



Sightsavers submission to Irish Aid White Paper Review, April 2012

Introduction

Sightsavers is an international charity which works with partners to eliminate avoidable blindness and promote equality of opportunity for disabled people in the developing world. We tackle the main causes of avoidable blindness including cataract, and a group of diseases that have been coined 'neglected tropical diseases' such as river blindness and trachoma. We support the principle of inclusive education and work to make sure children who are blind or have low vision get the chance to go to school. We also work with blind and visually impaired people and their organisations to ensure that they are able to play an equal role in society.

Sightsavers is present in three European countries (the UK, Ireland and Italy). Given our presence in Ireland and our experience as a recipient of Irish Aid funding, especially for our programmes in West Africa, we are keen to ensure that Irish Aid continues to use its resources to make a difference to the lives of disabled people including those who are blind and visually impaired. We welcome the progress that funding from Irish Aid has made to the lives of people that we work with and we welcome the continuing investment in international development that the Irish government is making, especially at a time of severe fiscal austerity being faced by the country.

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to this consultation on the Irish Aid White Paper on International Development. Having reviewed the consultation document, Sightsavers whole heartedly supports the progress that Irish Aid is making towards improving public engagement, accountability, promoting the role of civil society in international development and the attention being paid within the consultation document to countries in situations of fragility.

Sightsavers is pleased to see a continuing focus for Irish Aid in ensuring the basic needs of the poorest people are met, and welcomes the attention being given to access to education and health services. Within this, however, Sightsavers would be keen to see greater attention being paid to some more neglected health issues, such as eye health and the elimination and eradication of neglected tropical diseases. While these might not contribute to major increases in mortality rates, they do have a significant impact on morbidity rates and on the burden of disease that weak health systems in low and middle income countries are faced with.

In addition to these neglected areas in the provision of health services, Sightsavers is keen to see Irish Aid place greater emphasis on addressing the basic needs of neglected populations. In particular we would like to see greater attention paid to ensuring that disabled people, who are often amongst the poorest and most marginalised members of their communities, have access to the health, education and social protection services and economic development opportunities that will enable them to become fully productive members of their communities. We hope that Irish Aid will pay greater attention to the needs of these populations, not only in efforts to ensure that

the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) can be met by 2015, but also that the needs of such populations will become a key element of Irish Aid's priorities for the post-MDG international development era.

A. Progress Made

Quality and Quantity of Aid

Since the publication of the 2006 White Paper Irish Aid has improved and is now very well regarded internationally. Irish Aid's adherence to the principles of partnership and policy coherence has played a large part in this success, and should continue to do so. Irish Aid has benefited greatly from its policy of ensuring aid is completely untied and independent of commercial or trade interests; it is important that this principle continues to form an important part of future development and aid policy. Irish Aid funding has enabled Sightsavers to make significant progress on objectives around eye health, health systems, controlling neglected tropical diseases and strengthening civil society among others as part of the Block Grant that ran from 2008-2011.

Although Irish Aid is demonstrating good practice in ensuring its aid is delivered in line with globally agreed principles, it is disappointing that the quantity of international development aid has dropped so dramatically. While recognising that the Irish Government has responded to the pressure on its national budget caused by the global economic crisis, the 30% reduction in international development aid since 2008 seems disproportionately large. This is particularly concerning in light of recent [OECD research](#), which shows that unpredictability in aid flows such as that caused by the reductions in recent years can reduce the overall value of aid by between 10% and 20%.

B. Changing Context

The White Paper consultation document clearly highlights the changing contexts that are influencing the direction and impact of international development aid. In addition to the changes outlined by the paper, it is also important for Irish Aid to consider how the outcomes of the most recent High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness will impact on international development. It is clear, following the High Level Forum in Busan, that there is a shift from development aid to inclusive development partnerships. This will bring in new actors, including the private sector and new and emerging donors such as the BRICS and other countries, as well as placing greater emphasis on the recipients of development aid to generate their own domestic resources.

Within this changing context it will be important for Irish Aid to clearly define how its international development aid will continue to ensure that the basic needs of the most marginalised and vulnerable populations are met, whilst also playing a key role in encouraging the OECD DAC and other emerging donors to reaffirm and implement previous aid effectiveness commitments.

Millennium Development Goals

The six years since the White Paper was released have seen the world move much closer to the 2015 deadline for achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The Consultation Paper correctly states that the world is on track to meet the Millennium Development Goal to halve global poverty by 2015. What this does not

acknowledge, however, is how uneven this progress has been. Even within countries that are achieving the goal, such as India, there are groups and regions that remain very poor, with disabled people consistently among the poorest and most marginalised groups in developing countries. Many of the countries that are struggling to meet the targets are those in which Irish Aid is operational; the reasons for this shortfall should be examined as part of the white paper review, and a tighter focus on achieving the MDGs for all included in future statements of intent for Ireland's aid programme.

