

Dochas Survey:

NGO Experiences with Irish Aid's Civil Society Fund

March 2007

1. Background and Introduction

In August 2005, Irish Aid launched a process to review its mechanisms for supporting the work of non-governmental organisations. The view was that the system, with a bewildering number of different budget lines and eligibility criteria was not efficient, nor transparent. This review resulted in the launch of a new Civil Society Fund in March 2006.

In its first year of operation, there were three funding rounds under the new scheme, with deadlines for applications in March, June and October. A total of over 220 applications were received, with approval rates of around 60%.

	Number of Applications	Number of Applications Approved
Round 1	97	55 (57%)
Round 2	67	43 (64%)
Round 3	61	37 (61%)

However, in the context of rapid changes in personnel within Irish Aid, and uncertainty about the mechanisms and procedures for the new Civil Society Fund, a certain amount of criticism arose of the new scheme. In light of these criticisms, Dochas decided to survey the Irish NGO sector, with a view to gauging the extent to which the new scheme could be improved.

A questionnaire was sent out in Mid December to 54 organisations and 19 responses were received by early February (response rate of 35%).

2. Findings

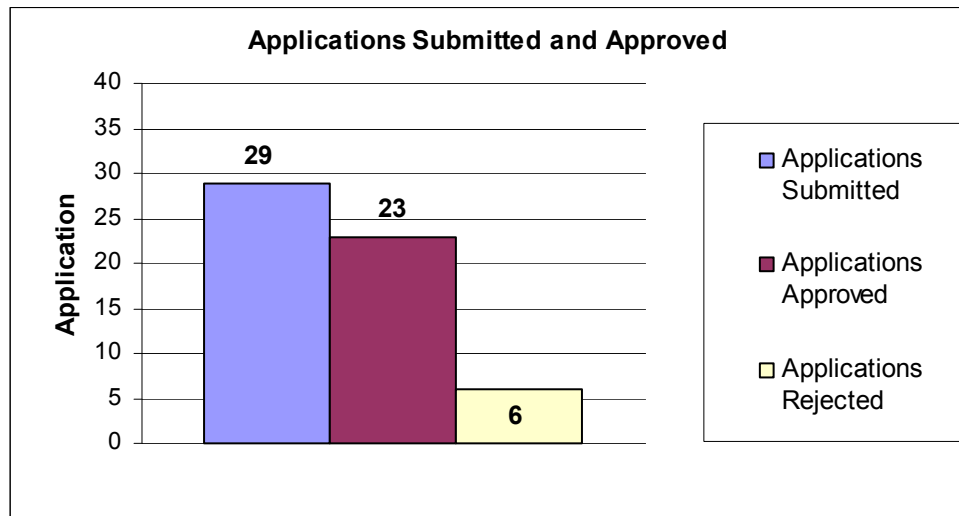
The overall finding of the survey is that the Civil Society Fund has worked reasonably well for NGOs, with the main criticism relating to the lack of clarity about the decision-making processes, and the time-frames involved.

1. Approval rates of NGO applications were high.

The nineteen respondents submitted 29 applications between them. Out of these, 23 (or 79%) were approved. This approval rate of 79% is above the average, which lies at around 65%.

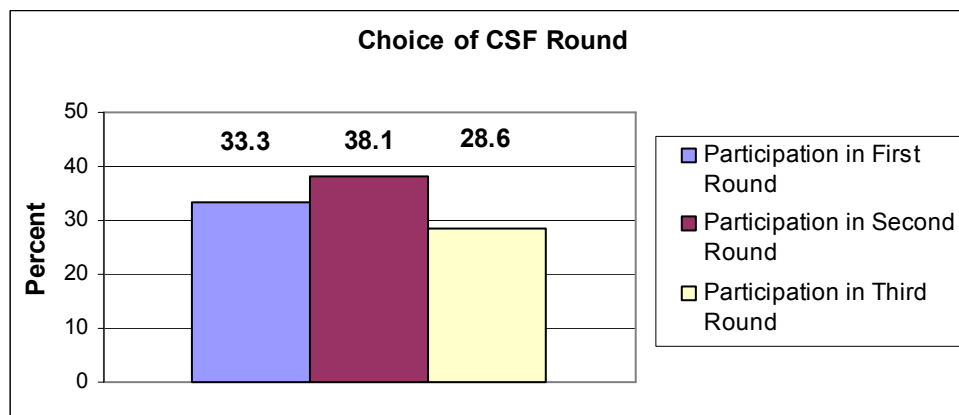
Seventeen of these applications were submitted by Dóchas members, 12 by non-members.

