

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM GHNÓTHAÍ EACHTRACHA AGUS TRÁDÁIL, AGUS COSAINTE

JOINT COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND TRADE, AND DEFENCE

Déardaoin, 4 Deireadh Fómhair 2018

Thursday, 4 October 2018

The Joint Committee met at 10 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Seán Barrett,	Senator Ivana Bacik,
Deputy Niall Collins,	Senator Billy Lawless.
Deputy Seán Crowe,	
Deputy Noel Grealish,	
Deputy Tony McLoughlin,	
Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan,	

In attendance: Senator Anthony Lawlor..

DEPUTY BRENDAN SMITH IN THE CHAIR.

Implementation of Sustainable Development Goals and Future of EU Development Funding: Discussion

Chairman: I welcome Ms Suzanne Keatinge, chief executive of Dóchas, Dr. Róisín Hinds of Oxfam, and Ms Niamh Garvey of Trócaire. The committee is keen to hear their assessment of Ireland's progress in achieving the targets contained in the sustainable development goals, SDGs. We also want to hear from them on how best to ensure that the EU's development funding after 2020, which is currently subject to negotiation as part of the next multi-annual financial framework, continues to focus on global poverty eradication. The delegates are very welcome. We look forward to hearing their opening statements.

I remind members, delegates and those in the Visitors Gallery to ensure their mobile phones are switched off completely for the duration of the meeting as they cause interference with the recording equipment in committee rooms, even when left in silent mode.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against any person outside the Houses, or an official, either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

By virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the joint committee. If they are directed by the Chairman to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

Deputy Niall Collins: I have to leave early to attend Priority Questions with the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Chairman: I understand that. Deputy Crowe is in the same position.

I call on Ms Suzanne Keatinge to make her opening statement.

Ms Suzanne Keatinge: I thank the Chairman, Deputies and Senators for this opportunity. I am the CEO of Dóchas, the Irish platform of international development organisations. One of the two subjects to be discussed today is the sustainable development goals, SDGs. I had the privilege of being in New York in July of this year so I want to give the committee a little bit of the flavour of that meeting but we also want to talk about the EU development funding, which is the second subject.

It is worth reminding ourselves that, as we speak, we are receiving more and more reports about the Indonesian tsunami. Some 14,000 people have died so far but that number is likely to increase. Some 62,000 people are displaced. The United Nations is saying about 200,000 people are in desperate need of humanitarian assistance. It is just a reminder of the importance of international aid, bearing in mind that we have at least three Irish agencies on the ground, and also a reminder, I hope, of the vital work of NGOs in international development.

I last appeared before the committees in October last year. It seems a long time ago. Then we were all together for the launch of the committee's report in February this year. That report

was very welcome. Some of the conclusions of the committee in the report comprise a good frame for the discussion today. In particular, I draw members' attention to the importance of the SDGs underpinning Irish Aid's new aid policy but also Government policy and programmes.

The committee mentioned the importance of the Government increasing funding on overseas development aid, ODA. With budget day very much to hand, it is important to remind ourselves of that. ODA is so critical if Ireland wants to continue to be a credible leader on international development and the SDGs in general.

The committee referred in its report to robust structures and oversight mechanisms in regard to policy coherence for development. That theme will be repeated today. It is vital to keep our eye on that and continually ask how we have those prompt and good oversight mechanisms.

Articulated very well in the committee's report is the overarching theme of Ireland needing to maintain a strong principle-based aid policy with poverty eradication at its core. Untied aid very much features. It is also about strengthening the role of civil society. These principles will need to be robustly defended, particularly in the ongoing negotiations on the EU budget.

It is worth noting by way of background that, on Tuesday, the Tánaiste echoed many of these themes in his launch of Irish Aid's annual report for 2017. In commending the excellent work of Irish Aid and the impact it is having, he opened his remarks by saying, "I stand here this year with the responsibility of a rich country." He also talked about the need for Ireland to play, more than ever, an international leadership role in development. He said we do not do big military spending or defence but that we do development as a core pillar of foreign policy. That is an important context to our remarks today.

I will talk briefly about the high-level political forum in July. Accompanying me today are Dr. Róisín Hinds, senior policy co-ordinator at Oxfam Ireland, and Ms Niamh Garvey, head of policy in Trócaire. They are present to help us with questions members may have and some of the detailed evidence and policy to back up some of our remarks and recommendations.

Let me turn quickly to the SDGs. As many might know, it was on 17 July that the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Denis Naughten, presented Ireland's first voluntary national review at the UN high-level political forum. It really was an important first step in Ireland's journey to implementing the SDGs. It is important to acknowledge the role of the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment, which in particular supported many civil society actors to be in New York and share that experience of Ireland.

For all the fanfare that comes with these kinds of high-level meetings, however, we need to ask ourselves, three years into the process, why Ireland has only just got into the starting blocks. Members all know we led the negotiations on this transformative agenda through the role of Mr. David Donoghue, the UN ambassador, in September 2015 but we now find ourselves playing catch-up. In particular, we draw members' attention to the limited time given for genuine stakeholder engagement as we got ready for New York. For example, an outline of the voluntary national report was shared at a stakeholder meeting but there was no detail or time for substantial input. As a result, Coalition 2030, of which Dóchas and many of its members are part, produced its own shadow report, which I am happy to share with members today. It gives a very different perspective on progress on the SDGs.

