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We need to learn from past crises

Development aid has been cut at the time it is needed most, writes Hans Zomer

Today, 39 of Ireland's aid agencies are meeting for their annual conference. This year's gathering of NGOs, however, is unlikely to focus on the traditional topics relating to how NGOs can work together to improve Ireland's aid efforts. Rather, the conference looks set to be dominated by the devastating realities currently affecting Irish aid agencies.

The economic crisis is now forcing Irish aid agencies to make dramatic cuts in their services and programmes. Although most NGOs report that ordinary citizens continue to contribute generously to their work, most other vital sources of funding for overseas aid have been slashed.

The Government cut Ireland's aid programme four times in less than a year. The April Supplementary Budget left aid agencies facing cuts of more than 20%.

The World Bank estimates that the crisis will push a further 46 million people below the poverty line. This comes on top of the estimated 130-150 million people – 30 times the population of Ireland – pushed into poverty because of the soaring food prices recently.

Earlier this month, 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.*"

The victims of the global crisis are least able to influence it, and are now hit further by rich countries like Ireland going back on their aid promises.

Yet this need not be the case. Many politicians, led most visibly by US President Obama, have pointed out that our response to crises defines who we are. The choices we make when the going is tough allow us to show our true identity. Our response as a nation to our current economic difficulties determines who we will be. Do we opt to retreat to a self image of a "little Ireland", or do we choose our future by investing in international cooperation?

This year provides us with opportunities to make the choices. Irish citizens can join millions of Europeans in selecting candidates for the European Parliament in June, and the referendum on the Lisbon Treaty provides another chance to define the future shape of our international outlook as a nation.

Despite its flaws, the EU remains an inspiring and hugely successful experiment in peaceful cooperation, and Ireland has benefited immensely from our inclusion.

Most Irish aid agencies agreed wholeheartedly with former Taoiseach Bertie Ahern when in 2005 he said that *“the Union has crafted a common approach to the rest of the world. This approach has been built very much on what one could call ‘soft power’ – development aid, strong support for multilateral engagement and an increasing commitment to peace-keeping and support for humanitarian tasks.”*

Ireland’s aid agencies, and our 850,000 supporters recognise the crucial role the EU can play by keeping the principles of development cooperation and independent humanitarian aid at its heart. The European Parliament elections offer us an opportunity to express concerns and values.

Today, when 39 Irish aid agencies come together, they will be launching guidelines for aspirant Irish MEPs on how they can use their influence in the European Parliament to ensure that Europe does not turn its back on the world’s poorest people.

Hans Zomer is Director of Dóchas, the umbrella group for Irish Development NGOs.