Interestingly, among the 19 respondents, non-Dóchas members were more successful than Dóchas members. This is due to some extent to the sample of this survey (overall, the non-members that responded were those with positive experiences) and to the fact that a number of bigger Dóchas members do not qualify for CSF, as they are in the MAPS scheme or involved in Development Education or Humanitarian Aid, which are not covered by CSF.



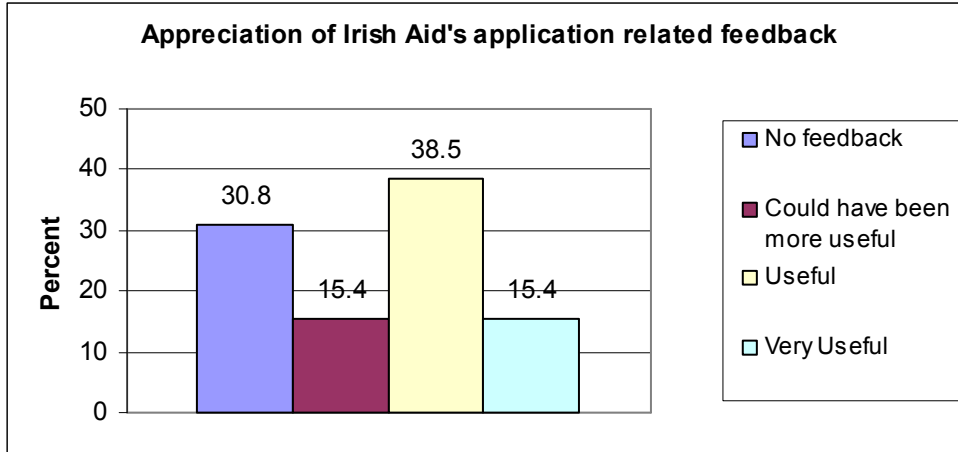
2. Applications were evenly spread throughout the year.

The 29 applications submitted were evenly spread over time, with organisations submitting applications for multiple funding rounds.

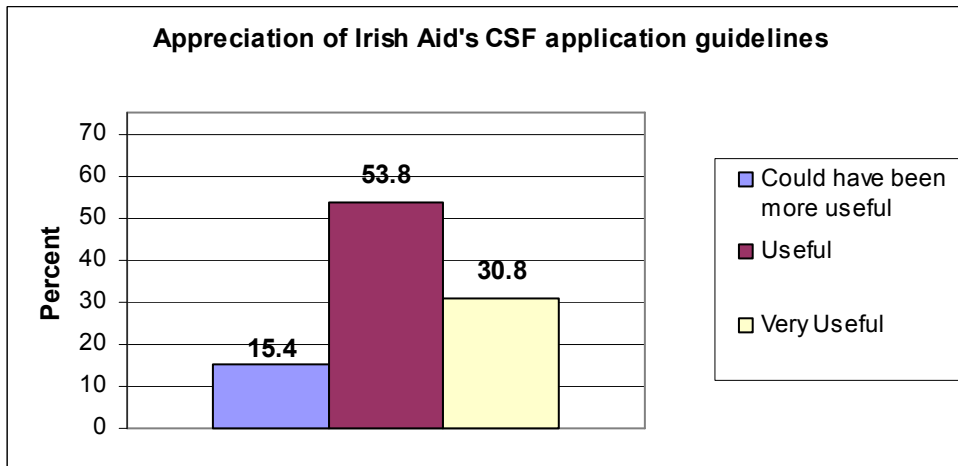


3. Feed-back from Irish Aid was appreciated by the NGOs

A large number of organisations (30%) indicated that they did not receive any feed-back from Irish Aid on their application. Fifteen percent said feed-back “could have been more useful”, and over half of respondents (54%) said the feed-back received was good or very good.