It is also important to note that we were given an opportunity to feed back on this national

implementation plan on the sustainable development goals, SDGs, which we now have done, and yet we struggle to see that any of our suggestions were taken on board when it was finally produced in April of this year by the Minister, Deputy Naughten. We were particularly concerned that the implementation plan is far too general, with very little effort at prioritisation or identifying where the extra funding is going to come from. Perhaps most relevant for the conversation today, however, is its weak mechanisms for stakeholder engagement and oversight.

The following are key themes that came out of New York and, in particular, our dealings and conversations with civil society. First and foremost is that civil society's voice is still not being heard in the voluntary national review, VNR, process. Indeed, it is very worrying trend that for many countries it is not there at all. Civil society is being silenced, both globally and in Europe.

Countries continue to report at the high-level political forum, HLPF, as if it is a tourist profile, a chance to say how fantastic we all are, without a genuine, honest reflection of some of the obstacles to achieving this transformative agenda. It is important to acknowledge that Ireland in its report was perhaps more honest than most. I need to point out, however, that we have only got to the stage of how we are aligning with the goals rather than tackling some of the challenges. In particular, the critical criteria around policy coherence is completely absent in most member states' reports. The accountability mechanism is consequently too weak to hold these countries to account, especially where there are serious human rights violations.

We also recognise that the UN is not playing the strong co-ordination role that it needs to play to get all stakeholders into the room, in particular, civil society, nor has it the clout to ensure that greater political accountability and leadership. Here again it is worth briefly referencing the Tánaiste's recent speech where he went so far as to say that the effectiveness of the United Nations as a platform for negotiation and compromise can no longer be taken for granted. It is this weakness of multilateralism that has to be of great concern to us all.

These few reflections from the high-level political forum resonate greatly with our own experience in that it is comforting to know, perhaps, that we are not alone, but we do acknowledge that some progress has been made. In particular, we commend the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, which has been genuinely engaging with the SDGs through the White Paper consultation process, which is happening right now. We are encouraged by their commitment to the "leaving no-one behind" principles, to understanding and critiquing what this means, and to identifying the most marginalised and how we can reach them. Similarly, we very much welcome the consultation process around the White Paper, which is a very good example of stakeholder engagement, and we need to see more of it.

Today is not the time to ponder about what we have done but to think about the SDGs and what we need to do in the future. In particular, the next 12 months will be critical. At the high-level political forum in July next year, there will be discussion around the reform process and the accountability mechanisms around the SDGs.

The following are four key recommendations that we believe are particularly relevant to this committee. First, Coalition 2030 has consistently called for the Office of the Taoiseach to take the lead. It has to take this responsibility for the delivery of the SDGs if there is going to be the whole-of-government approach that this delivery demands.

Second, we need to see a much more credible stakeholder forum established, which includes Members of the Oireachtas. This forum needs to consider an independent oversight function of progress on the SDGs, as well as allowing a space for critical dialogue.

We would also ask this committee to consider proposals to ask the Committee on Budgetary Oversight to request Government to SDG-proof, as it were, the budget each year. Only then will we truly know if we are on track and that we are monitoring these goals as they need to be monitored.

Underpinning the success of the SDGs for developing countries will be funding through overseas development assistance, ODA. We support this committee's own report, which asked that the Government to publish a roadmap with sustainable percentage increases to ensure we meet the 0.7% target of gross national income, GNI, on ODA. Very specifically on budget 2019, we need to see an increase of at least €147 million. That equates to just 0.05% of GNI*, but it will at least see us back on track to an upward trajectory to meet that 0.7% target.

It is important to reference the significance of public awareness if this global commitment is going to make it. Public awareness is very weak across Europe and here in Ireland, and this should be a concern for us all. In Ireland, the Minister, Deputy Naughten, accepts that there is insufficient effort to raise public awareness both at home and abroad. There seems to be an expectation that this is what civil society will do, and yet there is no serious funding to do this.

Let us be clear that unless the Irish citizen is behind this bold vision of the SDGs, it will struggle to gain political traction and the prioritisation that it deserves. We need to see the Government and all political parties putting greater effort into meaningful public participation around this whole-of-government approach.

On the future of EU development funding, as the committee knows, the multi-annual financial framework, MFF, will determine the budget of the EU for the next seven years, from 2021 to 2027. The negotiations are upon us now and over the next six months, so this a real opportunity for Ireland to translate its development and humanitarian aid commitments into reality. It is also a huge opportunity for us to influence the EU and get it to agree on our vision for development co-operation, as rooted in those European values of global solidarity. Let us be clear as what is at stake here. The budget for external action alone under the MFF will equate to roughly €108 billion in real terms. In addition, there is a peace facility and a humanitarian instrument.

