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Conference: The Use of Images – A Human Rights Issue! (14 - 15 July 2010,

Dublin Castle)

- Ladies and Gentlemen, I am delighted to be here today to speak at this important conference on images and messages of the developing world.
- I would like to congratulate the Africa Centre for hosting the conference and drawing attention to the importance of respecting the rights and dignity of our Southern partners and fellow citizens when representing them through public information initiatives.
- Congratulations too to Dochas for their work in drawing up the Code of Conduct and raising awareness among the NGO's and within the development sector of the need for reflection, consideration and debate on how we represent the developing world.
- Irish Aid has been long been a supporter of both organisations' work in this regard.
- We support the Africa Centre's efforts to promote an African perspective in development education in Ireland, particularly among the media and development sector.
- This support is designed to
 1. promote good practice in the use of balanced images and messages on
Africa

2. to develop a group of skilled educators from within the African Community
 3. To engage the media in mobilizing African voices in Ireland when reporting on African issues
 4. and to engage the wider Irish and African communities in activities to promote an African perspective in development education
- Too often the images we have in our minds of Africa are shaped by the stories of conflict, of hardship and of hunger of which we are all aware.
 - None of us here today would deny that the challenges facing many communities in the developing world are enormous. And Irish Aid and the NGO sector are working hard to meet the needs of some of the poorest and most vulnerable people in the world.
 - But in our communications with the public, we must strive to promote a more balanced and positive view of Africa.
 - We must tell the many positive stories that come from the developing world: the improvements in the number of children accessing education; the reduction in people dying of preventable illness and the strong entrepreneurial spirit which is driving economic and social change from within.
 - Clearly, war and humanitarian disasters are immediate, their causes and impact relatively clear and they fit in with news schedules.
 - But, to simply focus on these disasters is to give our audiences just a fragment of the story.
 - It is to neglect the long-term causes of injustice and conflict and the systemic problems which underlie much of the poverty in the developing world.

- And it is to ignore the many stories of hope, of progress and of African people building their own futures in a sustainable way.
- Striving to highlight the positive stories of the developing world is not simply the right thing to do: research shows that it is what audiences want to read and see.
- A study carried out for the British Department for International Development, Irish Aid's UK counterpart, found that coverage of disasters and terrorism constitute the bulk of TV news reports, but there was little explanation or context given.
- It also found that audiences perceive TV coverage of the developing world as either picturesque safari or doom and gloom.
- And that news reports and charity appeal programmes reinforce stereotypes of disaster and relentless poverty.
- But importantly in light of our discussion here today, the research showed the public are keen to see positive coverage of people in the developing world.
- They want to see programmes and read articles which highlight what we have in common and challenge stereotypes, rather than focusing relentlessly on the war, conflict and grinding poverty with little to inspire hope.
- VSO chief executive, Mark Goldring writes in the foreword to The Live Aid Legacy, published in 2001, that the media and development agencies have been complicit in promoting the doom-laden picture of the developing world:
- He wrote, "We have taken part in an intricate dance that sacrifices the long-term building of a balanced view for the short-term gain of raising funds or awareness of our work."

- This is not a new tension and indeed, I think that we all recognise that images and messages are used for different purposes. Some support advocacy causes, or are used to inform and engage audiences in our work and others support fund-raising initiatives.
- But whatever the purpose of our communications, it is important that we filter them through the prism of the dignity and respect and ensure that those we represent have their own voice.
- The Live Aid report found 80% of the UK public strongly associate the developing world with doom-laden images of famine, disaster and western aid; while a Dfid report from last year concluded that the dominance of news and ‘charity appeal’ television has reinforced viewers’ stereotypes of developing countries as doomed and relentlessly poverty-stricken.
- This has led them to see all content about developing countries as “worthy” or “difficult viewing”.
- Viewers and readers are switching off.
- As the code of conduct on images and messages states, we cannot ignore the suffering, poverty and hunger that exist in the developing world.
- But we can also seek out the hopeful stories; the case studies and reports that illustrate the great strength, resilience and innovation of so many of the communities and partners with whom we work.
- We can try to balance the picture to a greater degree.
- For our part, Irish Aid is striving to focus on the results being achieved and the communities which are flourishing with our support and that of the NGOs whom we support.

