



Submission to the Review of the White Paper on Irish Aid

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ICOS agrees to the release of all of this response subject to data protection requirements. ICOS does not require any part of this submission to be withheld from Freedom of Information requests

Introduction

This submission is made on behalf of the Irish Council for International Students (ICOS). ICOS is an independent, non-profit network of educational institutions, civil society organisations and individuals interested in international education and working with Government and other agencies to promote good policies and best practice in relation to the recruitment, access and support of international students in Irish education. Since 1975, ICOS has collaborated with the Department of Foreign Affairs on the management of the Irish Aid Fellowship Training Programme.

ICOS welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the White Paper Review and while the organisation will make a few general comments on the aid programme overall, the focus of its commentary will be on the role of education in development and the importance of leveraging Ireland's strength in higher education to contribute to capacity building in Ireland's partner countries. A Government-wide approach is also encouraged which will ensure coherence between Ireland's Aid programme and its wider international education policy objectives.

Progress Made

ICOS acknowledges that Ireland's Aid Programme is internationally recognised for its high quality and a source of pride for most people in this country (Dóchas/IDEA Ipsos/MRBI Poll May 2012). The continuing focus of our aid programme on the eradication of poverty and the achievement of the MDGs is also well supported by ICOS members.

ICOS is particularly pleased to have been associated with progress made in relation to the development of the Irish Aid Fellowship Training Programme (IAFTP) as a tool for capacity building. A comprehensive review of the IAFTP was carried out in 2007 as had been promised in the White Paper. The review found that the IAFTP is contributing to capacity development noting a high rate of return of Fellows to their employers, a growing regional component and the generation of significant goodwill towards Ireland and Irish Aid through the success of former fellows in achieving positions of influence and authority in their own countries on return. The IAFTP has been further strengthened in recent years through the successful alignment of the programme with Country Strategies in each of the partner countries. Successive tracking studies carried out by ICOS on behalf of Irish Aid have, since 2006, also shown that IAFTP is continuing to attract candidates, including a high percentage of women, who are of the highest calibre and who make a significant contribution on return to their own countries. There is still work to be done, however, especially in maximising the benefits of the knowledge gained by Fellows particularly through their research and in developing alumni networks of former Fellows to encourage knowledge sharing and continuing professional development for the benefit of returned Fellows themselves and also for their sponsoring organisations and their communities. The possibilities for wider distribution of Study Fellows' research in Ireland through academic and other networks should also be examined.

Building knowledge and research capacity to support development both within Irish higher educational institutions and partner institutions in Africa has been well supported by Irish

Aid through its Programme for Strategic Cooperation (PSC) with Higher Education and Research Institutes 2007-11. It is important that initiatives such as this are maintained in the face of ever increasing global challenges and especially as it is not certain that universities and research institutions will continue to place sufficient emphasis on development issues unless there are specific incentives to do so.

Ireland's Aid Commitment

While acknowledging the positive achievements, ICOS regrets the dramatic reduction of 30% since 2008 in our national contribution to ODA. It is understandable that some reduction in spending is inevitable during an economic crisis; however, the cuts to the aid budget have been disproportionate. It will be important that the review not only reconfirms Ireland's commitment to reach the UN target of 0.7% but also provides a plan and timeframe regarding how this is to be achieved. The uncertainty and unpredictability around funding has impeded partners including Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in effective planning for development projects with their overseas partners and threatened the continuity of excellent projects already started.

Changing Context

We are dealing with a different global and domestic economic reality since the White Paper was published in 2006 and the headline details do not need to be reiterated here. Many factors will influence recovery with a general acceptance that knowledge and talent resources are crucial to the development of economies. Unfortunately, however, "the gap between rich and poor countries, in terms of access to knowledge and the potential to generate it is widening and the current economic crisis will only make this worse"¹. This makes it more important than ever that Irish Aid, in the next phase, works with partners to develop programmes and strategies which will build local capacity to access, analyse and generate knowledge relevant to meeting development challenges.

Key Issues

Against the backdrop of falling Government financial support and rising domestic demand for higher education, there is a danger that higher education institutions in Ireland and elsewhere will find it more difficult to justify their engagements with partners in developing countries. It is very important and significant that Ireland's International Education Strategy 2010-2015, "Investing in Global Relationships", calls for "holistic and balanced engagement with international partners" (pg 1) and encourages Irish Higher Education Institutions to address the issue of global social responsibility and contribution to overseas development in their institutional strategies. Irish Aid can contribute by continuing to engage with partners in HE to develop programmes and strategies which support capacity building partnerships with institutions in the South. The documentation of successful partnerships should be encouraged not just in terms of sharing good practice and lessons learnt but also in demonstrating that Northern partners also gain much from collaborations with southern

¹*Institutional Capacity building and societal development; what role for higher education?* – NL National Commission for UNESCO

partners and indeed such partnerships are necessary to the generation of “institutional and national knowledge capital for the north”².

Ways of Working

ICOS supports the broad thrust of Dochas’ submission to the White Paper Review which calls on Irish Aid to maintain its focus on the poorest countries and for all aid to be measured against human rights criteria. ICOS also strongly supports the call in the next phase of our aid programme for a comprehensive all-government approach which “involves not just aid but all policies with international impact” and in this context ICOS has made specific reference to Ireland’s international education strategy.

Irish higher education institutions can assist developing country institutions to access knowledge and know-how and expand their systems more rapidly to meet increasing demand. Such efforts should be well coordinated and driven by the needs of developing country partners. There are also benefits for northern HEIs in terms of the opening up of new areas of research, contributing to better understanding of development issues and access to valuable international experience for both teachers and students. Irish Aid should also continue to fund fellowships to support key individuals from developing partner organisations study in Ireland and in regional higher education institutions in a continuing effort to support capacity deficits in areas relevant to the implementation of country strategies. These capacity building interventions need to be results driven and continually monitored and improved. However, it also needs to be recognised that capacity building takes time and longer term commitments will be required in order to produce successful outcomes. Meanwhile, developments in the delivery of academic programmes through Distance/Blended Learning hold potential for expanding the reach and impact of the IAFTP but may need specific targeted support from IA for HEIs in the development stages.

ICOS supports the view of the OECD DAC Peer Review (2009 p28) that “the different initiatives on capacity development - for civil society organisations, fellowship training and higher education - need to be well coordinated to ensure consistency in the approach and usefulness for Irish Aid’s programmes”. In the HE context, there is scope for greater collaboration between the IAFTP and the PSC for example. Both programmes support fellowships and engage with Southern institutions but there is no structured sharing of information and lessons learnt. The adequate resourcing and development of a framework for capacity building within Irish Aid will be necessary to support coherence with regard to interventions in this area in the future.

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²Damtew Teferra, “Partnerships in Africa in the New Era of Internationalisation”, International Higher Education No 67, Spring 2012 (pgs 19-21).