Discussions on the MFF are taking place against the backdrop of Brexit. We heard recently from the head of CONCORD, our European national platform, when he talked about the divisiveness in Europe and how it is turning increasingly inward. Migration and security preoccupations and attracting private sector investment without sufficient safeguards in place have become the new narrative and, perhaps, priorities.

The European Commission published its overall MFF proposal in May 2018, outlining its main priorities. The main proposal is to bring the European Development Fund and other external instruments into a single instrument, known as the Neighbourhood, Development and International Co-operation Instrument, NDICI. This will essentially combine 12 previous external instruments ideally into a more simplified and interlinked way of funding. The proposal around the NDICI was released in June this year and it is important to say that it does contain some positive elements, including an overall increase in funding for development. It also re-emphasises the re-commitment of the EU states to devote 0.7% of GNI to ODA. We also welcome the European Commission's proposal to keep humanitarian aid separate and to increase this budget from €7.1 billion to €11 billion, in recognition of the reality of the global humanitarian needs that have almost doubled.

However, the overall direction of the negotiations around the NDICI is taking a worrying

turn. In short, the EU self-interest appears to be prevailing over the need to keep the EU's actions focused on poverty eradication, the achievement of the SDGs, and its own consensus on development. Especially worrying from one of our members, Front Line Defenders, is the talk about the lack of specific support to human rights and civil society space. It also points out, for example, that poverty eradication, which should be the primary aim of the EU's development co-operation, is not explicitly mentioned in the NDICI. Financial allocations to the work of human rights defenders and civil society is expected to be reduced, and there is a real concern that funds for sub-Saharan Africa, in particular, will not be sufficiently protected.

It is important to remind the committee that Ireland's commitment to the EU is significant and is a huge part of our ODA, running at about 26% of the annual aid budget, which is about €192 million in 2017. We recognise very much the importance of this contribution. The added value of working within the EU in development and humanitarian action is essential and allows us to give economies of scale and efficiency and enable a stronger impact. However, we need to acknowledge that, with Brexit, we expect a deficit in both funding and policy influence within the EU, and we are calling on Ireland to step into that vacuum and play that leadership role.

To do that, we make some specific recommendations. We need to see significantly more resources to ensure strong oversight around the strategic direction of the new NDICI. This will need to include resources for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and Irish civil society to play a stronger policy role to bring strong evidence to bear on the debates within the European Union.

We also ask the committee to write to the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade ahead of the next Foreign Affairs Council on 26 November to share some of civil societies concerns and request regular reports on the committee, particularly over the next six months, to understand Ireland's position around the negotiations on the MFF. We feel this committee needs to have a stronger oversight role, for example, calling on the Department at least once a year to provide information on whether funds are being used in line with its stated policy. It is essential that we ensure that Ireland's ODA contribution is used for the intended purposes of poverty eradication, untied aid and supporting civil society.

We welcome the fact that Mr. Brian Hayes, MEP, is part of the development committee of the European Parliament. There are elections in May, and while we are not sure what the outcome will be, we will be urging very much that an Irish MEP remains on the development committee to ensure strong oversight of funding.

I thank the committee for its time and I am very much open to questions.

Deputy Seán Crowe: I welcome Ms Keatinge before the committee. It is nothing personal that members of the committee will have to leave for priority questions in the Dáil.

I agree with the key recommendations and the need for a whole-of-government approach to deliver the SDGs and for the Committee on Budgetary Oversight to proof the budget each year.

Is Ms Keatinge proposing a model for the stakeholders forum that can better track the Government's record on delivering the SDGs, to spread the message about them, or both, or to push the Government to act on the SDGs?

Ms Keatinge pointed out that public awareness of the SDGs is very weak, weaker even than awareness of the millennium development goals, MDGs. Why is that?

Ms Keatinge said she struggled to see that any of Dóchas' suggestions were taken on board by the Minister, Deputy Naughten, the voice of civil society is not being heard, and policy coherence is absent. Is Ms Keatinge saying that we are going through the motions on many of these issues?

I am struck immediately by goal No. 14 and conserving and sustainably using our oceans and seas. We know about the use plastic. There is supposedly an island in the Atlantic Ocean the size of Britain and France. The use of single-use plastics is strangling and destroying the planet. We all use our seas so there needs to be a global approach. Five trillion grocery bags are used globally each year. Ten million plastic bags are produced per minute. This is a flavour of the challenges. Microbeads are going into the food chain. It is something we cannot do on our own, but we have a responsibility to act, as people who are sharing the planet. Is there a role for Dóchas and others in this? Is there a role for the Government taking a lead by banning microbeads? There seems to be a reluctance there.

Part of the difficulty is that we are signing up to this but the follow-up is very slow. Ms Keatinge said the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade was better and much more advanced at engaging. One of my questions relates to the business and human rights implementation group. It was something that was agreed to be introduced in 2014 but still has not been. I am concerned that its role would be to guide State-owned companies and the Government in human rights implementation but, at the same time, for instance, the ESB is buying coal from the Cerrejon mine in Colombia. The lands are like something on the moon, the indigenous people are being forced off their land and the water is being destroyed. We have signed up to sustainable goals and Irish companies are involved in the likes of that. There is a contradiction there.

