

Wednesday, 28 April 2010

**COMHCHOISTE UM GHNÓTHAÍ
EACHTRACHA**

**JOINT COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN
AFFAIRS**

Millennium Development Goals: Discussion.

Chairman: I welcome Mr. Salil Shetty, director of the UN Millennium Campaign and Ms Marina Ponti, director for Europe of the UN Millennium Campaign. I wish to record our appreciation of the assistance of Dóchas in organising today's meeting and for its paper on the millennium development goals, which has been circulated to members. The Millennium Campaign was established by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan as a global campaigning force to hold governments accountable for the achievement of the millennium development goals by the target date of 2015. The UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon recently launched a progress report on the millennium development goals in preparation for the high-level plenary meeting to review the millennium development goals in New York in September. The interim progress report outlines notable successes to date in combating extreme poverty and hunger, improving school enrolment and child health, expanding access to clean water and HIV treatment, controlling malaria, tuberculosis and neglected tropical diseases. The report also highlights that progress has been uneven and, without additional efforts, several of the millennium development goals are likely to be missed in many countries.

The members of the joint committee have visited a number of the world's poorest countries in recent years to see at first hand the work of the Irish Government in supporting its Irish Aid programme in sub-Saharan Africa. Committee members are keen to hear the views of Mr. Shetty on whether there is cause for optimism in respect of the millennium development goals and the role Ireland can play in helping the least developed nations achieve the goal and targets.

While members of the committee enjoy absolute privilege, this privilege does not apply to witnesses appearing before the committee. Caution should be exercised, particularly in respect of references of a personal nature. In the Visitors Gallery, I welcome the following: Mr. Brian Hanratty, chief executive officer of Gorta; Ms Isabella Rae, programme manager of Gorta; Professor Denis Lucey, board member of Gorta and the hunger task force; Mr. Kostas Stamoulis, director of agricultural development economics division of the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations; Mr. David Dalton, chief executive of Plan Ireland; Mr. Hans Zomer, Dóchas; Ms Maeve Bateman, Trócaire; Ms Olga McDonogh, ActionAid Ireland; Ms Catherine Campbell, Department of Foreign Affairs; Ms Anne Molloy, education manager, Amnesty International; Ms Nina MacKenzie, British Embassy; and Ms Despoina Valamvou, second secretary at the Greek Embassy.

Mr. Salil Shetty: I thank members for the opportunity to address this very important committee in the Parliament of Ireland. Those involved in the Millennium Campaign have been talking with parliamentarians across the world. Just two weeks ago we had a meeting of African parliamentarians in Abuja, with 17 countries represented. In many countries we have parliamentary groups or caucuses formed and there is growing interest. We are working very closely with the Interparliamentary Union and AWEPA. I am sure my colleague, Ms Marina Ponti, will say more about this in the European context.

The main purpose of my visit to Ireland is related to what the Chairman mentioned, the upcoming summit at the Heads of State level on 20 to 22 September to review progress on the millennium development goals. More importantly, we will try to come up with a clear action plan on what we can do for the next five years. The focus is on accelerating progress over the next five years.

I will quickly make my presentation to highlight some key points. The first is that the millennium development goals offered a break from the way we did business in the development arena by creating a

millennium contract between developed and developing countries, where developing countries took primary responsibility for the planning and implementation of the first seven goals and the developed countries, in turn, committed themselves to delivering goal number eight. This deals with more and better quality aid, greater debt cancellation and increased poverty focused training opportunities. This is where we started from.

When these goals were signed in 2000, the average person on the street could not be blamed for being somewhat sceptical. They might have been seen as another bunch of goals, commitments and promises in a UN summit but if we fast forward from September 2000 to April 2010, I have presented a scorecard of where we are. I have been pleasantly surprised at the progress we have made over these nine years. The millennium development goals remained the most durable set of global development commitments. They withstood the events of 11 September 2001, the tsunami and all sorts of things that move our minds in different directions. They provided a strong human development and poverty focus to all global processes. The major regional bodies - the EU, the African Union, SAARC and ASEAN - have all embraced the millennium development goals. Most importantly, it has influenced national planning and implementation processes not only in the poorest countries but also in several middle-income countries, such as Brazil, Indonesia and my home country of India.

