

THE IRISH AID VOLUNTEERING AND INFORMATION CENTRE

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Introduction

Irish Aid is the Irish government's programme of overseas development assistance (ODA), the aim of which is to alleviate world poverty. It is paid for through public funds and administered by the Department of Foreign Affairs. Peter Power, TD, is Minister of State for Overseas Development. Ireland's aid budget has grown considerably over the last decade and the government has committed to reaching the United Nations (UN) target of spending 0.7% of GNP on aid by 2012.

Recently, Irish Aid built a Volunteering and Information Centre on Upper O'Connell Street in Dublin, which was opened to the public on 22 January 2008. The purpose of the Centre is: to provide information to the Irish public on the Irish Aid programme; to raise awareness about how the public can support the Irish development effort; and to act as an information centre for members of the public interested in volunteering overseas.

The new Centre plays an important role in communicating how ODA money is spent and the difference it makes in countries with high levels of poverty. Rising aid levels from Ireland have been matched by a groundswell of public interest in overseas volunteering, along with an increase in the number of new charities and NGOs in Ireland sending volunteers to developing countries. The first ever White Paper on overseas assistance, published in 2006, committed Irish Aid to establishing the Centre to 'be a key part of Irish Aid's broader communications activities. It will act as a focal point for efforts to increase public awareness of the Government's action in the area of development' and 'make more and better information to the public about volunteering opportunities for individuals, institutions and communities across Ireland' (Irish Aid, 2006).

Refurbishment of the building began in 2007. It was decided that the Centre would contain a permanent exhibition on Irish Aid, which would use multi-media audio-visuals to engage the viewing public in a lively and interactive manner. The content was produced by Irish Aid staff working with a consultant and an audio-visual design company. A computer-based presentation was designed to provide an introduction to overseas volunteering and made available to the public on three volunteering kiosks

in the exhibition area as well as on the Centre's website.

The education sector was considered to be a key target group and a programme was devised to attract schools as well as youth and community groups. The Centre currently provides group workshops and guided tours of the exhibition for schools, colleges and adult education groups. Workshop modules were devised with transition year students in mind and tested with schools groups in advance of the opening.

Centre facilities are made available free of charge to organisations, agencies and groups working in the area of development and development education for exhibitions, conferences, training, seminars and other public events. Consultations were held with these sectors to establish the needs and likely demand. Organisations are also invited to use the Centre for temporary exhibitions on development topics.

The Irish Aid exhibition

The permanent exhibition on Irish Aid uses a variety of audio-visual media to take the visitor through four distinct stages:

- Awareness: development challenges and opportunities;
- Exploration: Ireland's response and the Irish Aid programme;
- Opinion: your view on topical issues, and listening to others; and
- Reflection: how can I engage? Fairtrade, volunteering, etc.

Part 1 is the Awareness room, which sets the context and illustrates the challenges of global poverty facing humanity today. It features a presentation on four major aspects of poverty, projected on three large screens which surround and draw in the audience. A succession of key facts and figures on poverty, hunger, HIV/AIDS and education is interspersed with footage of people's stories from Africa and Latin America, illustrating the impact of poverty on their lives. The presentation runs for ten minutes on a continuous loop, and concludes with the global response of the Millennium Development Goals and Ireland's commitment to meeting the UN development assistance target of 0.7% of GNP by 2012.

The visitor then moves on to Part 2, the Exploration stage, which presents the work of Irish Aid. Touch screens allow the visitor to explore the Irish Aid programme and a dynamic table map 'brings' the visitor to whichever of the nine Irish Aid programme countries they choose, with film footage and key facts.

Part 3, the Opinion Monitor, invites the visitor to give their opinions on six key issues, such as volunteering, child labour and aid, which

serve to demonstrate the concept of global interdependence. An audio-visual presentation poses key questions and encourages the visitor to ‘vote’ in response. The accompanying film presents differing perspectives on these issues and allows you to reassess your earlier opinion on the issues.

