



The Irish Association of Non-Governmental  
Development Organisations

## Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence

Thursday 15 October 2020

### Introduction

*"In its declaration, it is as ambitious as the landmark agreement seventy years ago, to create the UN from the ashes of war and division", Minister of Foreign Affairs, Charlie Flanagan, in signing up to Ireland's commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals, New York 2015*

*"COVID-19 is not only a wake-up call, it is a dress rehearsal for the world of challenges to come... The pandemic has taught us that our choices matter. As we look to the future, let us make sure we choose wisely", António Guterres, secretary general of the United Nations, UN General Assembly 75, Sept 2020.*

Chair, deputies and senators, firstly I'd like to thank the Committee for this opportunity for Dóchas, the Irish network of international development and humanitarian organizations, to brief you on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). We are delighted to get this opportunity as you begin your important programme of work together as a committee.

For those who don't know us, the Dóchas network is made up of over 47 incredibly dedicated and hardworking Irish organizations working on the ground, day in day out, in over 104 countries, working on 15 out of the 17 SDG Goals. Over 5,000 people work in the sector here in Ireland and thousands more are employed by Irish aid agencies globally.

Many thanks to my colleague representing Coaltiiion2030 for his intervention. As he has ably demonstrated, the SDGs provide us with a framework that if used to its potential, has the power to bring about a 'Just Recovery' from Covid-19 and tackle the root causes of extreme poverty and inequality.

At its core, Agenda2030 has a simple message: human dignity matters, human rights matter, our planet matters.

We also have to recognise the true significance of having such an ambitious wide-ranging blueprint that is signed up to *by every country in the world without exception*. In this era of fractured global politics, the SDGs surely remains one of the very few strong statements that we have that says multilateralism can work, indeed it has to work.

We are however at a crossroads.

A recent 2020 Social Progress Index reported that: "The 17 Sustainable Development Goals, which include the eradication of poverty, improving access to education and action on climate change, will only be fulfilled by 2092 once the effects of the pandemic are taken into account<sup>1</sup>."

Very directly, on the ground, reports released as recently as last week predict extreme poverty will rise for the first time this century as a result of the economic devastation wrought by Covid-19. The World Bank estimate that we will see 115 million "new poor" this year alone. The triple threat of coronavirus, climate change and conflict are creating a perfect storm, threatening progress towards a sustainable future for everyone on this planet.

There is hope however, but the UN and the World Bank are just two of many global institutions, urging world leaders to act swiftly and with substantial policy measures.

Today we wish to call on you to act in 3 critical policy areas:

- (i) The role of Overseas Development Assistance in achieving the SDGS
- (ii) The implementation of the Irish Government's development policy 'A Better World' in order to meet the SDG targets and reach "the Furthest Behind First"
- (iii) Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development

I will then pass you over to my colleague from World Vision, Stephen Omollo, Regional Director for East Africa with strong connections to Ireland. He is currently based in Kenya and will be able to give you an insight into the very real impact of the SDGs on marginalised communities.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://socialprogress.blog/2020/09/30/the-2020-social-progress-index-sparks-discussion/>

As you may be aware, former members of this committee produced a report in 2018 reviewing the work of Irish Aid and I would like to draw your attention to a number of recommendations which are still as relevant now as they were then:

- The importance of the SDGs in underpinning not only Irish Aid's policy, 'A Better World' but also all Government policies and programmes.
- The need for Government to not only maintain but significantly increase its funding on ODA if it's to have credibility as a leader on the SDGs.
- The need to have much more robust structures and oversight mechanisms in relation to policy coherence for sustainable development.

As my colleague has mentioned, there is a real opportunity now for this Committee to interrogate progress in these areas in line with your critical oversight role.

**(i) The role of Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) in achieving the SDGs**

At a recent session of DFA's 'Global Ireland' strategy, Dr Mike Ryan of the World Health Organization (WHO), stated very clearly to all of Ireland's ambassadors, "With 90% of health systems disrupted...we need to sustain our investments in ODA and even increase our overseas development assistance".

We are very pleased to see that allocations to Overseas Aid in 2021 will be maintained at current levels, as announced on Tuesday by the Government. We don't underestimate the significance of securing that budget of €867m, given the domestic circumstances. We would like to acknowledge the efforts of the Coalition Government in delivering on their commitment made in the Programme for Government to set a monetary expenditure floor on the basis of 2019<sup>2</sup>. It'll be important that that principle is maintained in the coming years.

We are confident that it will be, with the support of this Committee. It is important to acknowledge that there has always been strong cross-party support for international development cooperation and humanitarian assistance, and this year in the face of the pandemic, that was very much the case. It is part of who we are, the kind of society we want to be, and perhaps relevant to today's context, we also know that to be safe from this virus in Ireland, everyone needs to be safe.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://assets.kpmg/content/dam/kpmg/ie/pdf/2020/06/programme-for-government.pdf>

Important to remember also that ODA continues to have high levels of public support in Ireland, with two thirds of those surveyed by Dóchas in August 2020 supporting ODA. This supports an earlier Eurobarometer survey, done in July 2019, where 93% of respondents supported development and tackling poverty in developing countries. However, in a context where new forms of populism and isolationism are challenging international co-operation, there needs to be a renewed focus on public engagement.