The European Commission admitted that EU development funding is tied aid. Does that concern Ms Keatinge? That issue has come up at this committee on a number of occasions. Would she agree that Irish ODA cannot be fully untied if it is giving significant amounts to EU development funding which may end up as tied aid? A total of 30% of Ireland's ODA is spent on EU development funding, yet the accountability and transparency around this funding is very low when compared with the rest of our ODA spending. Does that concern Ms Keatinge?

Is Ms Keatinge concerned that the EU development funding is shifting towards policies aimed at rewarding undemocratic and autocratic governments in the northern half of Africa to encourage them to ensure that those seeking refuge do not make it to Europe? I am talking about Libya and some of the failed states.

Ms Suzanne Keatinge: I thank Deputy Crowe for that comprehensive response. Starting with the stakeholder forum, it is important to acknowledge that we need a forum to start talking about these issues and how to take forward issues like oversight, public engagement and so forth. There are many good examples. In Germany, they are calling on independent experts to come in and play that oversight role. We in Ireland are not even having that conversation yet, and that needs to start now.

I hear what the Deputy says about the Government going through the motions. The Government did have to start making some progress because it had to report in New York. That said, we are three years on and there is not the urgency that is needed. The next 12 months are a real opportunity to keep that momentum going.

I want to pass over to my colleague to talk about SDG 14 in particular and business and human rights.

Ms Niamh Garvey: Dóchas is not hugely active in the area of goal 14. Within the broader coalition of the 2030 grouping, we collaborate with a number of allies in that broader network who have been working in this area. There is a high level of concern around the use of single-use plastics and some exciting campaigns by some of our allies in that network to reduce Ireland's dependence on such plastics, microbeads being a fantastic example if that were to progress.

Deputy Crowe makes exactly the right connections between business and human rights. We have mentioned human rights defenders and we are seeing huge attacks on human rights defenders globally and, in particular, environmental and land activists. The footprint of companies in terms of the loss of indigenous lands for such communities is worrying. The Deputy is right to name Ireland's national action plan on business and human rights, which was launched just over a year ago and contained some commitments for activities within the first six months of the plan's existence that have not yet materialised. We urge and would like to see the establishment of the oversight group that was committed to in that and a beginning of the roll-out of the work plan. There were clear steps in that national action plan that need to be implemented as soon as possible.

The national action plan is about voluntary commitments by Ireland, which are very important. In addition, internationally there is a process towards developing a binding UN treaty on business and human rights, and we would see this as an opportunity for strengthened regulation around the activities of companies in the context of their human rights abuse footprints. We would like Ireland, as part of the European Union, to be more supportive and to champion the need for such a treaty. A working group meeting is taking place between 15 October and 19 October to discuss it and we would like Ireland to be a proactive voice for it.

Ms Suzanne Keatinge: EU transparency is an oft-repeated theme in this committee and it is important but we must be clear what we are talking about. From the perspective of civil society, there is transparency around where money goes for grants. In fact, we have to account for every cent of EU funding that we use. The question is about transparency around the strategic direction and how decisions are made. In this new EU instrument there is much more unallocated funding which should allow greater flexibility, but we need to be concerned about how decisions are made in this area. For this reason, we need not just transparency but oversight.

Dr. Róisín Hinds: The multi-annual financial framework, MFF, was mentioned. The big concern for us is the fact that they are collapsing 12 instruments into one broad instrument and foreign policy, home affairs and policy and development objectives are being collapsed into one body. There is also a concern that short-term European political objectives, particularly around migration, security and trade, will take precedence over development objectives. I will follow up on this for the committee. We have particular concerns around tied aid. The budget has a €10 billion cushion for emerging challenges but very little clarity about what that means and what issues will be covered under the cushion. We are worried that an increasing focus on the neighbourhood region will mean more focus on migration control and security over the effectiveness of development, which is the core principle of ODI aid.

Senator Ivana Bacik: I thank Ms Keatinge and her colleagues for the great presentation. It is very helpful to have an emphasis on the implementation of the sustainable development goals. This committee has heard from Mr. David Donoghue and the role Ireland has played but it is important that we focus on it again. I also thank the witnesses for their kind words about the committee's report.

The witnesses made some strong recommendations and I suggest that the committee endorse them. One action we are being asked to take on EU funding is to write to the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade ahead of the next EU Foreign Affairs Council meeting on 26 November to share the concerns of civil society and to request regular reports to the committee on Ireland's position on the MFF. That might address the issues raised by Dr. Hinds. Ms Keatinge reminded us that Mr. Brian Hayes, MEP, is part of the development committee of the European Parliament. I suggest we engage with him and ask him to come before us to talk about what is going on in the development committee of the European Parliament. It would be a very useful engagement.

I have a couple of specific questions arising out of the presentation in respect of the implementation of the sustainable development goals, SDGs. How do the witnesses propose that engagement with civil society in the voluntary national review process can be improved? I was not clear whether they said engagement was poor at international level, following their experience in New York, or whether it was at national level. What could this committee do to address that? They also said they wanted the Department of the Taoiseach to take lead responsibility for the delivery of the SDGs. There is an interdepartmental group of senior officials, chaired by the Department of the Taoiseach, and an interdepartmental working group chaired by the Department of Communications, Climate Action and the Environment, with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade also playing a central role, but I am not clear why the last of these is essentially the lead Department for this. If the Department of the Taoiseach is already involved, why is it not taking the lead?