Part 4, the Reflection space, prompts the visitor to reflect on how they, as citizens, can play their part in fighting global poverty through their own lifestyle choices and actions. Four large illustrated display boards illustrate details of campaigning and development education, volunteering, fairtrade and sustainable living.

Visitors can also spend time at the volunteering kiosks or viewing temporary exhibitions set up by development organisations, which change every few weeks. The publications area provides copies of all current Irish Aid publications. Centre guides, who have a background in development and volunteering, are on hand at reception to provide guidance and information, answer queries and to refer people to relevant other sources of information.

The information service on volunteering

The Centre serves as a first step information point for members of the Irish public interested in volunteering overseas. A computer-based presentation was designed to provide a starting point for individuals interested in volunteering in developing countries. The Centre offers the following facilities:

- Three volunteering kiosks to present information on the full range of opportunities available and refer visitors to overseas volunteering networks and organisations in Ireland;
- Centre guides to provide assistance and information to visitors who call in person or to those who phone with queries on volunteering (over 1,500 in 2008);
- Volunteering packs and publications on volunteering;
- Volunteering seminars and information briefings run by volunteering organisations and by Irish Aid (64 such events in 2008);
- Information and copies of the codes of practice in relation to volunteering, i.e. Comhlámh’s Code of Good Practice and the Charter on Volunteering.

The Centre links closely with Comhlámh’s Volunteering Options programme and provides related information and material. Following a recent meeting with = volunteering NGOs, it is now proposed to take a more pro-active

approach in 2009 to raising awareness about responsible volunteering and opportunities for careers and volunteering in development.

The Volunteering Unit of Irish Aid is based in the Centre and administers the Irish Aid-funded United Nations Volunteer (UNV) programme. Currently 13 Irish international volunteers, 16 Irish interns and 23 national volunteers are supported by Irish Aid in the UNV programme. Funding has also been provided to support and upgrade the UNV online volunteering service. The Volunteering Unit also administers the election observation mission programme, sending about 100 observers on 20 missions each year, mostly with the European Union (EU) and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

The education programme

Second-level schools workshops

From September to April workshops are held twice daily during term-time for Transition Year, Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) and 5th and 6th year classes. A 90-minute module has been developed to raise awareness of development, particularly in relation to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Ireland's international role in fighting global poverty. Centre guides facilitate these workshops and teachers are present throughout. The teacher receives a preparatory lesson by email before the visit and a teachers' pack, including a follow-up lesson on completion of the workshop

In the first year of operation 116 second-level classes and 2,342 second-level students have participated in the workshops. Our experience working with schools and teachers' feedback have shown that second-level students' awareness of official overseas development assistance is very low, even in those schools which deliver development education. For example, awareness of Irish Aid prior to the visits is less than 20 per cent, with an even lower awareness of the MDGs.

If Irish citizens are to critically engage with Ireland's overseas aid policies and programme it is vital that students and young people are made aware of Irish Aid, including its aims and objectives, principles and policies. It is these young people who will shape the future of development assistance from Ireland, whether as decision-makers, leaders, professionals or as voting citizens. However, the Centre faces new challenges in attracting schools in the year ahead due to curtailing of field trips and extra-curricular activities in the current economic downturn.

Primary schools programme

In the first year of opening the Centre ran a summer programme for primary

schools in June, with workshops held twice daily for fourteen days. A special programme was also devised for 5th and 6th year classes on the theme of the environment. The aim was to make pupils aware of the importance of environmental protection and preservation in the fight against poverty. The workshop included cultural activities based on music and dance from Kenya, and games with an environmental and development themes. Twenty-eight workshops were held with 709 pupils taking part from schools all over Ireland. Because of its popularity in 2008, this year's Primary Schools Summer Programme will be extended to eight weeks in May and June, and hopes to attract over 2,000 pupils during that period.

External organisations' events

Events are hosted by a range of development and development education organisations and networks, campaigning and solidarity groups, immigrant organisations, missionary groups, disability groups, student groups and youth, adult education and community organisations. 179 development-related events were held in the Centre in its first year. These included: conferences, seminars, workshops, information evenings, short courses, film screenings, launches and public meetings. Management and promotion of events is carried out by the organisation responsible.

