developers, and to ensure that land and water rights of local communities are re-enforced and respected.

### **Financing for sustainable development**

We call on the Irish Government to take a firm stance against the introduction of any 'green economy' criteria into the provision of Official Development Assistance.

Introducing 'green economy' criteria could shift the focus away from supporting those in greatest need and could even be used by some as a form of economic policy conditionality as seen under previous structural adjustment programmes. Furthermore, if used to escape commitments on new and additional climate finance, it would completely undermine the principle of common but differentiated responsibility which lies at the heart of the UNFCCC and Kyoto Protocol.

Any agreement on financing for sustainable development needs to:

- recognise that climate change funds must be both new and additional;
- recall commitments already made to reach 0.7% GNP in ODA by 2015;
- consider the introduction of a Financial Transaction Tax and all other forms of innovative finance as a means of funding sustainable development;
- ensure that mechanisms for distributing financial resources for sustainable development operate with integrity and in accordance with the principles underlying the sustainable development concept.
- ensure that development finance channelled through the multilateral Banks supports, and not hinders, sustainable development and low carbon outcomes: unlike current practices by the World Bank and others to channel development finance into fossil fuel projects which will lock developing countries into high carbon development for decades to come.

### **Agriculture and food security**

As a priority action area for Irish Aid and a major concern for all involved in development, it is important that discussions on the Green Economy deal with the issue of agriculture and the right to food. In this regard, Rio +20 must include steps which will prioritise the situation of small-holder farmers and agro-ecological approaches they use which, with the right support, can ensure more sustainable farming, rural development and greater national food security.

The majority of people living in absolute poverty live on small farms. These small holder farmers are responsible for growing the majority of the world's food. Agro-ecological approaches to agriculture have proven effective in increasing yields while at the same time acting to protect the environment. As such, efforts to ensure sustainable development needs to include these small farmers, and in particular women. Women produce 60-80 percent of food in most developing countries, are responsible for food preparation, and are the primary caregivers. A woman's nutritional status is critical not only to her own health but also to her ability to maintain a secure livelihood and ensure that her children are properly nourished and healthy. Women therefore play a critical role in tackling food and nutrition security, and ensuring sustainability. Food production however, is not necessarily synonymous

with production of nutritious foods. Meeting increased demand for food must primarily be about producing the right type of food, foods that contribute to dietary requirements.

#### **Access to sustainable energy**

About 1.4 billion people globally live without access to electricity and 2.5 billion people cook on open wood, dung, or charcoal fuels. Economic development in many developing countries is hindered by power blackouts and lack of fuel supply. These same countries have an abundance of renewable energy and have huge scope for improving energy efficiency. In short, they can be supported to leapfrog fossil fuel based economies towards low carbon sustainable energy. As 2012 is the UN year of access to sustainable energy, this must be a priority for Rio+20.

### **3. Institutional framework for sustainable development**

Dóchas welcomes the focus of the 2012 Earth Summit on reforming the institutional framework for sustainable development. In this context, we want to highlight a number of areas of particular concern to Ireland's Development NGOs:

#### **Cohesion between international initiatives**

Over the past two decades, global initiatives on Climate Change, Food and Nutrition Security, MDGs or Sustainable Development have often operated in silos despite being extremely closely related. Rio +20 must clearly set out how cohesion between these and other interrelated UN initiatives shall be achieved in the coming years.

#### **The role of other International institutions and UN Agencies**

Similarly, the sustainable development agenda does not always feature strongly in the work and programmes of UN Agencies such as the UNDP and of IFIs such as the World Bank. Rio +20 can push for the Sustainable Development agenda to fall under the 'UN Delivering as One' initiative.

With regard to international efforts to re-launch the Doha round of WTO trade talks, the push for greater trade, investment and liberalisation should not be pursued at the expense of, or take precedence over, existing multilateral environmental agreements such as the Convention on Biodiversity (CBD). At present the free trade system rewards those countries who fail to internalise social and ecological costs.

#### **The role of Civil Society**

Irrespective of the locus of the Rio+20 agenda within the UN system, it is necessary that it is responsive and open to dialogue with global civil society. Dóchas calls on the Irish Government to support the representation, and meaningful participation, of civil society in the relevant bodies and processes.

#### **Reform, ownership, and public participation**

The Irish Government has a strong international reputation for supporting and raising the concerns of developing countries at an international level. Furthermore, through its signing of the Aarhus Convention it has signified its commitment to public participation.

It is important therefore, that at Rio 2012, the Irish Government promote the spirit of the Rio Declaration by ensuring that sustainable development remains a concept which is based on country and community ownership.

Furthermore, the Irish Government must ensure that any proposals which seek to make the green economy or sustainable development agenda more visible in developing countries do not result in duplication of processes with national development strategies. Any processes seeking to promote sustainable development must themselves be subject to the principles of sustainable development including public participation.

#### **4. Process and outcome document**

It is extremely important that the UN Conference on Sustainable Development fosters and thereafter harnesses political will to address poverty, climate change and biodiversity under the heading of sustainable development.

In this regard, the conference outcomes must, at the very least include:

- a reiteration of commitment to the principles of sustainable development contained in the Rio Declaration of 1992;
- an explicit expression of the need for a seismic shift in the prevailing economic model;
- detailed proposals addressing the human well being and social equity aspects of the green economy;
- a reiteration of the need for all states to meet their promises to provide 0.7% GNP in Official Development Assistance by 2015;
- a timeline for states and regions to deliver on long promised but still not delivered new and additional climate adaptation funding;
- a definitive pathway towards action to effectively and comprehensively tackle climate change;
- a clear statement that sustainable development will underpin the narrative for a “post MDGs” framework.

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Dóchas is the association of Irish Non-Governmental Development Organisations. It provides a forum for consultation and cooperation between its 45 members, and helps them speak with a single voice on development issues. For further information visit: [www.dochas.ie](http://www.dochas.ie)

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