



Submission to the White Paper Consultation

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Submitted by Thomas O'Connor, Senior Programme Officer, on behalf of Aidlink.

Address: 34 Greenmount Office Park, Harold's Cross, Dublin 6W

Website: www.aidlink.ie

Email: tom@aidlink.ie / info@aidlink.ie

Tel: 01 473 6488

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Introduction

Aidlink is a small, Irish-owned international development organisation, working to improve the lives of people living in poverty in Africa. We do this by empowering communities and local organisations with the capacity, skills and knowledge to support sustainable access to basic resources and enable healthy and fulfilling lives. Results from the last 10 years include:

- 350,000 people in Uganda provided with improved access to cleaner, safer water;
- 300 schools in Kenya and Uganda supported to become child-friendly, creating a safer, healthier learning environment for over 100,000 students;
- Over 50,000 children in Turkana, Northern Kenya vaccinated;
- Community Development Committees established and trained across Kenya and Uganda to manage local resources and advocate for improved service delivery from local government.

Aidlink works through a partnership model, providing direct and indirect support to local civil society organisations (CSOs) in Kenya, Uganda and Ghana. Partnerships are built on shared values, vision and a commitment to the poor, and have resulted in sustainable change that has enriched the lives of some of the world's poorest people. Partners and communities have been empowered to become leaders of their own development agenda and processes. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Irish Aid have supported the work of Aidlink in Africa for over 35 years. We are currently in receipt of a Civil Society Fund grant of €310,000 per annum (2018 – 2020).

In Ireland, Aidlink engages the public to build support for a global, social justice-oriented agenda that advances the interests of people living in the poorest communities in Africa and elsewhere in the world. Linking communities in Ireland and Africa to foster a sense of solidarity, we place a particular emphasis on Immersion Programmes with secondary school students, promoting critical thinking on global issues.

Aidlink's contribution to the White Paper consultation process is reflective of the learning gained over 35 years' of working with and alongside local partners and communities in the developing work.

1. What elements of Ireland's international development experience should the new policy reflect?

Aidlink is broadly in agreement with the findings of the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade (JCFAT) 2017 review of the Irish Aid Programme and supports an on-going commitment to reduced hunger and stronger resilience; sustainable development and inclusive economic growth; and better governance, human rights and accountability¹.

Ireland should maintain a focus on the poorest and most vulnerable, with particular emphasis placed on ensuring gender equality and building sustainable health and education systems. Furthermore, Ireland's Official Development Assistance (ODA) should remain untied with the commitment to strengthening governance and accountability at its core.

In the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), **the new White Paper should:**

- 1. Commit to working with the poorest and most vulnerable in the context of a human rights-based approach to development**
- 2. Re-affirm Ireland's support for quality, effective development programmes that have a positive long-term impact and reduce the need for humanitarian intervention;**
- 3. Recognise the contribution made by Irish Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) to the success of Ireland's ODA Programme and recommit to supporting them in the context of a balanced approach to bilateral and multilateral channels for aid disbursement.**

The world has made remarkable progress in recent years with over a billion people lifted out of extreme poverty since 1990 (World Bank). Yet despite these advances, more than 2.7 billion people worldwide live below the income poverty

¹ *One World, One Future: Ireland's Policy for International Development* (2013)

line (\$2.50/day) (UNDP), over 3 million children under 5 die every year as a result of preventable and treatable diseases (WHO), and more than 263 million children miss out on an education (UNESCO).

These on-going challenges highlight the need for Ireland's international development policy to continue to focus on long-term development programmes. In recent years, the trend amongst donors has been to divert ODA from development to humanitarian response. Such moves are short-sighted and fail to take into account the importance of long-term development programmes in combatting the need for humanitarian response. It is estimated that every €7 spent on responding to natural disaster could be offset by €1 spent on preparedness and early warning. **Ireland should continue to prioritise support for long-term development programmes that have a sustainable impact in reducing global poverty.**

At the heart of the SDGs is the commitment to 'leave no one behind'. This will require donor countries to focus efforts on reaching the poorest and most vulnerable in order to end extreme poverty and reduce inequality. Rising levels of inequality represent the biggest threat to society and the global economy (World Economic Forum). The new White Paper presents **Ireland with the opportunity to lead on efforts to tackle inequality and re-affirm its commitment to the poorest and most vulnerable by prioritising universal access to basic resources and services. With sub-Saharan Africa continuing to lag behind the rest of the world, Ireland's geographical focus should remain on this region.**

Ireland has a long and proud history of engagement overseas. From the work of early missionaries to that of long-established and well-respected NGOs, the contribution of Irish Civil Society to the eradication of poverty and the promotion of justice and prosperity in the Global South, especially in Africa, has long been regarded as a source of national pride.

