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## Pruning of overseas aid may go against grain of public goodwill



[Protesters against overseas aid cuts demonstrate outside the Department of Finance yesterday. Photograph: Julien Behal/PA](#)

While Irish people have an exaggerated idea of how much they give, they'd happily give more,. writes **MARY FITZGERALD** Foreign Affairs Correspondent

MINISTER OF State for Overseas Development Peter Power was keen to stress that the launch of the Irish Aid annual report for 2008 yesterday was a good news story. And it was – if you chose to ignore the fact that, over the last year, the State's overseas development assistance (ODA) budget has been slashed by €222 million or almost one-quarter.

As Mr Power listed some of Irish Aid's key achievements in 2008 – support for 13 million Ethiopians at risk of hunger; providing anti-retroviral treatments to more than 120,000 people in Mozambique; helping ensure the number of Zambians surviving on one meal a day fell by almost one-third; and ongoing support for UN programmes for 4.6 million Palestinian refugees – there were many in the audience who wondered how much more paltry next year's annual report might be.

Earlier that morning, Dóchas, an umbrella organisation representing more than 30 Irish NGOs and aid agencies, organised a demonstration outside the Department of Finance to highlight the impact of the recent cuts, and warn against any further pruning of the aid budget.

It was the latest salvo from those in the development sector who are keen to prove that considerable public support for overseas development spending exists, despite the State's economic travails, and despite what they say is a perception in political circles, particularly among the "No votes in overseas aid" brigade, that ODA is an easy target.

But those politicians who say they detect a growing mood of "charity begins at home" on the doorsteps must have been left scratching their heads over the findings of a recent TNS/mrbi survey on attitudes to overseas aid.

The poll, commissioned by Trócaire, found that while a majority believed Government spending on ODA was much higher than is the case (as much as 10 per cent of national income, compared with the actual figure of 0.48 per cent) most respondents supported an increase in the aid budget.

Aid agencies have been vocal in outlining the devastating effects of the cuts. Trócaire will have to pull out of Zambia, Nigeria, Peru and Indonesia, while in Ireland it will have to cut 27 jobs. Concern has been forced to drastically trim projects, and shed 500 jobs worldwide, as a result of funding shortfalls. Yesterday, Fr Eamon Aylward of the Irish Missionary Union told Power he was receiving daily calls from field staff anxious about the possibility of resources dwindling even further.

With December's budget looming, and with it the prospect of additional cuts – in July, the McCarthy report recommended that Ireland defer until 2015 (from 2012) its commitment to reach the UN target of allocating 0.7 per cent of national income to ODA – there is much trepidation within the development sector. Those hoping that the overseas aid budget will be frozen at its current level – €696 million or 0.48 per cent of national income – will not have been reassured by the Minister's unwillingness to be drawn on what the ODA budget might look like in 2010.

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