Should we send our report to the Department of Finance again to remind it of our suggestion for a roadmap to meet the 0.7% goal? It might be worth making the point to the Department, even at this late stage, rather than commenting retrospectively after the budget next week.

The witnesses referred to a number of SDGs in respect of which we are performing well, such as SDG 1 on having no poverty but SDG 5, on gender equality, is not listed as one of the goals in respect of which Ireland is performing well. I am aware that the Irish Family Planning Association submission to the all-party group and to the White Paper on Irish Aid has proposed that greater emphasis be placed on the goal of gender equality, particularly given our reality after the repeal of the eighth amendment. This should be reflected in policy and funding for sexual and reproductive health and the rights of women and girls, and it should be done at international level as a support for the efforts of other states to counterbalance and resist the current US Administration's aggressive attacks on sexual and reproductive health and rights. Ireland has supported a strong resolution at the UN Human Rights Council in recent weeks on preventable maternal mortality and morbidity and human rights and we are doing well in some ways but the witnesses might comment on what we could do better.

Deputy Noel Grealish: How many countries in the EU have reached their percentage target? We are hoping to reach ours by 2030 and there was a call for the date to be brought forward to 2025. I believe the UK has reached its target. What impact will the fact that the US is reducing its overseas development budget have on the shortfall in overseas development aid projects?

Ms Suzanne Keatinge: I rely on the voluntary national review reports on the role of civil society, which are done on a country-by-country basis. Civil society in every country seems to be saying it is not getting a role and there have been lots of different tales. In one country civil society organisations said the government contacted them three days prior to its report, asking them if they had anything to say about it, and in other countries they were not consulted at all.

The story is slightly better in Ireland but I do not think there has been a genuine dialogue and we did not feel we could shape the report in any way, which is why we produced our shadow report.

I appreciate Senator Bacik's reference to SDG 5 as it is very important. The beauty of SDGs is that they link what we do at home with what is going on overseas. We want the White Paper to contain a strong leadership role on gender equality. I think it is there but we need to keep pushing it. Maybe there will be an opportunity to bring the two roles together and to make sure what we do at home is coherent with what is happening overseas. It would be great to have more dialogue on that.

Ms Niamh Garvey: Deputy Grealish asked whether many countries had reached the 0.7% target. I do not have the exact figure but the Deputy is correct that the UK has reached the target, as have a number of Scandinavian countries. I will come back to him with the exact number but I believe there are between five and seven countries which have met their commitments.

On the question from Senator Bacik on the interdepartmental groups, the predecessor to the sustainable development goals, SDGs, had a place in the Rio negotiations and the Department of the Environment, as it was then, had a historical role in representing Ireland in this regard at the international level. That may explain why this is housed in a particular Department.

On the connections between policy coherence for development, which has interdepartmental groups, and the SDG process, which has interdepartmental groups, there is a common thread in that. Regardless of the existence of the groups, the issue is the effectiveness of the groups in meeting the ambition for a more whole-of-Government or more policy coherent approach. The OECD Development Assistance Committee, DAC, review of Irish Aid has consistently pointed to policy coherence for development being one of the weaker areas of Ireland's development programme. Regardless of the institutional make-up, what we suggest is most important is the transparency of the meetings and the ability of civil society to know what is on the agenda or to feed into discussions. Ireland's aid policy, One World, One Future, which is currently under review, would have committed to biannual reports by the interdepartmental committee that would be shared with the Oireachtas for discussion and debate. It would be very important going forward, whether for the SDGs or the aid programme, for a report on the whole-of-Government approach and how well Ireland feels it is doing on coherence to be shared with the Oireachtas and this committee.

In regard to the meaningful engagement, while I was not at the high level political forum this year, I attended last year and went to some UN training on voluntary national reviews, given Ireland's voluntary national review was coming up. The UN had to produce guidance on what meaningful engagement of civil society should look like for countries developing their voluntary national reviews. What we saw with Ireland's voluntary national review process would not have lived up to the standards outlined in that guidance in terms of the establishment of a steering committee that included civil society to oversee the production of the report, or of the opportunities for civil society to see and meaningfully comment on a draft of such a report. Ireland showed some good steps in terms of including stakeholder commitments on the website and so on, but we have not lived up to the guideline standards provided by the UN for voluntary national review.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: I apologise for being late but I have read the submissions that were sent to us. I place the word "coherence" in the context of Tuesday evening's launch of the Irish Aid report, which I attended. The question I asked there of the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Coveney, concerned the debate we were having last night

on double taxation. We know Irish aid is effective and is making a difference but, on the other hand, unless we get right the bits that do not fit into the jigsaw of coherence, we will not be able to get to the end point, which is Irish aid and all aid doing itself out of a job. One of the ways to do that is through developing world countries' ability to raise their own taxes and to sign treaties, like the double taxation treaty with Ghana we were debating last night, in a way that is beneficial to the developing countries. However, we know from what we have seen, and some NGOs are doing great work on this, that it does not appear to be beneficial to Ghana in the way it should be. For example, there are particular examples which suggest that what Ireland will get is much better than what Ghana will get in regard to royalties.