Nor should we lose sight of the fact that despite renewed promises to reach the 0.7% target of GNI spent on ODA, we were at less than half that in 2019 – the OECD data suggests we will be at 0.31% of GNI. Minister Coveney rightly stated in the Dáil in July that we need to see spending levels at around €2.3billion by 2030<sup>3</sup> – that’s in less than 10 years – if we are to meet the 0.7% target. Unless we commit to a roadmap now that sees us make significant incremental progress every year, that target will get harder and harder to reach.

**(i) The implementation of the Irish Government’s development policy ‘A Better World’ in order to meet the SDG targets and reach “the Furthest Behind First”**

It’s important to acknowledge the centrality of Ireland’s ‘A Better World’ policy, not only as an essential foreign policy tool, but in delivering on the Sustainable Development Goals. It is an international development policy which puts the SDGs at its heart.

Dóchas and our members welcomed the policy particularly as it kept key development principles at its core, including a renewed commitment to untied aid, a focus on Least Development Countries (LDCs), and increasing ODA. It’s the quality, not just quantity of aid that matters. The policy has also placed much greater emphasis on defending civil society space and the importance of listening and engaging with civil society partners.

It’s important to note that adherence to these Good Donorship principles are increasingly being challenged, including among more populist European member states, like Hungary and Poland. And where in the past we would have relied on the policy strength of the likes of the UK’s Department of Foreign Affairs and International Development, after Brexit, we no longer have that luxury.

It’s worth highlighting that Ireland was strongly praised by the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) in its recent peer review of Ireland for showing such principled leadership

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/2020-07-09/7/>

on aid and for its strong partnership with civil society. The DAC also confirmed that Irish Aid was “an excellent humanitarian partner”, resisting the worrying international trend of diverting development assistance funding away from poverty reduction and towards the security, commercial and migration objectives of donor countries.

But two years on from the publication of ‘A Better World’, we now need to see tangible progress, particularly in relation to what success looks like if it is really is to reach ‘the furthest behind first’, a core tenant of the SDGs. It is only by defining how Ireland intends to operationalise this policy objective, that we can better align and support its progress. We also need to see Irish Aid respond to all the recommendations made by the OECD DAC in its peer review, so we hope this Committee gets the opportunity to engage with that report.

## **(ii) Policy coherence for sustainable development**

Policy Coherence for development remains the vital missing link if Ireland is to deliver on the SDGs. To date Ireland has failed to find cross-government agreement on specific policy areas where coherence needs to be enhanced, including in relation to tax policy and business and human rights. While this is by no means an easy process and requires that interactions between economic, social and environmental policies, and departments are identified and addressed, it is the only way to ensure that the policies we implement now do not have negative consequences on us, our neighbours in the developing world, now and in the future.

There is a need to reflect on these past failures, and commit to a more determined process to find a way forward, as well as develop a practical mechanism to monitor progress toward better coherence.

Ireland’s civil society Coalition 2030 shadow report in 2018 on the SDGs called urgently for a **formal PCSD mechanism** that was both structured and resourced. This mechanism needs to include *inter alia*: an impact assessment system to identify key PCSD issues, followed by a transparent identification of policy options and timely, high-level, inter-Departmental meetings to address obstacles. It may also be relevant to adopt the approach of the European Parliament, which has established a Standing Rapporteur for PCSD.

We leave you today with a number of key recommendations set out below.

### ***Key Recommendations:***

- Underpinning the success of the SDGs for developing countries, will be funding through Overseas Development Assistance (ODA). We support this Committee’s ask

that the Government publish a roadmap which sets out how Ireland intends to not only maintain the level of ODA funding, but meet the target of spending 0.7% GNI by 2030.

- We ask this Committee to scrutinize how Irish Aid's 'A Better World' policy will meet its commitments to reaching the 'furthest behind first' in all their partner countries and partnerships. This could form the core of Ireland's next Voluntary National Review at the UN, which is due in 2022, as well as the progress report which although due this year, will now be published next year, as set out in the National Implementation Plan.
- Ireland will take its non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council from next year where it will have a unique opportunity to influence the resolution of some of the worst and forgotten humanitarian crises the world has faced. Conflicts and war can only be resolved if we tackle the drivers of conflict and work in partnership with all stakeholders, two key principles that lie at the heart of the SDGs. We ask this Committee to work with civil society to highlight forgotten crises and conflicts where Ireland can have a positive influence.
- We support the call from the OECD and Coalition 2030 that a strong mechanism for policy coherence for sustainable development is developed<sup>4</sup> and if appropriate a Standing Rapporteur for PCSD.

In conclusion, as we seek to find a fair and effective just recovery, in the face of this pandemic, I hope you agree that Ireland needs to ensure greater urgency to meeting its commitments to the SDGs. It offers a powerful roadmap to build back better in a way that brings to the fore the huge value of multilateralism and partnership, and demands that everyone plays a role.

We ask this Committee to insist on a full and timely consultation on the SDGs, more immediately with respect to the review of the National Implementation Plan which needs to remain a key reference point in tracking Ireland's domestic and international commitments to meet the targets. We also ask this Committee to continue to prioritise and raise the SDG targets in its meetings and when examining any legislation or policy coming before you in the months and years ahead.

**Thank you**

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.oecd.org/gov/pcsd/oecd-recommendation-on-policy-coherence-for-sustainable-development.htm>