More than 35 countries have had their debt cancelled under goal 8. This has resulted in a big increase in poverty focussed public expenditure. Aid levels have steadily and significantly increased over the past nine years. However, all of these are the means and we are looking for the outcomes.

More than 400 million people have come out of poverty since 2000; 4 million fewer children die and more than 30 million more children are in school. I will not go through all of the statistics provided. I often like to remind people, particularly parliamentarians, of the interesting statistic on child malnutrition. Of the 117 countries for which we have data, 63 are on track as we speak, 30 of which only came on track in recent years. Not only have we seen an improvement but we have seen an acceleration. This is partly because it takes a long time for these processes to kick into place. Although the goals were signed in 2000 it took a long time to organise the plans and get the programmes going. We are moving at a much more accelerated pace.

I apologise if those in the gallery do not have a copy of the presentation which includes slides of the graph to which I am referring. The yellow orange shaded portion shows how much we have covered and the unshaded portion shows how much distance we have yet to cover. The picture is far less gloomy than we are often led to believe.

Chairman: The people in the gallery have received the presentation.

Mr. Salil Shetty: That is good. I thank the Chairman.

This is not a comprehensive list but it shows the key information. The two areas where we have great distance to cover are child and maternal mortality, and we know this. When this information is given to people the normal response is that the figures are averages and that India and China distort the picture because of the very significant improvements there. This is why I have focused in particular on sub-Saharan Africa and how Africa performs in comparison with developing regions as a whole. The trend is in the right direction with large reductions in the proportion of people living below poverty. In education, the largest increases have been in Africa. This is partly because it started from a low base but the growth is very important. I will not go through each of the goals but a good proxy statistic on child health is that on measles vaccination, which has led to significant reductions in child deaths. All of these statistics are there for us to see.

For me, what is most important at this juncture is to understand why some of the poorest countries today are on track to achieve many of the goals. This is where we get to the crux of the issue. I have listed a few countries, which does not mean they are on track to achieve all of the goals but that they have made quite

significant progress on several of them. The question we should ask is why Bangladesh and Nepal, which are much poorer than India, have moved much faster than India on many of the goals and indicators. I have provided many more examples at national level of where much progress has been made in many areas but I will not discuss all of them. I am sure there is more information on Malawi available in Ireland. It used to be a basket case with regard to food security but over the past three or four years it has become a show case.

What is most important is to understand the elements and factors in the most successful countries. I have compiled a list of my thoughts on this and the UN Secretary General's report, Keeping the Promise, to which the Chairman referred, also outlines a list of success criteria. It is similar to my list. We believe the number one factor is leadership and ownership at national level; there is no substitute for this. The most successful countries have taken the global goals and did not just parrot them but adapted and customised them. They mainstreamed them into national policies, plans and strategies. They prioritised the goals in their domestic allocation of resources and leveraged external resources. They did a much better job in improving the delivery mechanisms. They are more accountable and transparent and have more citizen engagement and media and public debate. Most importantly, international donors have played their part not only in terms of aid volume but also standing behind national priorities.

One can take the view that we have a real obstacle course ahead of us over the next five years with the economic crisis, the food crisis and all of the other crises on which one can dwell. We believe that ultimately achieving the millennium development goals is a matter of political choice and the decisions we make and not a matter of divine intervention. If we really focus on making them happen these goals can be achieved.

I have a number of slides on citizen action but I will not discuss them. However, I will briefly mention that there is no doubt that a key element behind the significant progress we have seen on the millennium development goals beyond government action has been citizen action. People have come together and reminded their governments of their promises. Much of this has happened over the past five years. This has made a big difference and a very small example is something we have run as a millennium campaign over the past three or four years, which is "stand up and take action", a global campaign for the millennium development goals. Last year, 173 million people throughout the world joined, the majority of whom are from Africa and Asia where the change has to happen.

For the summit, we are calling on all governments, particularly those in developing countries, to conduct a good analysis of what has worked and what has not in their context; to present a clear report, nationally and to the UN in September; and to have an action plan on what they want to do over the next five years and what they will do. A core issue for us with regard to the summit is accountability contracts at two levels, namely, between developing country governments and their citizens, and between the north and the south, or rich country governments and developing country governments.