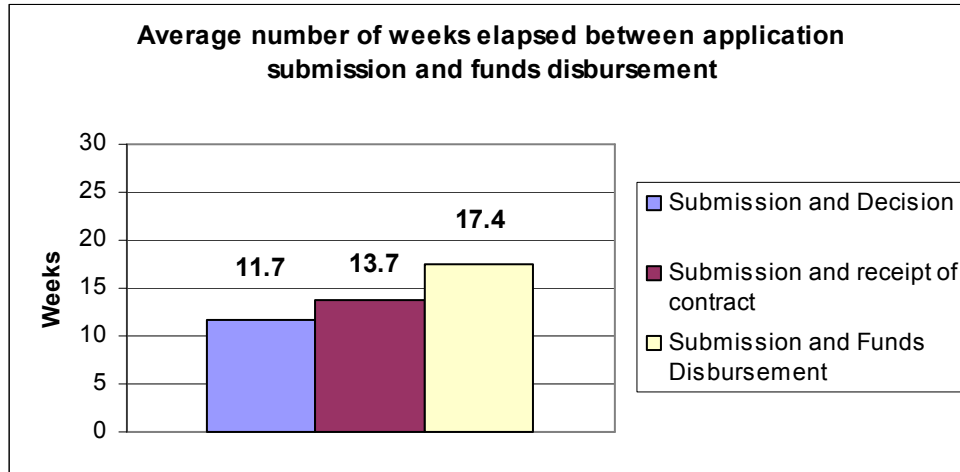


Similarly, appreciation of the guidelines provided by Irish Aid was widespread, with over 80% of respondents saying they were good or very good.



4. Overall, NGOs were unhappy with the time it took to get a decision on their proposal.

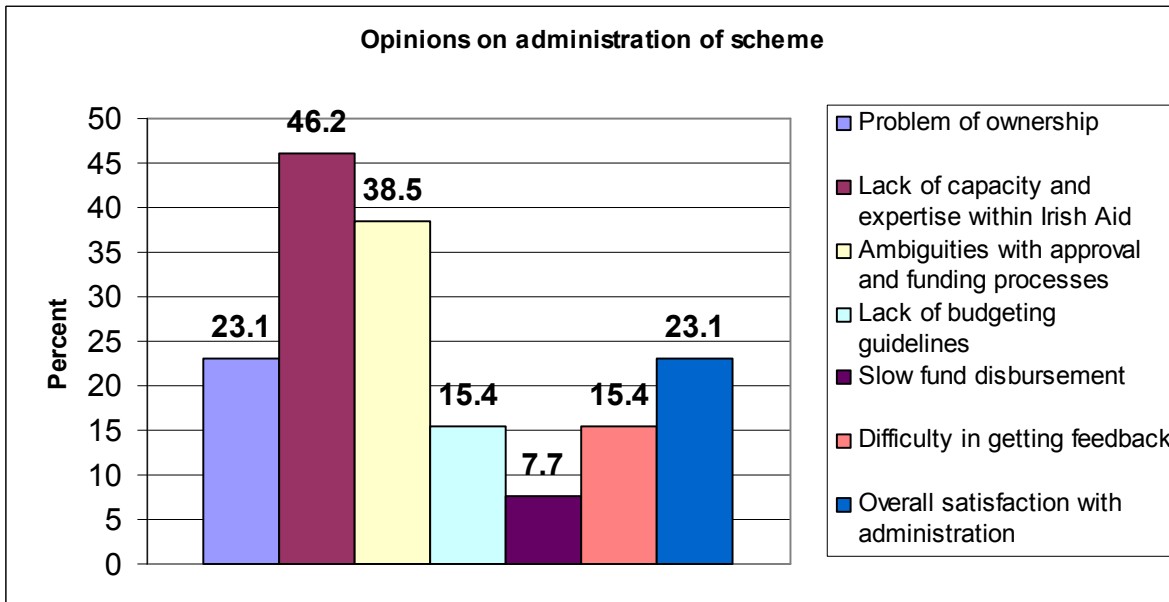
On average, more than 17 weeks elapsed between the date of submission, and the date of receipt of funding.



Interestingly, it took Irish Aid longer to decide on applications made by Dóchas members than by organisations not member of Dóchas: On average, Dóchas members had to wait 18.5 weeks, and non-members 16 weeks. As mentioned above, this is largely due to the sample, which had a relative under-representation of non-Dóchas members with bad experiences.