As the JCFAT review noted, 'much of Irish Aid's reputation for high quality derives from bilateral disbursement: through Irish Aid's own programmes in Key Partner Countries and through the bilateral aid distributed to civil society organisations'. Yet in recent years, the proportion of the ODA budget on-granted to Irish NGOs has declined in proportion to that on-granted to Multilateral Organisations².

While we recognise and support Irish Aid's commitment to working with Multilateral Organisations, Aidlink believes that the value-added by Irish NGOs extends beyond our capacity to implement quality, effective and impactful development programmes. Having emerged from Irish society, we are embedded in it and representative of it, with an understanding of what it means to be Irish and our place in the world. Irish NGOs are committed to deepening the Irish public's understanding of the importance, effectiveness and life-changing impact of Irish ODA. Through public engagement and development education, NGOs contribute to building a strong, active citizenship that supports ODA and is committed to a more just and equal world.

As the global political context becomes increasingly isolationist and inward-looking, a public sense of ownership is vital to ensuring public support for Ireland's ODA programme; people in Ireland must believe that they are making a real and meaningful contribution to changing the lives of the poor in sub-Saharan Africa and beyond. With our deep connection to Irish society, supporting the contribution of Irish NGOs – both overseas and in Ireland – is the most effective means of establishing a sense of pride and understanding among the general public of how Ireland is contributing to the building of a better future for some of the world's poorest people. **The new White Paper should set out how the government will continue to support the work of Irish NGOs, large and small, as a vital component of Ireland's efforts to transform our world.**

2. What are the implications of the changing global context for Ireland's international development cooperation and humanitarian action?

While there has been a substantial fall in the share of the world's population living in extreme poverty across the globe, new challenges have (re-)emerged in the global context including rising levels of wealth inequality, diminishing media freedoms and the shrinking of civil society space. Furthermore, the impact of climate change is becoming increasingly visible with environmental disasters threatening hard-won development gains in fragile states. In such circumstances, it is the poorest and most vulnerable who are most at risk.

² Percentage of ODA allocated to NGOs – down from 26% in 2015 to 23% in 2016; Percentage of ODA allocated to multilateral aid – up from 52% in 2015 to 61% in 2016.

Aidlink is broadly in agreement with the global challenges identified in the Public Consultation Paper but recommend that **further consideration be given to the growing support for nationalist populist movements across the Global North**. Such movements are fuelled by a narrative of fear and hatred of ‘others’, promoting division and self-interest as opposed to global solidarity and interdependence. While public support for Ireland’s ODA programme remains strong³, it is important that all of us with an interest in global justice and human rights do not become complacent. We must continue to make the case that Ireland’s ODA programme, in contributing to a ‘safer, more peaceful, more sustainable and more equal world is not only a moral imperative, but also in our fundamental interest’⁴ as a national in an increasing interconnected and interdependent world.

Furthermore, a re-affirming of our commitment to human rights and standing in solidarity with the poorest, most vulnerable, marginalised and oppressed is reflective of both our nation’s history and our values as a people. Investing in Development Education and Public Engagement has the potential to ‘increase public understanding of global justice in the context of the SDGs, and inspire people to take action at a local, national and global level’⁵. Aidlink’s own experience has seen us support over 500 Irish secondary school students to participate in a schools-based Immersion Programme in Kenya, Uganda and Ghana. Directly engaging with their peers, and experiencing first-hand how host communities live and work has supported personal growth in terms of knowledge, skills, values and attitudes and action among participants⁶. A greater understanding of the complexity of power dynamics, poverty and inequality has fostered a sense of solidarity with people in the Global South which we believe will have a positive impact in terms of the choices made by participants in the future. Aidlink believes that such initiatives, founded on a belief in our common humanity and ‘global citizenship’ are the key to growing support for Ireland’s international development cooperation and can contribute to combatting the growing trend of support for nationalist and populist policies.

3. Do the proposed priorities respond to the changing context and contribute to the achievement of our vision of a more equal, peaceful, sustainable world?

Aidlink is supportive of the proposed priorities set out in the Public Consultation Paper. In the context of the SDGs and the Leave No One Behind agenda, a focus on gender equality, reducing humanitarian need, promoting climate action and strengthening governance is appropriate for the contextual challenges identified and the vision of a more equal, peaceful and sustainable world. In light of our own work, we particularly welcome the emphasis on gender equality and governance through a rights-based perspective.