- Africa Day is a very important part of Irish Aid's efforts to promote awareness of the huge diversity, richness and potential of Africa.
 - This year, Irish Aid held flagship events in Iveagh Gardens and in Limerick which attracted 17,000 people, in addition to supporting more than 30 community events around the country.
 - Ireland and Africa have never been so close; whether through increased development cooperation and growing cultural, trade and community ties.
 - Africa Day provides a great opportunity for communities in Ireland to join with Africans around the world in celebrating African cultural and social diversity.
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- Also, this year, judges in the Simon Cumbers Fund – which is an Irish Aid-supported media challenge fund to promote coverage of the developing world – has specifically stated that the judges will favour applications that highlight positive developments and challenge stereotypes of the developing world.
 - Many Irish aid agencies and NGOs have also adopted a positive approach to communicating with the public.
 - But some do not appear to embrace the spirit of the code quite as closely. While Irish Aid supports the code, there have been rare occasions when some of our public material did not align 100% with the spirit the code. I think it's clear that we all need to constantly bear its central tenets in mind when communicating.
 - As the guide to implementing the code notes, there are no code police.

- We are all charged with upholding its core principles of respect for the dignity of people, belief in the equality of all people and acceptance of the need to promote fairness, solidarity and justice.
- In terms of our broader communications through the media, the development sector has a role to play in raising awareness of the key principles contained in the code – respect for the dignity of those interviewed and photographed and practical considerations which journalists need to be aware of such as cultural differences; the importance of seeking permission to take photographs and explaining the context of the report.
- However, while the code of conduct provides useful general guidelines, it was not designed as a code specifically for media, and therefore does not always take cognisance of their particular needs and the challenges they confront in a 24-hour news world that is increasingly driven by deadlines.
- If we expect journalists to take a more nuanced approach to reporting on the developing world, surely we have a corresponding responsibility to be clearer in our communication and guidance.
- The BBC’s Editorial Guidelines state that the following editorial principle must apply to their coverage of conflict: “We should respect human dignity without sanitising the realities of war. There must be clear editorial justification for the use of very graphic pictures of war or atrocity.”
- The International Federation of Journalists’ publication, To Tell you the Truth – the Ethical Journalism Initiative by Aidan White, offers practical guidelines on responsible reporting and ultimately puts the onus on each journalist and media organisation to work in an ethical manner.

- Following the publication in Denmark of cartoons which caused widespread offence, particularly among Muslims, the International Federation of Journalists agreed a statement broadly urging journalists to work professionally to ensure that they did not create unnecessary tension by promoting hatred or inciting violence.
- However, the statement was also quite clear in ruling out the need for new laws or codes of conduct to restrict journalists' work, stating instead that increasing dialogue and raising awareness around reporting of religious and cultural matters was more important.
- Interestingly, that statement also pointed up the need for dialogue with journalists from different cultural traditions and for reporting to be put in a broader context.
- Throughout many of journalists' guides and codes, the key message to journalists is to act responsibly, remain cognisant of people's dignity and crucially, to seek to place their story in context so as to inform their readers of the underlying causes of the conflict or disaster.
- In this sense, codes are a useful general guide for journalists, but greater debate and reflection appears to be needed on how development specifically is covered in the media.
- In this context, it is very useful for those of us working in development to initiate or input into discussions about how the media covers development.
- That is why it's so important to have occasions such as these when people from the development and media communities can share their views, discuss the practical challenges facing us and provide advice and information which

will ultimately benefit both of us in our respective jobs. I know that today's conference is another important step along that route.

- As Aidan White remarks in *To Tell You the Truth – the Ethical Journalism Initiative*: “Codes do not guarantee ethical reporting, but they identify professional dilemmas that journalists and media face, and challenge journalists and the media to be aware of their responsibilities.”
- We all need to be aware of our responsibilities to communicate in a way that respects the dignity of communities in the developing world. I am very much looking forward to discussing these issues in more detail during the very interesting workshops later today.
- Thank you.