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<b>Title</b>	<b>: Comment: Charities cannot be forgotten in crisis</b>

## **Comment: Charities cannot be forgotten in crisis**

**05 July 2009**

By Hans Zomer

This is the time of year when Ireland traditionally highlights its commitment to global justice and development.

At the end of June four years ago, 20,000 people marched in the streets of Dublin to demand more and better aid under the Make Poverty History banner. In early July 2005, as 20 years earlier, thousands of Irish people got involved in the Live 8 and Live Aid events, inspired by two Dubliners, Bono and Bob Geldof.

Hundreds of thousands have found other, quieter ways to take action against global poverty - they continue to support the work of Ireland's development non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In short, Irish people care, and are profoundly disturbed by the blatant disparities in global wealth.

Yet, if media coverage is to be believed, public opinion in Ireland has turned away from the world, and is entirely consumed by questions of how we can bridge the gap between government income and expenditure, or how to restructure the banking sector.

The truth is that Ireland is at a crossroads. The economic crisis has clearly demonstrated the flaws in our national development model, and it would be very unwise for us to make decisions about our national future in isolation.

The choice we face is very clear: do we want tomorrow's world to look like today's? Or do we want to build a more inclusive and sustainable future for us all? 'Business as usual' will not do, because it is that business that got us into the crisis in the first place.

If the global crisis has taught us anything, it's that the inherent instability of the financial markets, our economic model - which has delivered unprecedented prosperity to Ireland - is not sustainable in the long run. 'Business as usual' also won't do because it offers no solution for the other, even more serious, crises facing our world today: climate chaos, food scarcity and the end of cheap fossil fuels.

The impact of these multiple, and intrinsically linked, crises is already making itself felt very acutely in the world's most vulnerable countries. Harvests are failing, rains are irregular and, when they do come, they are torrential downpours, washing away fertile top soils.

Food prices have risen to levels at which urban populations cannot afford their daily bread. Social tensions are increasing in many countries and, across the developing world, people are on the move, looking for a better future.

The World Bank has estimated that hundreds of millions of people will fall back into poverty if countries do not receive "counter-cyclical" assistance.

This year alone, a combination of economic recession and food prices will take the number of people on the brink of starvation to a record high of 1.02 billion - one-sixth of the world's population - according to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation.

A major problem for many developing countries is that they don't have sufficient resources to protect their citizens from the effects of the crisis.

Governments are doing what they can but, financially, their options are limited. Every major source of income for developing countries has deteriorated.

Exports, remittances, foreign investment, equity flows: every one of these has dropped since the crisis began. Even overseas aid - which, until recently, was one of the few relatively predictable forms of financing for many developing countries - is under pressure due to the economic slump in the west.

World Bank president Robert Zoellick said: "We need to learn from the history of past crises, when governments, squeezed for cash, cut into social programmes, with often devastating impacts on the poor. "Most attention in the current crisis has been focused on developed countries where people face the loss of home, assets and jobs. These are real hardships.

"But people in developing countries have much less [of a] cushion: no savings, no insurance, no unemployment benefits, and often no food." In this context, it is worrying that Ireland has chosen to scale back its investment in international cooperation. In the past 12 months, the government has cut the aid budget four times, slashing a total of €255 million off our development cooperation programme, and reducing our contributions to the UN system to an absolute bare minimum.

In effect, Ireland appears to be saying to the global community that we are too poor to care about the rest of the world, and that our ideals of international cooperation are strictly for times of prosperity.

At a time of crucial choices for Ireland's future, it is good to remind ourselves of our core values and the ideals we have as a nation. Live Aid and Make Poverty History showed us the enormous extent to which Irish people do care about the world. Three years ago, the government captured that spirit extremely well, by adopting the White Paper on Irish Aid. That document contained our promise to the world's poorest people - a promise oft repeated since by our leaders: that Ireland will work with others, to help those in greatest need.

Withdrawing from international development cooperation and cutting the overseas aid budget will do nothing to solve the economic crisis, but it will certainly condemn millions of people to poverty.

Our overseas aid is not "charity", to be turned on when Ireland is feeling "generous", then turned off when we are feeling the pinch. Rather, our aid is a practical expression of our deep and lasting commitment to fight injustice, oppression and poverty wherever it exists - more than ever in times of crisis.

*Hans Zomer is the director of Dochas, the umbrella group of Ireland's overseas development NGOs.*