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## **Minister appeals to aid agencies to maintain good relations**

By Caroline O'Doherty

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THE Minister for Overseas Development has appealed to aid agencies to maintain good working relations with his department in the face of severe criticisms over dramatic cuts in funding to help the world's poor.

Minister Peter Power told the annual general meeting of Dóchas, the umbrella group of 39 Irish charities with overseas projects, that he greatly regretted the budget cuts, but said: "This has been a particularly uncertain and difficult year."

"All of us recognise this as a time of enormous challenge for all involved in the international development sector, both for Dóchas and for Irish Aid. It is easy to speak of partnership in good times but more difficult to sustain in a positive manner when difficult decisions need to be made," he said.

"I trust that the foundation we have built over the last decade can withstand the pressure of the next few years and that our partnership will sustain and emerge more resilient in the future."

Aid agencies reacted with shock and anger after €100 million was cut from the overseas aid fund in last month's emergency budget – following on from €155m in cuts announced in the previous eight months.

Speaking at yesterday's AGM, Helen Keogh, chairperson of Dóchas, said everyone recognised the country was in the middle of an economic storm but said the international factors were having a disproportionate impact on the poor.

"Around the world, one billion people are feeling the effects. This year, the number of people going hungry has gone up drastically, as a direct result of the crisis."

The meeting called on the minister to redouble his efforts to ensure Ireland regained and maintained its position as a world leader in helping developing countries.

"To regain our leadership position, the Government can start by making sure there will be no further cuts to the aid budget, and to present a clear plan on how we are going to keep our promise to help make poverty history," said Dóchas director Hans Zomer.

Mr Power acknowledged that "some very painful adjustments" had to be made to the aid programme but he said the remaining budget of €696m was still very significant and the priority would be to ensure it was spent in the most effective way possible.