I will make some comments on Ireland, after which Ms Marina Ponti will speak about Europe. I am not aware of many other countries which have had such long-standing commitment and support as Ireland for international development and the fight against poverty. I lived in Kenya for many years and have seen first hand and been inspired by the work of Irish civil society and the Irish Government. Even today, its per capita giving is among the highest in the world and Ireland remains among the top ten donors globally in the OECD chart. The quality of Irish aid is second to none. Any OECD independent review shows that Irish aid is targeted at the right countries, namely, the poorest countries, and focused on the right issues. There is much to be celebrated and commended and I will begin with that. Often, Ireland may not get enough appreciation for the very good things it does and I want to underline that as my first point.

The reason I am speaking about Ireland's contribution to millennium development goals aid in the run up to the summit is that we are very aware that the global economic situation, particular in Ireland, has led to a reduction in aid levels over the past year. The commitment which exists, made twice or thrice already, to reach 0.7% is being left open-ended and we do not have a clear timetable on how we will get there by 2015. We are very pleased that Ireland aligned its thinking with European thinking and is moving at the

same speed. This means it will match up to the 2015 European target of 0.7% but the timing of what Ireland does is crucial. Matters are just starting to get better in the poorest countries in the world. They are starting to pick up and if there are delays or further cuts, poor people in poor countries will be affected in a direct way.

Ireland in some ways does not need much persuasion and has been the beneficiary of European aid. I do not need to sell the importance of aid and external support to this nation. My argument has always been that developed countries - Ireland is no different - have the option of paying a relatively small bill now or the costs tend to be much higher later. I always give the example of Haiti; if we had invested a little in that country over a period we would probably not have had such a big loss of life, with an equally big reconstruction cost. Chile, which is next to Haiti, got away with a much lower cost. It is a matter of trying to invest now.

The 0.7% of GDP aid agenda is consistent with Ireland's support of human rights, gender equity and justice. Much leverage in Europe and general foreign policy can be received from a relatively small investment of €7 from every €1,000. The leverage is far higher than what one might imagine. Since aid from Ireland is of such high quality, reduction in aid from here has a much greater impact than aid being reduced by some other donors which do not go to the millennium development goals anyway.

Some other economies in a comparable position, such as Spain, the US and the UK, have managed to stick to aid commitments despite economic difficulties. It is important for Ireland to measure up to this. Part of the logic of the 0.7% figure was that it would remain constant even if the economy shrinks, which is very important. As we approach the summit, our hope - and I am sure the expectation of the Irish people is the same - is that the budget and investment for aid will turn around so that there will be a clear set of targets between now and 2015 for how official development assistance, ODA, volumes will increase to 0.7%. We hope the Doha trade process will be unlocked, as it has been stuck, and Ireland can play an important role in that. I hope Ireland can push the other European countries into doing more by doing more itself.

Ms Marina Ponti: I will reiterate some of the points made by Mr. Salil Shetty. The millennium campaign has worked in Europe by basically focusing on countries lagging behind, such as Italy, France, Germany and Spain, in the past. It is important that between 2010 and 2015, countries like Ireland, which had a high standard in the quality and quantity of aid, provide leadership. It is important, particularly at a European level, to keep those commitments. Unfortunately, many governments want to skip those commitments so we need the leaders in the field to continue.

We recently witnessed the launch of the European spring package. The role of the Irish Government and Parliament in the EU is very important, and it can ensure the calendar indicators and timetables from now to 2015 can be kept. Unfortunately, we know some governments will fight against any accountability within Europe to keep those commitments. We know Ireland has always been behind the European deadline commitments and we hope it will continue to do so.

We have been working with Parliaments and I have addressed many of them, especially in southern Europe. The role of the Parliament is crucial and we have a campaign to hold governments to account for their promises. Parliaments are seen as allies and can demand transparency and implementation.

It is important that in times of crisis, citizens be sure that every euro of their tax money being invested is well spent. Ireland is one of the very few European countries that can confidently say to its citizens that every single euro in development assistance serves that purpose. The committee should be a little more explicit in conveying that message to the public.

