

Irish Aid White Paper Review

Draft Response:



Introduction

The Centre for Global Health is an interdisciplinary research and teaching centre that is focused on strengthening health systems. Our comparative, multi-country research programmes are designed to ensure maximum learning and value is obtained for research investment, with lesson sharing across disciplines, sectors and geographical areas. Our teaching programmes are aimed at building a deeper understanding of health inequalities and the determinants of ill-health and imparting the knowledge and skills that enable our graduates to play their part in addressing these issues. Our approach to partnership values and respects the role of all actors in health – governments, communities, NGOs, academics and policy makers- and we facilitate their involvement in research design, research implementation and research utilisation. We have a strong commitment to capacity building and knowledge sharing.

Progress Made

Has the Government been successful in implementing the commitments contained in the White Paper on Irish Aid?

The government has made considerable progress in implementing the commitments in the White Paper. There are a number of specific commitments we wish to comment briefly on, in terms of how further progress might be achieved.

Strategic approach

Irish Aid has taken a more strategic approach in most of its areas of activity. Country strategy papers are now more inclusive and transparency and accountability has increased in terms of decision making at the country level. Considerable efforts have also been made to improve governance and reduce corruption. There have been improvements in how Irish Aid funds NGOs (with more rigorous measures of accountability and effectiveness) and the general move towards 5-year funding cycles is to be welcomed.

We believe that this strategic approach could be further strengthened by bringing more evidence and research into planning activities and by improving learning across the various sections and divisions within Irish Aid. Irish Aid spends a considerable portion of its budget on measurement but in our opinion does not gain maximum value from this activity. Research and measurement of impact and sustainability

should be integrated into programme design at the outset with clear pathways for learning delineated.. Greater engagement with the academic community to enable Irish Aid to build a meaningful operational research programme could have considerable value in developing their strategic approach.

Maintaining a mix of aid delivery methods

Irish Aid's decision to work at different levels from micro to meso to macro and to maintain a mix of delivery methods appropriate to these levels has benefits in terms of strengthening systems of delivery in its partner countries. Having familiarity with the issues that impact on community's daily lives coupled with an understanding of political and cultural practices that influence policy and decision making at national and international levels ensures Irish Aid is a credible voice in many fora. Intervening at many levels in the system utilising a range of aid modalities gives Irish Aid contextual and practical knowledge that enables its success.

In order to capitalise on this position, we feel that Irish Aid needs to engage in a more rigorous assessment of the mix of approaches, comparing across countries and gaining a better understanding of why some approaches work better than others and how political contexts, different styles of governance, approaches to tackling corruption etc influences progress. This would also enable Irish Aid to better articulate their theory of change/development, develop clearer rules of engagement with governments (articulating its position on human rights abuses, political corruption, democracy etc.) and occupy a more visible leadership position amongst donor agencies.

Engagement with HEIs and Research Strategy

Although the Programme of Strategic Cooperation (PSC) is a welcome vehicle towards strengthening the capacity of the higher education sector in Ireland to developing research and teaching collaborations with developing country partners, we believe there are several improvements that could be made to this programme. Setting research priorities for the programme should be a more inclusive process, that allows input from northern and southern researchers with considerable experience working in developing countries. Sustained emphasis through several cycles on particular priority areas would help to build a body of useful research that could help inform Irish Aid policy in a more strategic way. Also there needs to be a balance between responding to Irish Aid's research agenda and allowing leading researchers to generate and submit new topics for research. This would allow more natural collaborations to emerge across disciplines rather than the current situation where collaborations are based on each institution's desire to cover as many aspects of the call as possible (This can result in reluctant or superficial collaborations that don't always work). Consideration should be given to whether the objective of the programme is to support and build capacity of research teams with some track record in development research or to support new research networks of people interested in refocusing their research towards development issues. More explicit goals for research capacity building in Ireland and in Irish Aid's partner countries would be helpful and would facilitate better evaluation of the programme's impact.