This brings in another issue which I believe NGOs could take up, namely, the arms trade. To take the EU, the figure at the back of the Irish Aid report was for more than €70 billion in EU funding over a wide variety of areas, yet none of the SDGs will be realised unless we have peace. Therefore, as the money is going out with one hand, those countries that are or were major donors are raking it in from the arms trade. I do not think we are strong enough in making those points and while President Michael D. Higgins has made the point, this is something the NGOs and civil society have to talk about much more.

On coherence, we are not doing well and, at times, we are doing the easy bit. That is not to say it is not making a difference - of course, it is. What is great about Irish Aid is the way in which it works with local communities. It is not coming in and telling people what to do but working with them. It is about local empowerment. However, unless we get the other two bits right, it is not good enough.

Deputy Seán Barrett: One of the most important recommendations made is that this committee should have a strong oversight role in calling on the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to, at a minimum, meet the committee once a year. This is a problem generally. I do not think the public are fully aware of the large sums of money being spent, that they are being spent by somebody else and that we do not get a full report as to where they are being spent or by whom, or a report as to the progress that is being made as a result of this money being contributed. This is a real weakness in the local democratic process. It is lack of information. We assume that Dóchas and other groups will get on and do our work for us but that is not the way it should be. We should be part and parcel of that work.

I have been in the Dáil since 1981 and I can never remember regular, strong debates about the whole issue of how we spend overseas aid, or getting reports back and getting publicity so the public are made aware of how this money is being spent. I am not suggesting for one minute that these moneys are not being spent properly. It is all to do with communication. I have listened to the witnesses talk about the report, so I can learn a lot, but I am one of a privileged few getting this information at first hand, and it will not be reported nationally. That is a problem we have, as a committee. While I am not saying we want publicity individually, we want what we discuss to be presented to the public and debated. As a committee, we should do as the witnesses have suggested. I would go further and suggest we should get a quarterly or half-year report on all these issues, and that what comes from this committee should be brought onto the floor of the Dáil so that, hopefully, in that way we would create some sort of awareness. There is plenty of Dáil time available during certain periods of the year when very important issues like this could be debated. I suggest that we make a recommendation in our report that we get more Dáil time to make people fully aware of where their money is being spent, how it is being spent and by whom it is being spent. This would give some recognition to bodies like those represented today that are doing very important work because, by and large, nobody

knows about it.

From my point of view, this is a communications problem. We spend too much time talking about minor issues and giving Dáil time and publicity in the newspapers to matters that are far less important than what we are talking about today. My basic point is that we need to raise the profile of the work these bodies are doing and of how overseas development aid is being spent. People do not pick up their newspaper and say: “That is very interesting. I did not realise we were doing X, Y and Z.” The reason is that these matters are never covered.

I suggest that we make a strong recommendation in our report to increase the PR in respect of what is happening, not for our sake but for that of the public. Perhaps a six-monthly or annual report from Dóchas, Oxfam and Trócaire could be debated in the Dáil. It would help the profile of the agencies and the causes they are pursuing. Through this committee, we could give greater information to the public. That is my suggestion.

Chairman: On the issue of a Dáil debate, we are still waiting for the Business Committee to allocate time to resume the debate on our report, which started some months ago. Perhaps, with the agreement of members, we could ask that it be built into the year’s parliamentary activities and that the Minister reports twice a year to the Dáil on overseas development assistance and the aid programmes. Perhaps it is a recommendation that we, as a committee, could make to the Government Whip’s office or to the Business Committee.

Deputy Seán Barrett: We talk about an awful lot of other things that are far less important.

Chairman: The Deputy will get unanimous agreement on that.

Ms Suzanne Keatinge: We fully support that. When we met the Minister, Deputy Naughten, in New York, we made the proposal that there needs to be a Dáil debate on the voluntary national review. It is a countrywide thing that needs to be shared with people. The Minister was supportive but we need to see progress on it. Coalition 2030 has in mind to hold an event some time in November to share with the committee some of the findings from New York. Members of the committee will certainly be getting an invitation and I hope they come along to it. I fully endorse the idea of better communication.

I will address Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan’s points on coherence. She knows what it means and I fully agree with her. We have been talking about the stakeholder forum. That is exactly what the forum needs to be about. It needs to have dialogue where there is incoherence rather than having a dialogue asking how we are doing. That is the message I would like to get across to the committee. I fully agree with the Deputy on the arms trade. This is an important issue. I began by referring to the importance of Ireland playing a global leadership role. We have already been seen to show leadership on the issue of small arms and in other areas. This is our opportunity and we need to grasp it. I heard what the Deputy said about civil society stepping into that space.