Ireland has a tradition of accountability, which is very important. The numbers of hearings that this committee has had with decision makers in Irish Aid is very impressive and I would like the committee to bring this accountability concept to other European levels. There will be a discussion over the next few months in which the Irish Government will be involved on the European position to be presented at the UN

summit. I hope the committee will ask its Government what will be the position. Will Europe present an ambitious plan, which is what the world expects from Europe? I hope Ireland will be an important ally in that respect.

Concrete action is very important. I mentioned before that the Irish Government should ensure that the European position reflects the ambition and possibilities of the Irish tradition. There should be a debate in the Parliament on the issue. It is very ambitious but I hope the committee will not rule out immediately the possibility of having binding legislation on development, so the political commitments translate into legislation.

It would be very inspiring for peer governments for Ireland to volunteer to present to the summit an aid report on what Ireland has achieved in terms of quantity and effectiveness. If that happened, we could ask other governments to do the same. We know the Irish Parliament is extremely engaged and we are working with it. I hope there will be an opportunity for exchange with other European Parliaments so that the expertise and leadership can be useful to others.

Chairman: There is a vote in the Seanad so our Senators have gone to Chamber. I hope they will return shortly. Deputy Timmins will now contribute. He is the spokesperson for the Fine Gael party and has UN experience in the Lebanon. We are committed to the UN and the goals of the witnesses. All our members are committed and put on much pressure in critical moments.

Deputy Billy Timmins: I thank Mr. Shetty and Ms Ponti for their contribution. I have a few brief points. We have heard of millennium development goals and the deadline of 2015, and we think of how little has been achieved and how far we must go. It is good to have seen the presentation and the many positive actions, particularly in education and child health. That is heartening. I would like to get a more up-to-date set of data relating to the diagrams and graphs, if possible, as I feel that with the economic downturn of the past couple of years, the progress might not have been as good in the past two or three years as it was in the first years of the 21st century. Perhaps the witnesses could forward that data at some stage.

The witnesses spoke about political choice, mentioning resources lost through corruption by leaders of poor countries often colluding with Western governments and corporations. In Ireland we are very proud of the accountability with regard to aid in programme countries and how it is monitored. I would appreciate any examples or information on that point. Mr. Shetty raised the issue of national legislation to underpin the commitment to the 0.7% target. Fine Gael introduced a Private Members' Bill to try to achieve this, but it was unsuccessful. Have many countries introduced legislation to underpin the commitments they gave in 2000?

Deputy Rory O'Hanlon: I thank Mr. Shetty and Ms Ponti for their presentations.

It is important to recognise the progress made, and I appreciate the contributions of the delegates. However, I see from the documentation provided that there is quite a long way to go in terms of child and maternal mortality. I ask the delegates to comment on the reasons for this and explain what needs to be done. I appreciate their comments on Ireland's long-standing support and the quality of Irish aid. However, there is a question with regard to the 0.7% target. I refer to the amount of aid that is sent but does not contribute towards the target - for example, personnel, NGOs, missionaries and other voluntary contributions. Has any effort been made to identify the value of such contributions from different countries?

What would the delegates like to see us do in Ireland, apart from keeping up our funding levels and reaching the 0.7% target? What can the European Union do?

My final question is about co-operation and integration among the different agencies. There is a multiplicity of agencies doing good work in all areas of the millennium goals. It appears that in some

instances there is duplication, and a co-ordinated approach which would allow us to achieve better value for money is lacking. What are the views of the delegates on what might be done about this?

Chairman: Deputy Michael D. Higgins is president of the Labour Party in Ireland.

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: With others, I welcome the representatives. I was happy to hear Mr. Shetty speak yesterday at Gorta's hunger initiative event; it was a valuable presentation.

I will make a couple of points to advance the discussion. I was impressed, in Mr. Shetty's presentations today and yesterday, by his stressing that progress must be achieved universally across all aid goals. I refer to the work that should take place between now and the September review meeting. I imagine some countries attending the review will bring, along with Government delegations, representatives of civil society and NGOs. That is something on which a decision has not yet been made in Ireland, and it would be valuable. It would also be valuable if the preparatory meetings, including the regional and group meetings - that is, regional in a geographic sense, and groups based on levels of dependency and vulnerability - had clear presentations. For example, at the UN meeting, people will have text that addresses some of the issues.