The Centre provides an attractive city centre venue, free of charge to development or development education organisations, which in turn benefits from the attendance of event participants and the raising of awareness of Irish Aid. In this way the Centre is becoming a central venue for discussion and debate on development issues.

Displays and temporary exhibitions

Displays or exhibitions are required to have a global development dimension in order to be shown in the Centre. In its first year of operation 18 exhibitions organised by NGOs or Irish Aid were shown in the Centre. Topics included: fairtrade; disability; diversity; campaign against cluster munitions; missionaries; volunteering; the environment; gender; and human rights. It has become evident that stand-alone exhibitions attract little public interest on their own, and require promotion and complimentary seminars or workshops which engage the public to be successful. The Centre is therefore taking a more strategic approach in planning exhibitions in year two.

In its first year of operation the Centre has proved to be successful in providing a focal point for development in a very central venue. Confirmed

visitors number over 14,600, indicating a strong interest by the public in finding out about Irish Aid and volunteering opportunities. The Centre Guides have responded to over 3,000 queries from visitors or by phone or email on the work of Irish Aid, volunteering overseas, volunteering in Ireland, careers in development, development education, and funding. There has also been a high level of interest among the non-governmental sector in utilising the venue for events and exhibitions, ensuring a good use of the facilities. The education programme of the Centre has proved to be highly successful in attracting schools and other education institutions to participate. In its second year the Centre will take a more proactive approach to attracting a wider general audience, through provision of a diversity of events and displays, including arts and cultural features.

Public awareness and development education

For over thirty years now Irish Aid has supported development education in Ireland, and its impact has no doubt fed back into the policies and planning of the aid programme over the years. Development education is now clearly established as a key component of the Irish Aid programme. Although the primary purpose of the Centre is to raise awareness about Irish Aid, the information it provides is set in the broader context of development and the exhibition seeks to engage the public in an interactive manner, whilst the education workshops are based on development education methodologies and approaches.

Given the close connection between development education and overseas assistance, both of which focus on the global South and work to create a more equitable world, it is surprising that aid features relatively rarely as a development education topic. The theme-based approach of development education needs to take adequate account of the realities of specific national country contexts, which are constantly changing and often complex, like development itself. Official ODA works within and engages with these day-to-day realities and challenges in fighting global poverty through government, NGO and multilateral channels.

Our experience in the Centre has shown a high level of interest by the general public in finding out about the impact of official aid on the lives of people in developing countries and in hearing examples of where and how aid ‘works’. A healthy level of interest in the work of Irish Aid should be expected and encouraged, considering it is funded through public taxes.

Irish Aid also produces development education resources for students of all ages. It is currently producing case studies which tell the stories of individual families and communities who have lifted themselves

out of extreme poverty with government support, assisted by international donors, some to be included in forthcoming development education publications. A teaching pack on development and overseas assistance in 2006 for primary schools is now in its third print run due to demand by primary and second-level teachers. Most recently, Irish Aid has produced a children's book on five of its programme countries for 10-12 year olds, which will be sent to schools and libraries all over Ireland.

Conclusion

The Centre has an important role to play in raising awareness among the development education sector of the changing policies and practice in relation to official overseas aid and in particular, Ireland's role as the sixth highest donor per capita in the world. The development education sector can work with Irish Aid to promote a critical engagement among the Irish public with the many issues and challenges related to Ireland's overseas development assistance. It is hoped that the Centre can help this dialogue to develop. Development education organisations are encouraged to use the Centre as a venue for events, exhibitions or training courses or to book a group visit and/or workshop as part of a course on development or development education.

References

Irish Aid (2006) The Government White Paper on Irish Aid, Irish Aid, Dublin.

To find out more about the Irish Aid Volunteering and Information Centre or to book an event venue or group visit the Irish Aid website: <http://www.irishaid.gov.ie/centre/>

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