Dr. Róisín Hinds: I thank the committee for its support on tax justice. The latter is one of Oxfam’s core priorities. We work in coalition with partners in Ireland, many of which are Dóchas members, through the Tax Justice Network. In the areas of, in particular, tax and climate, which Trócaire is very involved in, policy coherence is essential for alleviating poverty and reducing vulnerability. Integrity and coherence are also really fundamental to building Ireland’s influence in bilateral and multilateral spaces. There is a huge amount of work we can do on that. We advocate for a solid policy coherence mechanism which is appropriately resourced to

identify conflicts and mandated to deal with them. We thank the committee for its support on the tax issue.

Ms Niamh Garvey: Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan mentioned identifying the building blocks. We see climate change as one of those building blocks. On the Minister's input at the high-level political forum reporting on the voluntary national review, Ireland's report acknowledged areas where progress is being made. Two areas the Minister highlighted in which Ireland is not making progress are housing and homelessness and climate action. They were the two big issues that the Minister identified as major challenges for Ireland. I reiterate my colleague's points.

I was inspired by President Higgins's comments at the conference hosted by our colleagues in Concern a number of weeks ago on the arms issue. The last major campaign I remember in terms of the NGOs was on the cluster munitions ban. As Ms Keatinge mentioned, Ireland has shown leadership on that issue before. It is something we can take away in our planning.

Senator Billy Lawless: I thank the witnesses for a comprehensive report. I support the aid that Ireland is to the fore in providing. My colleagues have mentioned awareness and how we make the Irish people aware of how important the aid they give is and the great work it is doing. One of my main concerns is the toxic atmosphere in the United States where the number of asylum seekers will be reduced to a third of 110,000, which was the number a couple of years ago. It concerns me that such a terrible attitude is gaining traction. Ireland is one of the few European countries that is still pretty level-headed in the context of politics and the direction in which we are going. That is not to say it could not happen here. It is very important and I always ensure when I am speaking to my Irish-American colleagues that they remember from where they came. We were the first asylum seekers before the term was invented. It is a really worrying aspect for those of us who are advocates in the United States. It has been accepted, which is terrible. We have to make sure the Irish people understand what is going on and that we retain the giving attitude we have in this country.

Senator Anthony Lawlor: I thank the Chairman for allowing me to speak. I hope to be part of the committee in the near future. The witnesses have spoken about worldwide and national awareness. There is a role for Dóchas to take a lead on that as it is the umbrella body for all the organisations. Perhaps Dóchas could access funding to make the people aware of what is going on. Rather than having seven or eight different bodies, Dóchas could be the lead player in that and could be responsible for informing the public.

Everyone talks about the UN, which is a huge body. It is becoming more and more ineffective. I see the EU becoming a much more effective body because it is a smaller grouping. The near neighbour fund and the accountability for it was mentioned and its focus on migration was mentioned. Migration comes about because people in certain sub-Saharan countries want to believe they are heading for the promised land. We should be developing the promised land in their own countries. Some of that funding could be directed towards that. Rather than looking at it as a bloc of people coming in, maybe we could direct the funding back to the countries this migration is coming from and work towards that. I see Dóchas having a role in that.

Accountability has been mentioned. I keep going back to my little bugbear which is aid effectiveness. I do not hear much about it now. It seems to be gone off the agenda. I would like the opinion of the witnesses on this matter. That is what we should be going back to. Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan and I were very much involved in a programme to get parliamentarians in countries where aid money from here was going to make their governments accountable. That is probably the best way of doing it rather than us, as parliamentarians in Ireland, chasing up

where the cents are spent in Ghana, Tanzania or Mozambique. For example, parliamentarians in Mozambique should make the Government of the country accountable for the aid. Much of the money is pooled rather than being allocated to specific areas.

Deputy Barrett has argued there should be a debate in the Dáil. There should also be a debate in the Seanad. It is a much freer forum and there are much better opportunities for us to discuss this more openly. I suggest to Seanad colleagues here that we make a drive to put it on the agenda. If the Dáil wants to follow the Seanad, so be it.

Chairman: I thank the Senator. I do not think the Seanad had a discussion on our report.

Senator Ivana Bacik: We should pursue that.

Chairman: Maybe that would be a good idea.

Ms Suzanne Keatinge: That is very welcome and we are at your service if we can help at all with those conversations. The committee should rest assured that the two issues of public awareness and aid effectiveness are very much at the heart of the conversation around this White Paper consultation. They are not forgotten at all. Coming back to the issue of awareness, I very much share members' concerns. We need to move from awareness as a public relations effort outlining what we do and who we are to a much more nuanced conversation about the impact of aid, why we do it and why it is so important to us in Ireland. That is the bit we are all struggling with. Everybody who has responsibility around public awareness needs to come together to think that though. Certainly Dóchas is taking that really seriously and trying to bring forward some ideas to help Irish Aid support us in that endeavour.