Given our focus on delivering sustainable, improved access to basic resources for some of the world’s poorest people⁷, **we welcome the identification of People: Social protection, education and health as key to tackling poverty and vulnerability, as well as the focus on improved outcomes for women and girls and the inclusion of people living with disabilities**⁸. This investment in ‘human capital is going to be the most important long-term investment any country can make for its people’s future prosperity and quality of life . . . Without an urgent and concerted global effort, vast numbers of people and entire countries are in danger of being excluded from future prosperity’⁹.

Investment in human capital is critical to Irish Aid’s vision of a more equal, peaceful and sustainable world. When people are healthier, better educated and their livelihoods are secure, they become more resilient. As empowered active citizens and leaders, they become more productive, demanding their rights and driving local development according their own identified needs.

4. How can we improve delivery of Ireland’s international development cooperation and humanitarian action?

In addition to the proposed criteria for action, we call on Irish Aid to **recognise the contribution made by Irish NGOs, large and small, to the success of Ireland’s ODA Programme**.

³ A 2017 study of public attitudes towards overseas Aid found that 94% of the Irish public ‘believe it is important to support poorer countries’ (Kantar Millward Brown)

⁴ ‘Transforming Our World’ Public Consultation Paper, P10.

⁵ Irish Aid Development Education Strategy 2017 – 2023.

⁶ [Review of the Aidlink Immersion Programme \(2016\)](#).

⁷ Aidlink Strategic Plan 2017 – 2021.

⁸ ‘Transforming Our World’ Public Consultation Paper, P14/

⁹ World Bank, [‘Investing in People to Build Human Capital’](#).

As we have seen, the proportion of Ireland's ODA budget allocated to NGOs has declined in recent years with smaller organisations particularly impacted. Aidlink believes that in the context of the new White Paper, **Irish Aid should consider the contribution that smaller NGOs can make in delivering Ireland's ODA Programme**, not least in the area of human capital.

The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) identifies 'organisations delivering change, producing real solutions to real problems that have real impact' as key for successful development interventions. 'It's about building trust, empowering people and promoting sustainability'¹⁰.

Small organisations are ideally placed to engage in this manner, building strong and trusting relationships with local partners and communities, responding to their self-identified needs. Small organisations are agile and flexible in identifying and testing innovative new approaches. While there is potential for failure, piloting new approaches also has the potential to unearth new, more effective and impactful means of supporting sustainable development. In this regard, the international development sector can learn from private enterprise, in particular the 'Silicon Valley' technological start-ups who identify failure and the ability to learn from it as an intrinsic part of their eventual success.

Further, despite calls for small organisations to consider merging, there is no evidence that it either improves development outcomes for the poor, or that it represents value-for-money. The evidence suggests that small organisations use public resources efficiently and effectively, providing value-for-money for the Irish taxpayer and ensuring that funds are directed to where they are needed most.

The UK government has recently recognised smaller organisations as 'a crucial part of [their] offer on international development', valued not only for the work they do but also their capacity to create 'direct connections between the people we're trying to help and those wanting to help them'. Aidlink recommend that Irish Aid reconsider their relationship with the unique and valuable contribution of Ireland's smaller NGOs in implementing Ireland's international development policy and raising public awareness and support for it.

Aidlink also believes that the new White Paper should set out a commitment to explore opportunities to increase support to Southern (African) NGO partners. Building the capacity of local CSOs, equipping them with the skills, knowledge and expertise to drive the development agenda would further enhance the delivery of Ireland's vision of a more equal, peaceful and sustainable world.

Currently only 1% of the \$150bn spent on aid annually reaches Southern CSOs directly. There are challenges of course; the need to manage risk, a lack of administrative capacity to oversee smaller grants, and political pressure to fund domestic CSOs. The primary concern however is that local CSOs in developing countries lack capacity, both to spend grants effectively, and to meet the reporting requirements of donors (Civicus).

Aidlink believes that ignoring local CSOs, limits the potential for truly transforming society and the lives of the poorest and most vulnerable. While there are many well-managed, efficient and effective local actors who find themselves locked out of funding opportunities, the claim that local CSOs lack capacity holds some truth. This represents a potential opportunity for Irish Aid, and indeed NGOs (of all sizes) to work with local organisations, building their institutional capacity so that they may, in time become direct partners.

¹⁰ Overseas Development Institute: 'Doing Development Differently'.