

Editorial

OVERCOMING FRAGMENTATION IN IRELAND'S DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITIES THROUGH AN ALL IRELAND GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT FORUM

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The establishment of the Millennium Development Goals in 2000 and commitments by the G8 (Group of Eight) countries and the United Nations General Assembly in 2001 to increase funding for the fight against HIV and AIDS launched a decade of renewed commitment to development worldwide. It was also a decade where Ireland's official overseas development assistance (ODA) rose dramatically, both in absolute amounts and in proportions of gross national income (GNI): increasing from 255 million (0.30 per cent of GNI) in 2000 to 921m (0.59 per cent of GNI) in 2008. By 2007, Ireland's ODA of 0.54 per cent of GNI proportionately exceeded that of the United Kingdom (UK) (0.36 per cent of its GNI), based on a higher per capita GNI.

Moving swiftly on from mention of Ireland's economic shooting star, more important than the levels of Ireland's ODA was the high reputation that Irish Aid programmes had earned, as can be attested by those working in international development during this period. Irish Aid, working closely with the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DfID) and the mainly Nordic Group of 'like-minded' countries, often took a leadership role in rolling out new development funding mechanisms, including sector wide approaches (SWAPs) and budget support. Irish Aid was also in the forefront in promoting new strategies such as gender- and HIV-mainstreaming across the development sectors.

Big reductions in Ireland's ODA in 2009 and 2010 (down to 671m – 0.52 per cent of GNI) have been a major setback, but need not result in reversals in gains made towards development goals, if cutbacks are managed well. The jury is still out on their effects. One reason for this has been the lack of concerted action from Ireland's development communities, which should be asking pertinent questions of the Department of Foreign Affairs, and ensuring that its responses are part of a public debate: where precisely were the cuts made? What evidence and criteria were used to determine the distribution and

levels of the cuts to different sectors, recipient organisations or countries? What have been the impacts of cuts on the development sectors and on the overall goal of poverty reduction?

There are other questions that the development education community in Ireland should also be asking. 2007 saw the launch of a five year Programme of Strategic Cooperation between Irish Aid and Higher Education and Research Institutes. The long-term aim of this (hopefully first) five year programme was 'to increase the capacity of [global] Southern institutions to make an effective contribution to poverty reduction'. For this to be achieved, the Report stated: 'Irish Aid recognises that the capacity of the sector in Ireland needs to be strengthened in order to be able to respond to this agenda. Therefore in the initial phase of the programme (2007-11) there will be a more concentrated focus on capacity building of the higher education sector in Ireland' (Irish Aid, 2007).

In 2007 and 2008, eight programmes were funded (up to 1.5m each) spanning different combinations of Irish Third Level Higher Education and Research Institutes (HEIs), south and north of the border. The programmes, which focused on African countries, covered health, education, HIV/AIDS, water and other general development issues (see <http://www.irishaid.gov.ie/article.asp?article=1057>). Irish Aid, working with the Programme Heads, has been developing an evaluation framework and indicators to assess programme performance. Now past the halfway mark of the Programme of Strategic Cooperation, it is time for Irish HEIs to reflect on what they could be doing collectively to increase their effectiveness in contributing to capacity building for development research and education, both in the global North (in Ireland) and in the South (especially in Africa).

In many ways, UK's DfID has been the leader in supporting capacity building for development research in its HEI sector, through its five year 'knowledge programmes', which I first encountered when I joined the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) in 1996, and participated in until my move back to Ireland in 2005. Knowledge programmes have enabled UK HEIs to establish and foster long-term links with research partners in low- and middle-income countries. Follow-on programmes, awarded through competitive tender, have rewarded performance and supported programme sustainability. For example, LSHTM's Health Economics and Financing Programme has been receiving DfID funding for over fifteen years, and has had since its inception some of the same Southern partners, whom it is including as

co-applicants in its 2010 application for a fourth consecutive tranche of funding (see <http://www.crehs.lshtm.ac.uk/>).

While competitive tendering represents the best mechanism for awarding programme grants and rewarding excellence, it also has its downsides. At the stroke of a pen, a programme that may have several ‘soft’ (research) funded staff, in the global South as well as the North, can come to an end with only a few months remaining to find contingency funding or else terminate programme activities. Competitive tendering for programme funding between eligible institutions is essential, but is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, while a ‘wheat and chaff’ metaphor may be harsh, it is not and should not be the objective of tax payer-funded programmes to fund jobs in Ireland, regardless of performance in contributing to development in Africa. However, a second downside is that competition can undermine collaborative approaches between HEIs. Collaboration may be a more important objective in a smaller setting, such as Ireland, which lacks the larger critical mass of development research-focused HEIs found in the UK.

