

Presentation to Joint Foreign Affairs Committee

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Introduction

Dochas welcomes the opportunity to meet with and present at this first meeting of the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, Trade and Defence, together with Jim Clarken from Oxfam Ireland. I am also joined today by my colleagues, Réiseal Ní Chéilleachair, Humanitarian Policy Adviser with Trócaire, and Louise Finan, policy officer at Christian Aid, who will be available to answer any specific questions you might have. I will begin with a broad introduction to our sector's engagement with that crisis.

Dochas is the umbrella organisation of more than 60 non-governmental organisations working together to bring about a more equal, just and sustainable world. Our members work across the whole breadth of international development, human rights and humanitarian issues in Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Latin America.

Dochas acts as a forum for consultation, to enable a common voice amongst members speaking to the Irish government about development. Crucially, our members' work overseas is accompanied by recognition of the importance of Irish government policy at home in shaping our shared global future. In carrying out our work, we have always viewed the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, Trade and Defence as an ally to ensuring Ireland upholds its reputation as a global leader in international development and human rights.

In this light, we would like in particular to recognise the efforts made by the joint committee to meet ahead of the summer break, given the upcoming United Nations General Assembly High Level Meeting on Refugees and Migrants, on 19 September. We very much welcome the political commitment which this meeting today shows. And we would also like to thank Oxfam for their commitment to bringing this issue to your attention.

“This era of increased globalisation, migration is one of the great issues of the next decades” – President Michael D. Higgins

It was September 15 2015, less than a year ago, that we were all horrified by the image of the three-year-old boy, Aylan Kurdi, washed up on a beach in Turkey, along with his 5-year old brother and mother. We need to remember that families like his are still being torn apart every day. In 2015, the number of migrants surpassed 244 million, growing at a rate faster than the world's population. There are roughly 65 million displaced persons, including 25 million refugees and asylum seekers, and almost 40 million internally displaced persons. Not since the Second World War have there been population movement of this magnitude. Let's also not forget that most vulnerable. For example, we know that there are nearly 90,000 unaccompanied children seeking asylum in Europe alone.

Our President, Michael D. Higgins has consistently said that in “**this era of increased globalisation, migration is one of the great issues of the next decades**”. His comments underline the new realities of the global migration. One of these new realities is that the global flow of refugees fleeing conflict is now pressing on Europe’s door. Medecins Sans Frontieres estimate that since 1 January 2016, 200,000 arrived on European shores by sea, whilst more than 2800 people have died trying to make the journey – an rise of almost a 1000 people from this time last year.

Migration is a symptom of greater development challenges

For Dóchas members, and for those with whom we work in developing countries, migration to towns cities and across borders is a coping mechanism. We must remind ourselves that the vast majority of refugees continue to be hosted by developing countries, particularly those that are close to the refugees’ countries of origin, and the vast majority of those displaced by conflict are displaced within their own country.

Dóchas’ members including Action Aid, Christian Aid, Concern, Goal, Oxfam, Trócaire and World Vision Ireland are actively involved in responding to this crisis. Our members are working in crisis contexts that are forcing people to go on the move throughout Africa, Asia and the Middle East; they are supporting the efforts of neighbouring countries to deal with large numbers of refugees in places like Jordan, Turkey, Kenya, Tanzania and many others. They are also working in Europe and in Ireland alongside local agencies on issues of resettlement and relocation.

Ireland and the United Nations High Level Meeting on Refugees and Migrants

On September 19th, at the United Nations General Assembly High-Level Meeting in New York, **Ireland has the opportunity to play an important leadership role** on the global stage in shaping our response to this emergency.

Mr. David Donoghue, Irish Permanent Representative to the United Nations, was chosen alongside his counterpart from Jordan to co-chair the meeting towards a positive outcome – testament both to the global perception that Ireland maintains a neutral and progressive foreign policy, but also to Mr. Donoghue, and Ireland’s, recent success in facilitating a positive outcome in the Sustainable Development Goals process.

Between now and September there are a number of key events. The deadline for this current phase of negotiations is this Friday, 29th July. UN member states are expected to agree to the adoption of a progressive and rights based **Political Declaration** to Address Large Movements of Refugees and Migrants. Member States are also be expected to agree to the development of a **Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework**. Lastly, they need to agree on a roadmap to the development of a similar Compact or Response Framework for the Safe, Orderly and Regular movement of Migrants but this is not expected to be concluded until 2018.