The representatives will excuse me if I do not go down the road of self-congratulation with regard to Ireland, because I see real problems with our performance in some areas, although it is good. People such as me perhaps do not stress enough what has been achieved. The delegates mentioned Malawi, which has made some progress, but to some extent at the cost of environmental sustainability, because there has been a massive increase in deforestation. This raises a point in which I am interested - that is, the progress towards the eight development goals, universally and together. I mentioned the preparatory meetings. A good text is required that will enable the reconfiguration of the resources and their location, so we can address the lags that are occurring in certain countries. A data sheet about the eight development goals would show that progress differs on each; however, it differs in known and predictable ways. It would be reasonable to assume that the Irish and European position should be to increase the resources and to reconfigure them in a way that allows us to address the problems that are occurring.

The September meeting will also need to take account of the interactive effect of the four or five major crises that are occurring. I refer not just to the fiscal and economic crisis, but to the energy crisis, the food crisis and so on. I am gravely concerned about the pressure on some of the African countries in dealing with the food shortage in terms of the right of these countries to have a pattern of sustainable food production. For example, in the west African countries, 80% of the real increase in agricultural production has been due to the efforts of women, who do not own land. That is a different approach towards sustainability for the future. Some people want to release vast amounts of food, some of it genetically modified, into these countries, which results in major pressure.

With regard to the question of technology transfer and with a view to achievement of the eight development goals, I am struck by two major prejudices that in the development approach. One is what I call the dominating knowledge approach - that is, that there is one model and one set of assumptions in economics, which is a form of colonisation, frankly. The second is the absolute silence, post-Copenhagen, on the delivery of technological resources to enable sustainability to be built into national policies.

Chairman: Deputy John Deasy is the Chairman on the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs Sub-Committee on Overseas Development.

Deputy John Deasy: I will pick up where Deputy Higgins left off, as my question is related to the millennium development goals progress report. Where did these goals originate and how were they put together? What was the science behind the nomination of those goals in the first place, and how has this evolved? Deputy Higgins used the word "reconfiguration". I am interested in the delegates' response in this regard.

The delegates mention in their documentation that Nicaragua cut hunger by half between 1991 and 2004, but I could also mention countries where that has not occurred. I am not saying it is simplistic, but we have all been to developing countries in which things have not improved. I could equally have put such information together.

We have a sub-committee meeting tomorrow on our programme in Zambia. It states in the documentation that the 2008 millennium development goals progress report indicates that the 2015 targets for hunger, education, gender and HIV-AIDS are likely to be met, but I favour the CSO figures for that country - the hard figures with regard to poverty, HIV prevalence and so on. Perhaps the delegates should explain the process behind their goals, when these were configured initially, how the process has evolved and whether the goals are still relevant. Do they keep them relevant?

Chairman: I ask Mr. Shetty to respond. He may wish to add further information at this stage.

We visited a number of the countries, including Malawi, where great efforts are being made to deal with corruption. I would be interested to know if Mr. Shetty knows anything about the current situation in that country. We were there in April 2009 and can give the delegates a copy of the report we made when we returned. We can also provide a copy of work we did in the lead-up to the last setting of targets, when we tried to convince the Government how little extra was needed to make up the 0.7% in comparison with the private and public sector requirements, among others. We shall provide those two documents afterwards but perhaps Mr. Shetty will now give his responses to the questions asked.

Mr. Salil Shetty: I do not know how much time we have. Several of the questions were in-depth but I will try to answer some of them.

I will begin with the last question, from the Chairman of the development and co-operation sub-committee, concerning the origin of the goals. Briefly, they were put together as a kind of aggregation or summary of findings which had come out from the several UN conferences of the 1990s, Beijing, Cairo and Copenhagen. There was a range of major UN conferences in that decade. That was one source from which our goals came. Another source was the OECD targets which existed in parallel. When the expert committee sat it was very clear that whichever set of goals one would come up with they would be wrong in any case. Trying to get one perfect set of goals for the whole world is impossible and therefore what was agreed was a compromise package.

There were many criticisms. One set of criticisms said it was too ambitious; another said it was too unambitious. One can never quite get it right at the global level. However, the view of the Millennium Campaign has always been that global agreement on these goals presented a very important shift in that there was a consensus set of ideas on what should be done. In reality, these were broad political commitments at global level and it was for each country to see how it wanted to sequence these at national level.