Most of the senior staff in the HEI programmes that Irish Aid funds through the Higher Education Authority (HEA) are doing development research in addition to their ‘day jobs’. They are paid by their HEIs to deliver training programmes and research outputs focused on the Irish market and Irish knowledge priorities. Justification for efforts and use of institutional resources for development research to their Deans, Presidents and Chief Executives – who may be broadly sympathetic but who are also under pressure to deliver more with less resources – inevitably gets translated into the market-metrics of HEIs. These include publications in impact factor-rated journals and citations and attraction of fee-paying students, whether those students are funded by Irish Aid or from other sources.

Khoo and Lehane (2008), in Issue 7 of *Policy and Practice: A Development Education Review*, contrasted two scenarios for higher education – ‘democratic deliberation’ versus ‘market rationality’ – and suggested that development education fitted with the former. They proceeded to illustrate how Irish HEIs increasingly danced to the tune of market forces and productivity metrics and concluded that ‘their research activities are increasingly eschewing traditional scholarly autonomy in favour of market values and competitive rankings on global league tables’. The reality in Ireland is that development education and research in HEIs have been largely driven by the interests, values and vision of individual academics. Permanent posts, however, are in short

supply and career-security and advancement require that academics dance to the tune of impact factors and citation rates. Therefore academics, as far as possible, need to ensure that the development research they undertake scores well according to such metrics. At the same time, all such academics that I know in Ireland also aim for their research to support an equitable and human rights value-driven approach to global development.

In many ways international development in Ireland and Irish Aid reached a zenith in 2007-08. Thereafter, a perfect storm occurred that combined decentralisation, budget cuts and a major internal re-organisation with significant staff changes, which left Irish Aid reeling and searching for a new equilibrium. In 2010, funding for some of the first tranche of programmes under the Irish Aid-HEA Programme of Strategic Cooperation is due to end. Two complementary approaches could build on what has been achieved and strengthen development research capacity in Irish HEIs and links with our African partners. First, Irish researchers would welcome a Southern-led process, where our African research partners are offered an opportunity to compete for Irish Aid funding to undertake research on country priorities, supported by Irish HEI researchers. The second approach would be agreement among Irish HEIs and support from Irish Aid to establish a Development Forum, to add value to existing efforts in development education and research and to Irish Aid's forthcoming research strategy.

What shape might an Irish Development Forum take? Firstly, it should be an all-Ireland body and encompass all of the HEIs, not just those South of the border and not just the universities. We are a set of relatively small communities, and a critical mass for research and education across the development sectors can only be achieved collectively. Secondly, if we lack the track record and specific-sector expertise of organisations such as the London School of Economics, the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, or the Institute of Development Studies, we have the potential to bring together our sectoral experiences and work in a cross-sectoral way. Such a way of working is not typical of the narrowness and depth with which researchers normally feel comfortable, which means it could produce innovation in development research and education. Cross-sectoral working is an Irish Aid priority.

Thirdly, as a small island with a vibrant history of development work – through missionary orders, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and by individuals in a range of voluntary, multilateral and bilateral development agencies – there has been a lot of interaction and movement between the

different development communities. Irish Aid seminars were well attended by members of all these different communities, especially HEI-based academics who often contributed to them, when held at Bishop's Square in Dublin up to 2008. A Development Forum that encompassed the needs and aims of these diverse development constituencies – education, research, practice, advocacy and policy development – would be a more ambitious entity than, for example, the UK Development Studies Association (<http://www.devstud.org.uk/>).

Fourthly, just as lack of development up to the 1970s enabled Ireland to leapfrog generations of telecommunication capacity, which along with our education system contributed to rapid economic growth up to 2002, an All Ireland Global Development Forum could leapfrog and adopt new communication technologies for the dissemination of knowledge for development. The Irish Aid-funded HEA Programme Heads have been discussing the possibility of a Web Portal for Development Research, which could provide a forum for researchers, policy-makers, NGOs, funding organisations and others to deposit and freely access development research outputs, exchange ideas and share best practice. This would strengthen linkages and provide multi-directional communication channels for the development partners, in Ireland and among their overseas partners, who generate and use evidence for development. Development staff (including Irish Aid country offices), project and programme managers and policy makers in Africa and beyond could thereby access up-to-date research-based evidence.

