

Dóchas Strategy on Sustainability.

What Dóchas Does to Implement Priority 4 in the Strategic Plan

November 2007

1. Dóchas and Sustainability

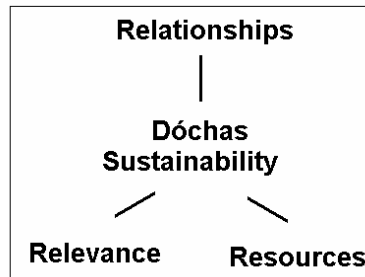
Dóchas is committed to building a sustainable and effective network.

In the Dóchas Strategic Plan, we have identified the need for Dóchas to ensure its long-term sustainability. The objective for Dóchas, in this context, is: "To support the achievement of other strategic objectives by maintaining a well governed and managed organisation based on active member participation."

For Dóchas, Sustainability is more than financial sustainability. We take sustainability to mean that our organisation continues to function effectively until it achieves its goals, or until its members are no longer willing or able to continue, or until it becomes irrelevant.¹

In general terms, the word "sustainability" refers to financial, administrative, technical, environmental, and cultural dimensions of organisational set-up. When Dóchas speaks of sustainability, however, we refer to the formal and informal arrangements which enable members to establish relationships and engage in joint activities. For Dóchas, networking is a means whereby Irish Development NGOs can contribute to the achievement of their organisational goals.

Our sustainability is thus linked intrinsically to the organisation being effective, and relevant to its stakeholders. Furthermore, Dóchas is sustainable if it continues to enable high-quality relationships.



¹ Definition by Tricia Wind, "Document Review on Network Sustainability", IDRC 2005

2. Dóchas Is A Membership Organisation, Where Relationships Matter.

In our Strategic Framework, we have identified the active participation of our members as the key ingredient for our organisational sustainability: At its most fundamental, Dóchas is not about money, but about relationships and trust among our member organisations.

“Money supports programmes, but programmes are not the sum total of a network. People, relationships and personalities are what gives the network life and it is only when people use resources in a way that furthers the success of the network relationships, that a network is sustainable.”²

Participation and relationship building is at the core of Dóchas’ identity, and Dóchas is at its most successful when it develops and strengthens a sense of membership and togetherness among its member organisations – If members see the value of acting collectively and of building on the experience of others, then Dóchas is achieving its aims.

Given the centrality of members’ relationships in the work of Dóchas, it is essential that we have clear rules of engagement within the network.

Dóchas is proud of the diversity of its membership. At the same time, for Dóchas to be able to achieve its mission, it needs to develop a clear sense of membership, and a well-defined shared purpose and vision. Predictability, accountability and clear decision-making structures and responsibilities are equally of critical importance in this context.



For this reason, Dóchas has invested a lot of time in formulating its internal rules and governance. The results of this work are laid down in our Finance and Procedures Manual.

The motivation of members to participate in Dóchas will directly impact on its sustainability.

Organisations have joined Dóchas for a wide variety of reasons. These reasons may range from gaining credibility, to pleasing funders, accessing potential sources of

² Gross Stein, Stren, Fitzgibbon & MacLean, “Networks of Knowledge: Collaborative Innovation in International Learning”, University of Toronto Press, 2001, as quoted in “Sustainability of International Development Networks, Review of IDRC Experience”, IISD, 2006.

funding, seeking channels for the distribution of their knowledge and experience. Others have joined Dóchas out of a commitment to networking in general, or to efforts to build capacity in the NGO sector in Ireland. All these motivations are legitimate. Similarly, over time, as the network and member organisations have evolved, their motivations for continuing involvement may change, as may their levels of participation.

For Dóchas, the quality of members' engagement is more important than the quantity.

Our commitment to quality participation is reflected in the way Dóchas seeks to establish a shared sense of ownership among its members, and in the way we continually seek to improve our internal communications. The latter will be documented in the Dóchas communications strategy.

The Dóchas secretariat plays a central role in ensuring the network's sustainability, by providing focus, leadership and continuity.

It is important to note that, besides its responsibilities for implementing substantial parts of the Dóchas work plan, the Secretariat also provides an institutional home for the network: It is the contact point, the meeting space and the neutral space to which member organisations turn, but it also provides the leadership that influences members' attitudes and behaviours toward each other.

3. Resources

The work of Dóchas requires significant resources. We are in a fortunate position to have significant support – both financially and otherwise – from our key stakeholders: member organisations and the government.

Dóchas' main source of income is a multi-annual grant from the Irish government. This support is based on a shared understanding of Dóchas' role and relevance, and on a genuine commitment on the part of Irish Aid to efforts aimed at enhancing the capacity and impact of the Irish Development NGO sector. Crucially, the support consists not only of funding, but is based on a genuine partnership where government supports our work in many other ways as well.

The same applies to our member organisations: whereas their financial contribution to the work is of crucial importance, Dóchas would not be able to achieve its mission without the active involvement of our member organisations. Members participate in meetings, share experiences in our Working Groups and ensure that Dóchas decisions are made in ways that actively involve them.³

Dóchas is not, and will not be able to be a self-financing organisation.

Many of our services are provided free of charge, and Dóchas does not intend to introduce user fees. Instead, members are expected to contribute to the work of the organisation on the basis of solidarity, as evident in our membership fee structure.

³ Dóchas estimates that members' in-kind contributions to the network, measured simply in hours spent in Dóchas-hosted meetings, amounts to at least €30,000 annually.

Dóchas' concern in relation to finance is to strengthen the network's financial position and ensure sustainability and independence of action.

To this end, Dóchas will seek to put in place a funding basis that is adequate and flexible enough to enable the implementation of the Dóchas work plan. The membership fee system should be sufficient to guarantee income for the core operating costs of the network, and other funding will be sought from other sources, provided they afford Dóchas with sufficient room for manoeuvre.

Furthermore, to ensure full accountability Dóchas will ensure that it has in place a strong financial management system, utilising professional and transparent procedures and systems, and capable of generating quality and timely information for all relevant stakeholders.

4. Relevance

The main guarantee for Dóchas' long-term sustainability is its relevance, to both its internal stakeholders (members) and its external stakeholders.

Relevance and credibility are the key ingredients for Dóchas' sustainability. This means that Dóchas must at all times provide quality services to its members, and that those services must be provided in a timely and appropriate manner.

More importantly, however, Dóchas must also ensure that it engages with its stakeholders in an open and constructive manner, in order to ensure that it is able to distinguish between stakeholders' immediate needs, and their strategic needs.

In order for Dóchas to remain relevant, Dóchas at all times strives to have a clear role and mandate, to undertake work that is of value to its stakeholders, and to demonstrate impact and progress towards its goals.

- Dóchas' has formulated a strategy that makes it clear what its niche is, and how it fits within the constellation of actors and initiatives that make up the sector.
- Dóchas has built up a clear sense of purpose and shared ownership among its members. By maintaining high levels of participation and openness, Dóchas ensures that its members and partners have a direct say in the services provided by the network.
- The Dóchas strategy is built on a series of indicators, and Dóchas seeks – to the extent possible and practical – to collect data on its impact.

By developing a communications strategy, Dóchas is also taking steps to "advertise" its services better: reinforcing the profile of the organisation – both among staff of member organisations and external stakeholders – and of the sector as a collective.