That touches somewhat on the other question about whether we configure goals. It is our submission today that the countries which actually nationalise these goals, set their own priorities and decide on sequencing, rather than take an orthodox approach that says, "This is the only way to do it", have been relatively the most successful because they have already adapted and customised according to their own reality.

The question on data touches a big problem. Deputy Timmons asked whether we had more updated data. This is linked to what was said about Malawi and Zambia, that for each good example there can be five bad ones. However, as members can imagine, it is a very complex matter to get consistent data across the world. It is close to impossible. If one takes maternal mortality, for example, the figure we quoted globally until three weeks is 500,000 deaths per year. The latest study by *The Lancet* which came out only a few weeks ago stated the figure is now down to 350,000. That is quite a big range to talk about - 500,000 to 350,000. There are many methodological challenges, etc. If we take Zambia, for example, by

national Zambian Government data, which was probably what was referred to by the Deputy, its assessment is much more optimistic than the international assessment by the World Bank. There are many data issues involved.

For me, the examples of success stories I gave - the Deputy is right that one can find five which are unsuccessful - the important thing to ask is why we see success in those countries but not in others. That is the point I was trying to make and that is where analysis and looking more deeply comes in. We are doing some studies with the Overseas Development Institute, looking much more deeply at the question of success variables and we will be very happy to share that information with the committee. The first set of documents will come out in late June.

The Deputy asked what examples we could give of corruption. These abound but the real question is how we can address the problem. Our view has been that the entire transparency and accountability agenda can be driven to some extent from outside but at the end of the day it must come from domestic sources. We support citizen-led campaigns within the country, by churches, faith groups, non-governmental organisations and civil society. That is our approach in that regard.

On national legislation I do not have a full list of the countries concerned. Perhaps Ms Ponti knows more. We can look at it in more detail but certainly Holland and the United Kingdom have legislation and there may be others. We can make a list and find out which ones belong.

Deputy O'Hanlon asked about the factors behind the high rates of child and maternal mortality. If one takes the list I gave of the success variables and reverse them one will find those are the causes of the failure variables or they account for why success has not happened. Of course, maternal mortality is related closely to the status of women and women's rights. We can establish that but by and large where there has been a more systemic sort of health systems approach we have seen more success on these variables. One can do some of these things easily with a vertical programme. If one has an immunisation programme one can get immediate results. In education, if school fees are removed enrolment shoots up. However, if one wishes to improve the quality of education that is a longer term process. Where one sees quick results is where quick action could be taken. In Malawi, the rise in food security came about to some extent because of subsidised inputs, which are made available to smallholders. One could see results almost immediately. The Deputy is right that this has meant trade-offs on the environment side. We know there are hard choices to be made and there are no simple answers. Our answer to that is there is no new development theory on how we can do this. Our answer has always been that it has to be bottom-up and nationally defined rather than externally driven.

Much more needs to be done on UN co-ordination but the Millennium Campaign is not particularly focused on that. I am sure the members are aware that one UN body delivers as such and Ireland has supported that process in Mozambique, Tanzania and Vietnam. It is making a difference but is a slow process. That is a discussion in itself. How do we get the UN to work in a more co-ordinated way?

Much more work must be done on goal setting, climate change and the environment and we see these as interlinked. We have a document on energies and climate change that we would be happy to share with the committee. Our strong view is that any financing for adaptation should be additional, should not end up being substituted and that we should not have a competitive effort in this regard.

I am sure I have not covered all the questions members raised because there were so many of them but I wish to make one further point. Apart from the ODI joint study we are doing with the Overseas Development Institute, the UN system itself is producing an entire range of documents in the next six months. These will all be available and, for those interested in the more analytical side, an international assessment report is coming out in a couple of weeks which will feed into the G8 process. There is a synthesis report based on 30 country case studies, looking at lessons learned, and I will be happy to share all those documents with committee members.

