

Response to the Review of the White Paper on Irish Aid

2.0 Response

Introduction:

My comments are confined to one section of the Review, under the heading of “Peace, Security and Development (pg 32):

“White Paper Commitment:

We will work to develop a distinctive role for Ireland in the areas of conflict prevention and resolution and peace-building, drawing from our political, diplomatic and aid experience and resources(pg 58)

Progress:

A Conflict Resolution Unit was established in the Political Division of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in 2007 and has worked closely with Irish Aid in developing a programme of strategic responses to conflict-affected countries. Irish Aid continues to support the Stability Fund as a key tool in developing partnerships in conflict contexts and supporting key multilateral and NGO partners working in the area of conflict.”

As Head of Mission at the Representative Office of the Irish Government to Timor-Leste from 2006-2009, I had ongoing contact with the above Unit’s interventions in Timor-Leste in this area, for two of my three years there. Timor-Leste represented the Unit’s initial attempt in the field.

I must add that my experience of these conflict resolution intervention attempts in Timor-Leste are time-bound - from my initial meeting with the Unit in Autumn, 2007, to the completion of my posting in August, 2009.

Progress Made, Key Issues:

Governance is one of the key issues for Irish Aid now and going forward. In the context of this submission, my emphasis is confined to governance, not in relation to a particular

country, but in relation to the Department of Foreign Affairs/Irish Aid itself - governance of conflict resolution interventions.

My brief comments here concern the *approach* to such interventions, of a bilateral partner, in this instance, with the Government of Timor-Leste. Three questions: 1) Who defines the problem? 2) Who sets the goals?, and, 3) Who gets the credit?

In my experience, these questions were not asked, and the recipient country served merely as a petrie dish, where the intervenor experimented, defined the problem, set the goals and claimed the credit.

Who is the intervention for? - A question not honestly asked and answered often enough in such involvements.

In any future interventions (I note in the "Progress" section above, there is no mention of bilateral partner involvement or support - does that include Irish Aid as well?), I would argue for much lower-key attempts, more modest and realistic timeframes and inputs, - not apart, but a part of wider, joined-up and longer-term approaches. In my experience in Timor-Leste, the intervention by the Political Division via the above Unit, was decided prior to any meaningful consultation on the ground with Irish Aid, that had, at that point, over 7 years experience in the country. One of the results of this approach was an ongoing reputational risk to Ireland's presence and involvement in Timor-Leste.

In the area of conflict resolution interventions, no country deserves to be a petrie dish.