Strengthening Health Systems

Irish Aid's focus on strengthening health systems and addressing the multi-faceted causes of ill-health is evident in its' focus on nutrition, in the establishment of the Hunger Task Force and in its' commitment to the principles of community engagement and community participation. However, more effort is required to effectively target the poor and most vulnerable, those who live with a disability and other marginalised groups. Access to health for these groups is the real test of a health system. Gaps in human resources and other infrastructure, along with other negative consequences of vertical programming for HIV/AIDS and other target diseases have resulted in weakened health systems that are unable to respond to the needs of the poor and marginalised. More emphasis needs to be placed on addressing these gaps through innovative and sustainable alternatives to the traditional methods of service delivery. CGH's work on utilising alternative cadres, improving the retention and performance of health workers and on using technology to enhance the reach and effectiveness of community health workers can contribute to this agenda.

Supporting the development of a diverse and independent civil society and encouraging greater civil society participation

Irish Aid works in partnership with many civil society organisations and consequently faces the challenge of ensuring accountability and effectiveness for Irish public funding invested in a diversity of NGOs. Developing a workable framework of accountability that does not over-burden or compromise the independence of NGOs and CSOs is a considerable challenge for Irish Aid. Greater encouragement of NGOs to develop their own mechanisms for monitoring and measuring progress, developing capacity in this area through partnerships with academic institutions (e.g. the CGH – World Vision partnership) could help bring more rigour and improve measurement of impact to their work. Monitoring and evaluation activities need to link more strongly to learning and have greater impact on strategic planning and programming.

Changing Context

What are the implications of the changes in the global and domestic context for the Government's aid programme in the future and how will these affect current priorities?

Domestic context

The economic context in Ireland is not a justification for reducing the aid budget and there is a need for greater clarification of why the percentage has decreased. Public opinion is starting to sway against meeting Ireland's commitment, so people need to be educated about why it is important and why we are supporting it. The focus ought to be on the 0.7 % itself, and also on aid effectiveness. While the huge amount of work being done with limited resources is acknowledged, there are

growing concerns about limited capacity and the impact this has on Irish Aids' ability to deliver on its commitments.

The relocation of Irish Aid's offices to Limerick has been a burden to partnership, making it more difficult to have physical meetings. IA should look at strengthening existing relationships and use them more efficiently. An additional impact of the move has been the loss of expertise and institutional memory, leading to huge gaps and a loss of the momentum built up during the boom years. These factors have had a negative impact on the continuity of some programmes, both in Ireland and at country level e.g. not as much progress in African Union or regional commitments. In the interests of efficiency, coherence with government policy and the recruitment and retention of high calibre staff, consideration should be given to reversing this decision.

The reduced staffing makes it imperative that external assistance is utilised to compensate for gaps in knowledge and expertise. One approach to this might be to establish collaborating centres with academic units that have relevant expertise in some of Irish Aid's priority areas.

Global context

Irish Aid's progress in adhering to the Paris Declaration is to be commended. Greater alignment with European policy and strong engagement with donors at country level have resulted. However, the power balance between individual country governments and donor groups needs to be considered. New mechanisms are needed to enable country governments to take the lead in setting development priorities and reviewing progress so that Irish Aid's (and other donors') work is truly informed by country-determined priorities.

Private investment in development is on the increase and Irish Aid should continue to seek opportunities to capitalise on this and engage in public-private partnerships that have the potential to enhance the development agenda.

The global economic downturn has focused greater attention on achieving value for money with development resources. Governments and the public are more discerning in their evaluation of impact and effectiveness and Irish Aid needs to go beyond the obvious and measure impact at deeper levels and over longer time periods to ensure sustainability.

For example, the statistics on the increase in school enrolment do not acknowledge that in some contexts the majority of students drop out before completing their education. In health, the dramatic increase in non-communicable disease and associated mortality increases associated with this emphasises the need for greater focus on prevention and treatment of NCDs. Also the success of anti-retrovirals in the treatment of HIV/AIDS means that this is now a chronic disease with implications for its management and treatment across the lifespan.

