

## **Dochas briefing note on NGDO-Government Relations in Ireland**

January 2006

### 1. Irish Government policy and civil society

The Irish non-profit sector has a long history, influenced by the legacy of colonialism and concepts of church activity and the role of the State.

From the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Protestant churches and the Quakers engaged in efforts to attend to the needs of the poor, followed later on (after the Catholic Emancipation Act) by Catholic religious orders. These service-providing non-profit organisations have operated under the principle of subsidiarity (under which the government recognises the autonomy of the organisations) and self-help (avoiding as much as possible any interference by the colonial government). After independence, this tradition was further reinforced, by the establishment of schooling and health systems that were largely run by religious orders, and were in receipt of State funding.

In other words, from its beginning as a State, Ireland has had a strong **civil society tradition** and the political culture is one in which the Government plays a very limited role in public life.

Since the extreme economic social and economic problems of the 1980s, this culture has found its translation in a political tradition of “**social partnership**” (an approach to government where interest groups outside of elected representatives play an active role in decision-taking and policy-making; designated 'social partners' enter discussions with government on a range of social and economic issues and sign up to multi-year agreements.) and “**public-private partnerships**” (contractual arrangements between the public and private sectors, with clear agreement on shared objectives, for the delivery of services that would otherwise have been provided through traditional public sector procurement).

At present, the Irish “community and voluntary sector” is very large:

- The economic significance of the non-profit sector to the Irish economy was estimated in a 1995 survey to amount to IR£ 3.24 billion or 8.2% of GDP in 1995.
- The public sector in Ireland accounted for three-quarters of non-profit incomes in 1995. Private donations were estimated to account for 10% of charity income.
- At the time of that same survey<sup>1</sup>, the Community & Voluntary sector was estimated to provide jobs to over 30,000 people, with another 30,000 people volunteering regularly.
- Other estimates<sup>2</sup> speak of 118,000 full time jobs in the non-profit sector, equivalent to 11% of total employment in Ireland in 1995 (Half of these posts were in education, and another quarter in the health sector).

### 2. Government cooperation with Development NGOs

Similarly, the Irish development cooperation programme is largely based on the tradition of civil society groups. Ireland has a long standing **missionary tradition**, with Irish religious working in most developing countries around the globe. The creation of a Government aid programme in 1974 was preceded by a large number of non-governmental organisations and missionary organisations.

As a result, the Irish Government channels large amounts of its aid budget through Irish voluntary organisations. In 2005, about €80m will be provided for the work of civil society organisations, or 12% of

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<sup>1</sup> Donoghue, F. (1999) Uncovering the Non-Profit sector in Ireland. The John Hopkins Comparative Non-Profit Sector Project.

<sup>2</sup> Salamon, Sokolowski & associates (2004), Global Civil Society: Dimension of the Non-Profit Sector, Vol 2.

total ODA. (This is just from the “civil society” budget line. Other funding – eg for humanitarian aid, human rights work and development education – is additional to this amount).

In recent times, and particularly following the announcement in 2000 of the Government’s intention to reach the UN target of 0.7% ODA/GNP, there have been attempts to **increase the cooperation** between Government and NGOs, and to go beyond the traditional situation, where this cooperation was largely financial and on a bilateral basis.

There are a number of reasons for this change, relating inter alia to:

- Changing concepts of the role of NGOs: less emphasis on service provision, and more on policy engagement;
- Reduction of the sense of competition among NGOs, and greater emphasis on (national and international) cooperation and alliance-building;
- Realisation of the limits to development work on a project-to-project basis;
- Growth of the aid budget;
- Formulation of an internationally agreed aid agenda, in the shape of the MDGs.

As a result, during the last decade, the Irish Government and NGOs have stepped up their efforts to engage in a **strategic relationship**. This involves a review of the funding relationships (multi-annual funding arrangements, thematic approaches, etc) and the policy dialogue mechanisms (role of NGO networks, policy-formation processes, capacity building).

### 3. Elements of NGO-Government dialogue

There are a number of structures in place to shape the dialogue between NGOs and the Government, in the field of development cooperation:

- The **Advisory Board** to Development Cooperation Ireland (<http://www.abdci.gov.ie/>): The Advisory Board for Development Cooperation Ireland is composed of individuals who have a background in development cooperation or in key Irish interest organisations (trade unions, private sector) and has five strategic areas of responsibility. It is required to:
  - Provide general oversight and advice to the Minister and senior Development Cooperation Ireland management on the strategic direction of the programme;
  - Enhance the independence of the evaluation and audit arrangements;
  - Commission research of the highest international standards;
  - Keep the overall funding and staffing needs of the development cooperation programme under review;
  - Organise the Development Forum to take place once or twice a year, to bring together Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and the Missionary Community with the Minister and senior Development Cooperation Ireland officials, for wide-ranging discussions on issues to include governance, democracy and human rights;
- The **Development** Forum is organised by the Advisory Board, in cooperation with DCI, Dóchas and the Irish missionary organisations. The Development Forum was established to enhance policy dialogue between the Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and the Missionary Community and Development Cooperation policy-makers at both political and official levels. The Development Forum is convened by the Advisory Board twice a year.
- The Department of Foreign Affairs/NGO Joint **Standing Committee on Human Rights** (<http://foreignaffairs.gov.ie/policy/hr/hrngo.asp>): The Department of Foreign Affairs established a Human Rights Unit in 1996. Its main function is to take an overview of Ireland’s approach to international human rights issues, so that they are given full attention in all aspects of our foreign policy. Shortly afterwards, the Unit established a NGO Committee on Human Rights, reflecting the growing level of contacts taking place between the Department and the NGO community. The Committee comprises representatives of human rights and development NGOs, human rights experts, and officers of the Department. The purpose of the Committee is to provide a formal framework for a regular exchange of views between the Department and representatives of the NGO community.

- The Standing Committee on Human Rights also works with the Department of Foreign Affairs in the organisation of the NGO Forum on Human Rights, which is intended to facilitate a broad-based but focused discussion on a range of human rights issues, with the emphasis primarily on foreign policy. The Forum meets once a year.
- Finally, the Department of Foreign Affairs, through its Development Cooperation division (DCI) has a **partnership agreement with Dóchas**, the Irish umbrella organisation of Development NGOs. Under a three-year partnership agreement, DCI provides financial support to the work of Dóchas, which allows Dóchas to build its capacity to provide services to its members, stimulate NGO work on quality standards in development cooperation and work with DCI to shape the mechanisms for policy dialogue between DCI and the NGO community. DCI and Dóchas are currently in talks to put in place a successor agreement, for the 2006-2008 period. This agreement will be based on the current Dóchas Strategic Plan ([http://www.dochas.ie/strategic\\_framework.htm](http://www.dochas.ie/strategic_framework.htm)).

#### Resources:

- Dóchas website: [www.dochas.ie](http://www.dochas.ie) and [www.dochas.ie/Documents/facts\\_and\\_figures.htm](http://www.dochas.ie/Documents/facts_and_figures.htm)
- DCI website: [www.dci.irlgov.ie](http://www.dci.irlgov.ie)
- DCU Civil Society research project: <http://www.dcu.ie/~cis/researchproj.htm#civil>
- Trinity Centre for Non-Profit Management: <http://www.cnm.tcd.ie/index.html>
- Defining Irish Non-Profit sector: <http://www.cnm.tcd.ie/publications/defining.pdf>
- Government website on Public-Private Partnerships: <http://www.ppp.gov.ie/>