Ms Marina Ponti: It is legitimate to think about and question the 0.7% target and the criteria but there is a very big risk involved. We experienced this last year when the Italian Government, which is not performing very well in this regard, put forward at European level a proposal for the OECD to revisit the 0.7% criteria and include voluntary work and civil society measures. This is a very dangerous act because the moment you change the criteria governments will say, "Okay". If you change the criteria the commitment can also be changed. Many governments are waiting to open up this Pandora's box and include other things so that without offering additional resources they can honour their promises. It is very important to keep the 0.7% figure as it is. We know the criteria can be improved but in a time of economic crisis like the present some governments do not want to honour their promises. If we open up Pandora's box we may be in a situation in which, without any extra resources, everyone could achieve the 0.7% target and we do not want to risk that.

Chairman: I thank Ms Ponti very much and I thank the delegation for coming today.

Deputy John Deasy: I wish to put a question to Ms Ponti because she said something that interested me. She stated we should be more explicit in vocally supporting our aid budget. Irish Aid has done this as have several people in this room. Allow me to play devil's advocate. I realise Ms Ponti is, for all intents and purposes, a diplomat but is there something that Irish Aid is not doing? Is there any criticism with regard to our aid programme that Ms Ponti could refer to? She remarked that the programmes are run very well and that they are a model for the world, but is there something that Irish Aid does not do well?

Mr. Salil Shetty: We have no qualms with the Irish Aid folk and we have not done an in-depth analysis of Irish Aid so, in a sense, we are not really competent to answer the question. Our appeal is that we need more of it rather than saying there are specific areas requiring change, because we have not done an evaluation of it. Normally, we go with the OECD DAC, development assistance committee, peer review. It has listed some areas in which there could be some change. Nothing is perfect but, on the whole, our assessment is very positive.

Deputy John Deasy: I thank the delegation.

Deputy Michael D. Higgins: I refer to the rights perspective. It has taken a long time to achieve the practical implementation of the justiciable right to food or to be free from hunger in different places. Is this the area where progress is slowest? I have attended many seminars over the years and people refer to the need for a specific right to development goals because it is derived from the universal declaration and so on. However, I do not see much progress internationally on the lodging of a rights-based perspective within the development model.

Mr. Salil Shetty: In my view the two must go together. In a sense establishing any right, whether a civil, political, social or economic right, is a very important first step. It must go side-by-side with allocating the resources and empowering rights holders with the ability to actually claim such rights. I come from a country which has several of these rights in place now. Most recently, education has been made a fundamental right. We are also a country with the greatest number of people living in hunger, estimated at 400 million people. It is important to have the rights but it is equally important for us to empower people to be able to claim these rights and to create the environment in which the rights can be fulfilled.

Chairman: The hunger task force and its report has had a significant impact internationally and it will have this impact again in September at the meeting. I understand there is a proposal for a major showing of the report in conjunction with the United States.

Mr. Salil Shetty: Ms Ponti mentioned the point already, but the Deputy asked us what actions we are calling for from Ireland and Europe. I restate the point that the committee might underestimate the importance of everything it does. The voice of the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs is very important in Ireland, in Europe and internationally. Even the simplest of things such as parliamentary resolutions, a hearing, pushing for a report from the Irish Government on goal aid and ensuring a presence at summits

at European and global level are important. We urge the committee to consider all these things seriously. They make a significant difference.

Chairman: I wish to thank Mr. Shetty and Ms Ponti for their presentations. As they can see, people here are very interested and go into a great deal of detail. We will be following the work of the delegation very closely. The size of the task of achieving the millennium development goals is very significant and will require genuine commitment from donor and recipient governments. It is very useful to have carried out the interim review because it allows us to take stock of what has been achieved to date. It is also important that the review takes place this year, while there is still time to make the necessary policy changes and to commit to accelerating progress towards the achievement of the millennium development goals, especially MDG 1, to halve the proportion of people suffering from extreme poverty and hunger. Arising from the meeting today, I propose that the committee invite the Minister of State with responsibility for overseas development to come before it next month to set out a new and clear timetable for Ireland to reach the 0.7% UN target. We will follow up that proposal in committee.

I wish Mr. Shetty well in his new position as Secretary General of Amnesty International, a position he will assume in June, and I am sure will be in contact with him in that context. I look forward to welcoming him back to the joint committee in that role at a future date.

The joint committee went into private session at 4.05 p.m. and adjourned at 4.45 p.m. *sine die*.