The reduction in Irish Aid's budget makes it inevitable that some of its activities will cease or be reduced. It is important that careful consideration is given to maintaining progress in capacity building in country, as without this countries will be unable to play a lead role in setting priorities and planning programmes appropriate to their needs. CGH is particularly concerned about the depletion of in-country capacity in Health and HIV/AIDS. Considerable progress had been made by Irish Aid in building this expertise in countries such as Mozambique, Tanzania, Ethiopia. However in recent times progress has been reversed with the loss of key personnel in this area and little attention being paid to support or develop those who remain in post. This crisis coupled with the skeleton staff working in Health and HIV/AIDS at Irish Aid's head office makes progress on the health agenda extremely difficult. This situation needs urgent attention.

Key Issues

How should the Government respond to the key issues of hunger, fragility, climate change, basic needs, governance & human rights, and gender equality? Are there other issues?

Given the limited resources and the need to focus these, which issues should the Government prioritise in its future aid programming?

Health is a driver of social stability and economic development and as such it would seem appropriate that health be given greater prominence in the white paper. Rethinking health as an investment in society rather than a drain on resources would provide a more accurate reflection of the positive impact of attaining health for all. The impact of globalization on health needs to be more explicitly acknowledged and shared problems such as a shortage of health workers, the developing crisis of non-communicable diseases and the negative health impacts of tobacco and alcohol on health need to be tackled by sharing experience and expertise and working on solutions that benefit all. It may be appropriate to link domestic and overseas programmes in the health sector to the benefit of both, as has been done in the UK and elsewhere.

The shortage of human resources is an issue that Irish Aid state they are very concerned about, yet the Irish government continues to drain human resources from countries that can ill-afford the loss. There is an obvious need for greater policy coherence here. The developing collaboration between the HSE and Irish Aid coupled with the expertise of CGH on recruitment, retention and motivation of staff (HSSE, STEM) and increasing the utilisation and effectiveness of community health workers (e.g. M-Health) and other mid-level cadres provides opportunity to develop some innovative approaches to addressing the problems posed by the acute shortage of health workers on a global level.

Achieving equity of access to healthcare for all, especially the poor, vulnerable and marginalised in society should be at the core of attempts to strengthen health

systems. Meeting the basic needs of these groups should receive higher priority in Irish Aid's work. The first ever World Report on Disability (2011), estimated that 15% of the World's population – over 1 billion people – experience some type of disability; with 80% of these living in low income countries. Irish Aid's health programmes have traditionally focused on the prevention of mortality and morbidity. With innovations in public health interventions people are escaping death through living with disability. For instance, the increased availability of ARVs to treat HIV/AIDS will make it a lifespan condition; with many people living with HIV, including children, developing different types of impairments, functional limitations and participation restrictions. Conversely, persons with disabilities will also require access to ARVS and it is recognised that persons with disabilities are among those who have the greatest difficulties in accessing health services. Specific actions to identify and target those living with a disability and other marginalised groups are needed as well as strong advocacy efforts to ensure their inclusion in policies and services. CGH's work in this area through projects such as APODD and Equitable provide a strong base on which to further develop innovative work in this area.

In addition, a stronger commitment to preventing ill-health is in keeping with a broader view of the determinants of health. Whilst there has been a welcome increase in the focus on nutrition and alleviating poverty, the role of hygiene and sanitation and health education at the community level should also receive greater support as activities that will pay dividends in the longer term.

Ways of Working

How can the Government further strengthen its ways of working in delivering an effective aid programme, with a view to delivering real results in poverty reduction?