Dr. Róisín Hinds: On the migration issue, no one knows better than us the powerful role that migration can play in poverty reduction and reducing vulnerability. It has been identified in the sustainable development goals, SDGs, that safe and orderly migration makes positive contributions to development. In the proposals the EU Commission has put forward we are particularly concerned about the references to fighting, tackling or mitigating irregular migration. Aid should play no role in stopping people migrating. That does not abide by aid effectiveness principles or commitments the EU has made in the European Consensus on Development. We are looking for strong safeguards to ensure that aid money is not used to stop people migrating to Europe. As a previous speaker said, efforts should focus on-----

Senator Anthony Lawlor: Rather than focus on the blockage we should get the EU to look at ways of improving the economy in migrants' home countries, so that they can stay there rather than facing the necessity of moving. We should twist that approach around so that it looks as if it is going to benefit the people on the ground, rather than those people in transit.

Dr. Róisín Hinds: Absolutely. Aid money should be about alleviating poverty and reducing vulnerability. There are examples of aid money being used to facilitate mobility especially across border regions, where, for instance, pastoralists may need to cross a border to access livelihood options. That is a positive example of how aid money can be spent to encourage livelihoods through migration if needed. There are also very negative examples. For instance the EU trust fund for Africa has funded support to the Libyan coast guard, which is about the detention and reception of people who are in vulnerable situations and are trying to seek safety in Europe. I completely agree with the Senator - the purpose of aid is to reduce vulnerability and alleviate poverty, and that is where the focus should be. It should not be on stopping people who are in need of safety from reaching it.

Ms Niamh Garvey: Senators Lawless and Lawlor both made the connection between awareness on the part of the Irish public and Irish people acting as global citizens. Beyond the support given to the official development assistance, ODA, programme or the SDGs, that means being actively concerned and involved in some of these global issues. That can be a counterpart to some of the more worrying trends we are seeing in the US and across Europe, the changing attitudes and retreat from human rights norms. One of Dóchas's central messages to Irish Aid as we develop our new international development policy is about the need to maintain the core principles and values at the heart of the Irish Aid programme. Irish Aid is consistently ranked the highest in development effectiveness, quality poverty focus, 100% untied grant aid etc. That really needs to stay at the heart of the programme.

I have had the pleasure of attending a number of public consultations as part of the process. The Irish public is very proud of that aspect of the Irish aid programme. That is something to build on. In the submissions of Dóchas and Trócaire to the White Paper consultation we acknowledged that Irish Aid has become a reputable leader in the area of development education. That concerns engaging the Irish public about these issues at a really meaningful level. In the context of populism and isolationism, we really encourage Irish Aid to build on that reputation and continue to invest in development education as part of the Irish Aid programme. We have suggested putting 3% of the ODA spend towards development education.

Chairman: I thank Ms Keatinge, Dr. Hinds and Ms Garvey for their contributions here today. They have highlighted a huge number of very important issues and their engagement with the committee was very worthwhile. Many of the issues they raised are issues we have raised through our own paper. Deputy Seán Barrett mentioned education and communication, which we have highlighted in our own paper as well. We have also outlined the need for innovative ways to communicate with the public and let people know about the good results that come from their money, whether it is given through taxation or on a voluntary basis.

Senator Lawless referred to the toxic atmosphere in the United States. Unfortunately the atmosphere is not improving in Europe either. Brexit governs our lives, particularly where I come from. I represent two counties in southern Ulster. Brexit is on the hourly agenda for people like myself. The EU budget will be affected by Britain leaving the European union. Britain has a good record. I think it was the government of Mr. Tony Blair and Mr. Gordon Brown which set the 0.7% target. They put it in legislation as far as I recall. It is to their credit. I think it was one of those two Prime Ministers. The European Union also has a good record of providing funding.

Several of us went as a committee to the House of Commons and attended various meetings in London. We met the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee. We also met the chair and other members of the International Development Committee. Those we met were very adamant that Britain would continue to be a very significant contributor. I gather that Britain will be co-operating with the European Union and with other countries through the European Union structures in regard to development aid. That is what we took from what the committee.

The Multiannual Financial Framework, MFF, is a very serious issue. The new configuration, with one budget covering a number of areas, needs to be watched very carefully. Attention must be paid to how that money is disbursed and where that expenditure goes. We can follow up the witnesses' recommendations, to which Senator Bacik also referred. There is agreement from the committee in that respect. We will write to the Minister in advance of the November meeting of the Council of the European Union. We will also have the Tánaiste here. His next meeting with us will be on 13 December. He reports to us on all the issues discussed at the

recent Foreign Affairs Councils and we will raise those issues with him. We will engage with Mr. Brian Hayes, MEP, to see if he can make a presentation to the committee. We will also write to the Minister for Finance again in regard to the forthcoming budget and the need to work towards achieving the target of 0.7% of gross national income, GNI.

I thank our witnesses again for their ongoing engagement. It is disappointing to hear from New York of the lack of regard for the Stakeholder Forum. That is disappointing because we see the great coverage UN meetings get in our broadcast and print media. It is unfortunate if key stakeholders are not given the respect they deserve when those meetings take place at a very important forum. I propose that we suspend for a few minutes and have a photograph taken with our visitors in view of Deputy Barrett's suggestion that we are not making the public sufficiently aware of the good work of these bodies.

Sitting suspended at 11 a.m. and resumed in private session at 11.05 a.m..

The joint committee adjourned at 11.20 a.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Thursday, 18 October 2018.