

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN A NORTHERN IRELAND POLICY CONTEXT

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Conall McDevitt is a Member of the Local Assembly (MLA) for the Social Democratic and Labour (SDLP) in South Belfast and affiliated to the Assembly's All Party Group on International Development (APGID). In this article, Conall discusses the recently launched strategy for the APGID and a new partnership in north-east Uganda. Although international development is a reserved matter in Northern Ireland the All Party Group is aiming to strengthen local links with the global South and enhance public engagement with global issues.

Introduction

There is no doubt in many people's minds that Northern Ireland has a higher level of interest in international development than any other part of the United Kingdom (UK). We have a long history of work throughout the world, through faith-based organisations and development non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Many of our public servants have also volunteered on a myriad of technical assistance projects through Irish Aid, the Department for International Development (DfID), the European Union, World Bank and Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO). Indeed, local aid agencies estimate that there are several thousand people from this region working in far-off parts of the world at any given time, dealing with essential healthcare, education and other important work.

A generous society

Jim Wells, Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) for South Down and vice chair of the Northern Ireland Assembly's All Party Group on International Development, often cites the following example in reference to local generosity to good causes. He is involved in a charitable group that is responsible for the maintenance of an orphanage in Timisoara, Romania. Three years ago they ran an appeal in Kent and in Northern Ireland, and he, as treasurer, had the job of receiving the donations. The part of Kent that was targeted was quite affluent, even by southern English standards. As the donations came in he found that the average amount donated from Kent was £31, and that from Northern Ireland was £90. As Jim is fond of pointing out, that minor example indicates that we, as a region, are extremely interested in overseas development and very generous when it comes to giving. Indeed, one could not help but notice the

vast contribution of over £1 million raised in Northern Ireland when the Asian Tsunami appeal was launched in December 2004, with even small events raising sums of £30,000, £35,000 or £40,000 in one day for that very deserving cause.

We have that interest, but, until now, as a devolved Assembly we have not had what could be called the ‘made in Northern Ireland’ or the ‘Northern Ireland-branded product’ in relation to overseas development. We have been conscious of the fact that our colleagues in Scotland have strong links with Malawi, whilst the Welsh Assembly has been very active in countries such as Lesotho in southern Africa. However, there has been very little that this devolved region could point to as being its own local contribution to that very important work outside of the centrally administered overseas aid programme at Westminster through the Department for International Development. Nonetheless, the Northern Ireland Assembly has established an All Party Group on International Development (APGID) to strengthen its work in this area and this is considered in the next section.

The role of the All Party Group on International Development

The APGID was formed in the first mandate of the Assembly by my predecessor in South Belfast, Carmel Hanna, whose personal commitment to overseas development drew in a dedicated group of MLAs with a similar interest and sense of global responsibility to those living in less-developed countries. Whilst the APGID has no statutory powers, the determination and commitment of Members has ensured that the group is an active and vocal lobby on overseas development which was reflected in the publication of an international development strategy in March 2011. This strategy has put the APGID firmly on the local political map as a persuasive and influential cross-party policy forum in relation to overseas aid and development. The group works closely with local aid agencies here in Northern Ireland, and often invites interested groups to the Assembly to present to the committee, as well as taking advice on matters pertaining to the delivery of an APGID strategy.

A Northern Ireland Strategy for Overseas Development

Of course, the main agency for the delivery of overseas development aid in the United Kingdom is DfID, and as international development is a reserved issue in Northern Ireland, it is an area of policy which has not been devolved to the local Assembly. However, we have discovered that it is possible for the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly to make an immediate contribution to that work without infringing any of the legislation that surrounds overseas

development. I am pleased, therefore, that as a result of funding that we have received from NI-CO (<http://www.nico.org.uk/>), we have been able to produce a research document and a strategy for moving forward in this area locally, in association with the Coalition of Aid and Development Agencies (CADA), which offered the All Party Group an inside knowledge of development programmes already being delivered across the world by local agencies. The strategy was adopted by the Assembly following a debate on 1 March 2011 with unanimous support, and the APGID has since been lobbying the Executive to ask that the strategy is adopted as part of a wider international relations strategy within the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFM/DFM), which holds some responsibility for this area within our devolved government.

The strategy incorporates both a north-south (of Ireland) and east-west (UK) dimension, and seeks to find a role for Northern Ireland within already established links with DfID as well as Irish Aid, the Irish Government's implementation body for overseas development; two very significant players in the field of global development. With this in mind, we are taking very tentative steps towards creating an overseas development project branded from Northern Ireland. Following extensive consultation and discussion with stakeholders, north-east Uganda is the first area that we in Northern Ireland Assembly will work in partnership with as part of the new strategy. This undertaking is based in part on the levels of underdevelopment in this part of Uganda which has approximately 31 million inhabitants with an average life expectancy of just 50 years, compared to that of 78 years in the United Kingdom. The average income in Uganda is \$300 a year while that in the United States is \$38,200. In Uganda, 35 per cent of residents do not have access to clean drinking water which is a major cause of disease and illness.

These statistics give some indication of the huge disparity in incomes between sub-Saharan Africa and Western Europe. Many aid agencies represented by the Coalition of Aid and Development Agencies in Northern Ireland (CADA) are active in this country and we also have significant involvement through Irish Aid. These strong 'on the ground' links have focused our attention on Uganda. I recently had the opportunity to travel to the country and will soon be reporting back to the APGID on the next steps in terms of developing links with Uganda and the north-eastern region in particular. One dimension of the programme will hopefully include a specific development education programme for local schools that seeks to enhance their knowledge and understanding of Uganda and the links with Northern Ireland. We look forward to working with those already involved in development

education over the coming years as well as celebrating some of the existing projects on global issues which local schools have been involved with for some time.

Conclusion

The All-Party Group aims to build on the Northern Ireland public's traditionally strong financial commitment to developing countries and develop a deeper and more sustainable relationship with a specific region in the developing world. This relationship will be built on shared learning, mutual respect and closer links between political and non-governmental institutions in the two regions. Effective development work goes beyond overseas aid and includes addressing the underlying causes of poverty and injustice in the developing world. Development education can play an important role in building this understanding and mobilizing the Northern Ireland public in actions that can bring about positive change and social justice in Uganda and other countries in the developing world.

References

NI-CO is a not for profit, public body dedicated to the pursuit of building efficient, accountable and sustainable public sector institutions capable of managing donor aid effectively and implementing positive change. Over the past two decades NI-CO has supported counterpart administrations in 60 countries through the design and delivery of 300 institutional capacity building and training contracts. Visit <http://www.nico.org.uk/>

The All Party Group on International Development strategy was published in March 2011 and is available from the APGID Secretary Anna McAlister; phone (00044) (28) 90 68 3535 or email c.mcdevitt@sdlp.ie

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