Evidence-based decision making

Decision makers within Irish Aid, and in the organisations, agencies and communities that you support, are facing the same information overload that is happening throughout society, politics, academia and our daily lives. A vast amount of information is being generated and made available, but not all of this is reliable, accurate or trustworthy. Ways are needed to summarise and synthesise this information so that decision makers are provided with a succinct and unbiased knowledge base to help them make well-informed choices. Over the last few decades this has become increasingly possible in health care, through the growing number of systematic reviews in which a focused question and clear eligibility criteria lead to the identification and appraisal of relevant studies; and the comparing, contrasting and, where relevant and possible, combining of their findings. Systematic reviews provide the vehicle by which evidence can be brought together in ways that minimize bias, avoid undue emphasis on single studies, and maximize the power of research that has already been done. They help decision makers to consider the totality of the relevant evidence and to base their choices on the estimates of the likely effects of interventions and actions, which, in the best traditions of evidence based decision making, they can then combine with other

knowledge such as feasibility, values and preferences. They help decision makers to be transparent about the processes they have followed, for example when this requires a balancing of the likely benefits and harms, with costs and resources. These issues are increasingly important in building trust at a time when unprecedented needs are confronted by unprecedented pressures on resources; be these human, financial, or environmental. Evidence Aid (www.EvidenceAid.org) is a project coordinated by CGH. It seeks to improve access to systematic reviews of relevance to natural disasters and other humanitarian emergencies and we urge Irish Aid to work with such initiatives and to embed a commitment to the role of systematic reviews in decision making within the new strategy.

Engaging and supporting communities

In situations where health workers are in short supply, the community is a vital resource in providing access to health education, prevention and treatment. Strengthening health systems and extending their reach requires engagement with and investment in communities. More systematic approaches to selecting, training and utilising health workers are essential to improving access to healthcare. Investing greater ownership of healthcare in community-level structures and supporting democratic decision-making groups is an important component of strengthening health systems. CGH's research on community health workers in Ethiopia, Sierra Leone and several east African countries has the potential to contribute to developing new approaches in engaging communities.

Better targeting of the poor and vulnerable

Achieving equity of access to healthcare requires greater efforts in identifying the poorest, most marginalised and vulnerable groups. Whilst Irish Aid has made considerable improvements in the lives of HIV/AIDS orphans and female-headed households, there are other groups such as people living with a disability that have not received the same level of attention. The delivery of health services in an equitable manner should not provoke competition or necessitate choices about which vulnerable group to invest in. Equity implies that all have equal rights to health. This needs to be reflected much more strongly in health policies and programmes

Measuring Impact/Improving accountability and effectiveness

Irish Aid has given increasing consideration to the measurement of change in all of their programme activity and has made considerable progress in implementing the principles of the Paris Declaration. However, we believe that a more systematic and strategic approach to measuring impact and sustainability across all of Irish Aid's activity is a priority. Baseline, mid-term and end-line evaluations are of limited value as stand alone activities. They must be integrated into a framework of learning and development. Planning, measuring and evaluating must become part of a cyclical process embedded in Irish Aid work. With limited resources and lack of dedicated expertise attempting to effect change across a wide range of partners with a diversity of modalities, the necessity for a coordinated approach to learning and ensuring this learning feeds into future planning is a priority.

The particular role that operational research can play in providing timely feedback and learning to improve programming is not fully acknowledged by Irish Aid. CGH's strength in this area could make a positive contribution to programme planning and implementation. Planning impact measurement at the outset of programmes is another area that CGH is focusing on and again this has considerable potential to improve impact measurement and ensure its relevance to future planning.

In summary

Key Issues

- Health is a driver of social stability and economic development and as such it would seem appropriate that health be given greater prominence in the white paper. Rethinking health as an investment and portraying a more accurate impression of the positive impact achieving health for all will have on society should be a priority.
- Strengthen health systems, maintaining a focus on human resource capacity building and attaining policy coherence on Ireland's response to the human resources in health crisis. Recognise the global nature of the crisis and working towards shared solutions that benefit all countries.
- Achieving equity in access to healthcare calls for more effective targeting of poor, vulnerable and marginalized groups.
- Strengthen commitment to engaging communities in new and innovative approaches to preventing ill-health.

Ways of Working

- Embrace evidence-based decision making.
- Develop more explicit goals for research capacity building in Ireland and in Irish Aid's partner countries.
- Engage and support communities as a vital resource in expanding the delivery of healthcare.
- Improve targeting of the poor and vulnerable.
- Develop a framework for learning and development that utilises academic partners to improve the measurement of impact and improve accountability and effectiveness. Integrate research with action.