It’s important to note then that these past two months of negotiations, led by Mr. Donoghue’s team, are just the **beginning of a process**. Our hope is that by September, there is a framework in place which will better equip and support countries of origin, and those receiving countries, to uphold the rights of those seeking protection and a dignified life. But then the hard work of operationalising these undertakings needs to begin.

Recommendations to the Joint Committee

We are asking for support from the Joint Committee in ensuring that the Irish government lives up to the responsibility which its mandate entails and, specifically, **that the Committee write to the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Charles Flanagan, asking that Ireland prioritise the following issues in his preparations for the High Level Meeting.**

- 1. Ensure the High Level Meeting outcomes reflect a clear commitment to prioritising international legal obligations, under the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol on the status of Refugees.**

In the current crisis, that means, firstly, finding all means possible to ensure safe and legal passage and international protection to refugees. Europe in particular, has taken regressive steps towards an approach based on pushing people back into conflict areas, in direct contradiction with commitments under international law. It is critical that Ireland take leadership in challenging this regression.

We also need to ensure that children on the move are protected and guaranteed access to education; that refugees have the right to remain in a country and not live in fear of being returned against their will; that they can access basic services and have the right to earn a dignified living thereby reducing their dependency on aid and assistance.

- 2. Ensure funding to tackle the refugee crisis is additional to, and not contained within, existing commitment to Overseas Development Assistance (ODA)**

Ireland has a proud record of not counting its commitments to taking in refugees within its ODA calculations. This is not always shared across many European countries. Irish Aid also continues to be used as a vital tool to fight poverty and inequality in least developed countries, as clearly outlined in the Government's 'One World One Future' policy.

It is critical that we continue to seek to provide new additional resources to respond adequately to the needs of refugees, and that we continue to support the lifesaving naval support in the Mediterranean, but that this does not eat into existing commitments to our ODA spending. To do so would be counterproductive.

We need to also use our influence to ensure other EU and member states follow suit, and in particular refrain from placing any conditions, particularly migration-control indicators, on the allocation of development or humanitarian aid to third countries. Overseas Development Assistance is a critical tool for building the stability and prosperity in many countries which both refugees of conflict, and economic migrants, flee.

- 3. Ensure that Ireland is represented at the High Level Meeting by the Taoiseach, sending a clear signal that the issue is an urgent and important one.**

This is of particular importance given Ireland's unique role as co-chair— and, indeed, in beginning the process of demonstrating Ireland's capability to lead on global challenges. This leadership role will certainly influence and be well received by others, particularly if it does intend to bid for a seat on the United Nations Security Council in 2020.

- 4. Ensure that civil society is an integral partner in the preparation for and implementation of Ireland's engagement at the High Level Meeting**

It is critical that civil society, and in particular refugees, migrants, displaced persons and diaspora themselves, are at the table every step of the way, informing the plans, helping to monitor progress, and continuing the discussion about how to create a world that protects and provides opportunity to refugees, migrants and societies. Recently in many countries, debate around refugees and migrants has focused more on our differences rather than the common humanity we share. The language being used to depict refugees has too often been dehumanising, demeaning and divisive. We should listen and take account of the voices of affected populations themselves, respect their agency, and recognise their right to be at the heart and centre of decision making.

5. Ensure that the High Level Meeting outcomes reflect a strong commitment to protect and empower women and girls affected by migration

Ireland's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (2015-2018), has set out its strong commitments to protect and empower women and girls, and we welcome the fact that it is included in the recent Programme for Partnership Government. It has also been a central theme of the Irish Government at the World Humanitarian Summit. Ireland's naval forces are already putting this policy into practice, supporting those rescued on the Mediterranean who undergo severe trauma and violence on the dangerous route to Europe.

The Irish Government must continue to ensure gender and the protection of women and girls are central to policy making and decisions on the welfare and support to refugees, asylum seekers and migrants.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion then, I think it's appropriate to end with a quote from President Michael D. Higgins, who, as you know, is such a champion of so many of the issues and values that we are discussing today. At the recent World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul, he spoke passionately about the need for greater political leadership and urgency in addressing migration, as well as raising concerns about gender-based violence as a He-for She campaigner. But he also concluded: **“For too long, empty pledges and fine words have died in our mouths-now is the time to turn promises into action for this generation.”**

Thank you