Finally, academic researchers, teachers, practitioners, activists and policy makers (and those who wear several hats) should be critical allies of each other. Academic researchers know that a doctorate and a journal publication record is required for survival in a HEI. Just as academics need to develop skills in using other communication media, other development communities can learn from us. Academic research outputs are filtered through an independent peer-reviewed quality assurance process, to which other forms of knowledge are only occasionally subjected. It is far from perfect; but far better than no peer-review process. Development PhD programmes, which several of the HEA programmes established using Irish Aid funding, are the means to ensure that undergraduate, diploma and masters development education programmes, which most development professionals consider a pre-requisite for their practice, are of international quality. They also provide one of the stated 'Gains for Irish Aid': 'Development of a valuable pool of knowledge and expertise in Ireland that can be drawn on for advocacy, policy development and research' (Irish Aid, 2007).

However, although necessary, PhDs and journal articles are not sufficient for ensuring research informs development education, policy and practice. Academic researchers want direct connections to knowledge users – teachers, practitioners, activists and policy makers – who can translate research-based evidence into policies and programmes that directly benefit people’s lives, especially in Africa where most of us did our development work. It is this direct connection, which a Development Forum could support, that makes researchers feel that a life too often consumed by the frustrating pursuit of journal publications is a life well chosen. One of the many unfortunate effects of the decentralisation of Irish Aid to Limerick has been the fragmentation of links and alliances across Ireland’s development communities (not even our colleagues in the Limerick HEIs would argue that the advantages to development compensate for the damage done). Irish Aid now has much less access to the critical and analytical input provided by the other development communities, especially indigenous academics and NGOs, which are among its core constituencies.

No Irish development academic I know would expect payment for providing short technical inputs to Irish Aid, such as giving or responding to a seminar presentation, provision of advice on technical issues, or commentary on a draft document. They would welcome such opportunities. Drastic cut-backs in the Irish Aid budget for consultancies are therefore no reason for Irish Aid to deprive itself from accessing indigenous expertise on development issues. Several senior academics were among the group of national and international development experts who contributed their services to Irish Aid as a free good for three years, 2006-08 (around four meetings per year), on the Technical Advisory Group to support the Taoiseach’s Initiative on HIV/AIDS and Communicable Diseases. Meetings stopped in late 2008 and the members received no further communication, no explanation and no acknowledgement of their contributions.

Development is a life-long commitment and a vocation for those of us fortunate to have progressed from a period of voluntary service or short overseas exposure to development to making it a central focus of our working lives, during and often after what are normal working hours for others. Foregoing any opportunity to make sure that it is done well is not an option we should take, which may sometimes require biting the hand that has fed us. The gap that has opened up between Irish Aid and its core constituencies, especially academic researchers and NGOs, has meant that we as development

communities in Ireland are losing the ability to understand and learn from each other.

We academics are also lacking and in need of the critical engagement that would come from more regular interaction with Irish Aid and the NGO community (which will get us out on parole from our ivory towers). An Irish Global Development Forum could provide a mechanism to support this, building synergies and helping us all to overcome fragmentation. We could use communication technology to get us to work efficiently and overcome the barriers created by decentralisation, until the politicians come to their senses. We are a small island and those of us committed to development need to act on the words used recently by two prominent residents of Phoenix Park: ‘*Ní neart go cur le chéile* – strength comes from working together.

Editor’s note

Ruairí Brugha’s examination of the sector draws our attention to the opportunities that exist and are being passed by. His suggestion to create a development forum to promote greater coordination and cooperation in the sector, especially within formal education, is exactly the type of innovation we aimed to examine in Issue 11 of *Policy & Practice*, on the theme Innovations in Development Education. The Focus articles describe recent research and projects aimed to develop and strengthen the sector as a whole. Natasha Bailey looks at how development education can fit into adult education to better engage adults with development issues. Nancy Serrano and Roland Tormey explore how to embed development education and education for sustainable development within the post-primary curriculum in Ireland using situated cognition methodologies. Mella Cusack and Aoife Rush present research findings from study visits involving post-primary teachers related to the effectiveness of short-term study visits as a professional development opportunity. Eleanor D’alton, Mary Fenton, Helen Maher and Maeve O’Grady chart the evolution of an innovative learning partnership between the Waterford Women’s Centre and the Waterford Institute of Technology, and summarise the key findings of an evaluation of its effectiveness. Danilo Martins de Castro Chaib examines how music circles can impact and alter our understanding of the relationship between cultural capital and cultural imperialism, and how development education assists these culture circles. I hope that Issue 11 inspires readers to look at how they can implement innovative ideas into their work to increase the quality and effectiveness of development education across the

board. For more information on contributing or to suggest an article topic, please contact the Editor: jenna@centreforglobaleducation.com

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