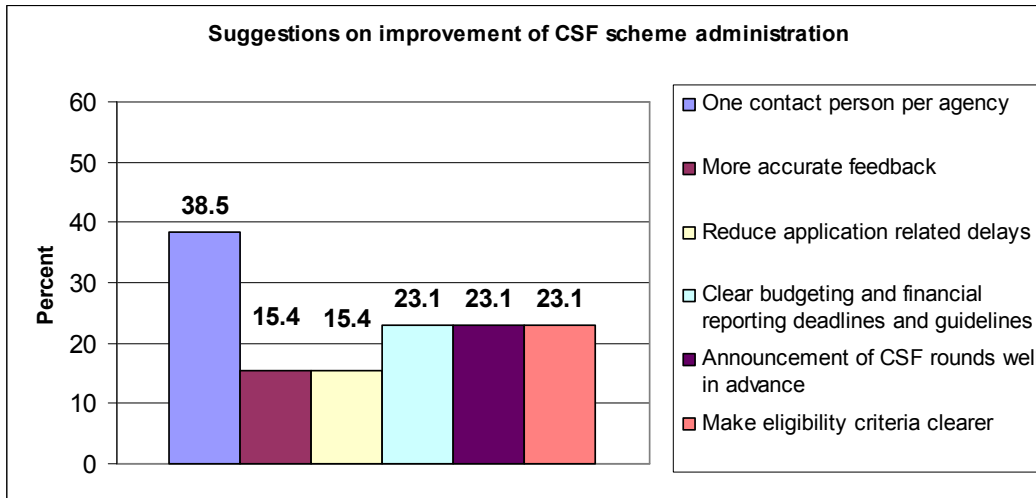
5. Despite high approval rates, NGOs were unhappy with the way Irish Aid administered the system.

When asked what the main problems associated with the scheme were, respondents listed a great number of factors, ranging from a lack of capacity in Irish Aid to ambiguities with the decision-making process.



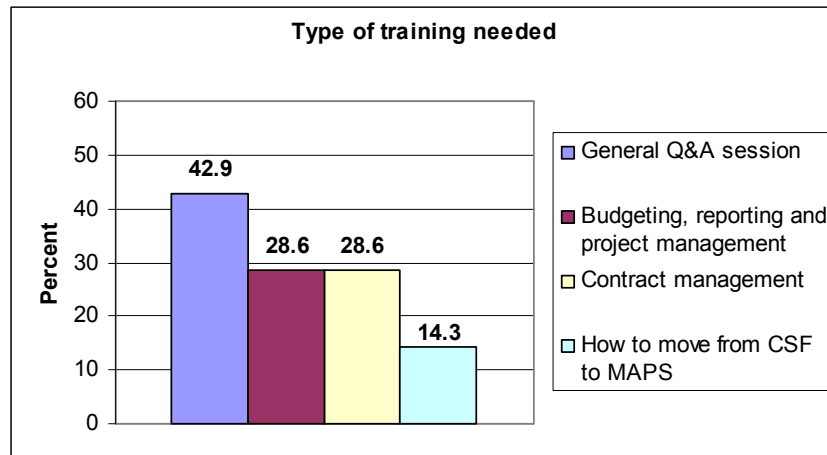
6. When asked for suggestions on how to improve the management of the Civil Society Fund, NGOs are asking mainly for greater clarity.

The suggestion most frequently made is for a clearly designated contact person within Irish Aid (38.5%). Other suggestions include clearer guidelines and longer advance warning of the time-frames and deadlines. Many organisations also found the eligibility criteria insufficiently clear.



When asked if training would be an answer, the NGO respondents were evenly split (50%) between those approving of the idea of training on how to access CSF funding and those who did not approve.

Those in favour of training asked mainly for more accessible discussion fora on the functioning of the scheme.



7. In an initial response to the survey, Irish Aid have indicated their readiness to meet with NGOs to strengthen the system.

Feedback will improve, with the appraisal matrix being returned to applicant NGOs; application deadlines will be more predictable (with one round before and one round after the summer); the decision-making process will be described in greater detail; and greater clarity will be provided about the duration of the entire decision-making process.