It is also important to consider what the post-2015 development agenda will consist of. Consideration, consultation and negotiation on a post-MDG framework are all already underway and will intensify between now and the UN Summit in 2013. We hope that Irish Aid will engage fully with these discussions and will support the involvement of marginalised populations, such as disabled people, in these consultations.

C. Key Issues

Sightsavers welcomes the White Paper's focus on basic needs, including health, education, nutrition and HIV. However, we also feel there are some gaps within the paper that, if addressed, could help Irish Aid achieve even greater impacts with its development aid. The most critical gaps that Sightsavers would like to highlight include a lack of attention paid to eye health, neglected tropical diseases, education of disabled children and, more generally, the need for development efforts, including the provision of basic services, to take account of the needs of disabled people.

Neglected Issues and Neglected People

Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTDs) are a group of 13 parasitic and bacterial infections that affect over 1.4 billion of the world's poorest people. They increase poverty by reducing economic productivity, preventing individuals from being able to work or care for themselves or their families, and limiting access to education. Yet despite the fact that these diseases affect so many people, and can be prevented and treated with proven, cost-effective interventions, there is no mention of these diseases within the Irish Aid White Paper consultation document.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has recently launched a roadmap to eliminate up to 10 of these NTDs by 2020, and at a meeting held in London in January 2012 pharmaceutical companies and bi-lateral and multi-lateral donor agencies came together to make a series of commitments aimed at progressing towards the elimination of these debilitating diseases. Given the increasing attention that is being paid to these diseases, along with the clear cross-sectoral links with education, school health, water and sanitation programmes, and the potential for improved synergies with other disease prevention, control and treatment programmes such as those for HIV, TB and malaria, Sightsavers would like to see Irish Aid explore what it thinks its role could be in contributing to these elimination of these diseases in a 10-year period.

Water, sanitation and neglected tropical diseases

A lack of access to clean water and sanitation contributes to the spread of nine neglected tropical diseases (NTDs). Worldwide, 320 million people are at risk from blinding trachoma, and 110 million in need of treatment. The accepted strategy for

control and elimination ([SAFE](#)) includes surgery, antibiotics, facial cleanliness and environmental hygiene. Better sanitation and water facilities remove the habitat for the flies that spread trachoma, reducing exposure and preventing re-infection after treatment. Clean water enables facial cleanliness to be effective in reducing transmission of the disease.

Irish Aid should ensure that access to clean water and sanitation is included in its basic needs package, and that its work on water and sanitation takes account of the links with NTD treatment and control. Without this, it is impossible to eliminate blinding trachoma, and the opportunity we now have will be wasted.

Eye Health

Poor eye health critically affects attainment of the MDGs. Even minor eye conditions can affect access to education, income and livelihoods, and blindness can have a devastating impact on individuals, households and wider communities. Globally, an estimated 285.3 million people are visually impaired, including 39.8 million people who are blind; ninety per cent of blind people live in developing countries. However, less than 30 per cent of those in need have access to eye health services in Africa, and in many other countries the figure is less than 10 per cent.

Health System Strengthening

In many of the countries in which Irish Aid works health systems are weak, chronically under-resourced and unable to deliver the essential health and eye health services that people need. Specific health systems challenges include shortages of eye health workers, eye health drugs and equipment; insufficient services at primary level; limited integration between eye health and other health services; and a lack of data on eye health, equitable health financing schemes and government commitments to eye health as a public health priority.

Sightsavers and Irish Aid have already worked to address the key causes of illness by strengthening health systems in poor countries, through the Block Grant received for the period 2008-2011. We urge Irish Aid to continue to emphasise the importance of health systems in development, and in particular to integrate eye health care into this work.

Human Resources for Health

The lack of human resources for health is one of the most serious constraints to achieving the health-related MDGs. Sub-Saharan Africa has 24% of the global burden of disease but only 3% of the world's health workers (WHO 2006 The World Health Report 2006 – Working Together for Health Geneva, World Health Organization). Evidence demonstrates that up to 80% of global blindness can be prevented or treated, but the lack of qualified eye health workers means that critical eye health services are not available.

Irish Aid funding for Sightsavers work in West Africa is already helping to reduce the shortage of trained eye health staff, which will have a significant impact on access to eye health services. Sightsavers welcomes Irish Aid's focus on basic needs, and in particular health and health workers. Developing countries must continue to work towards the

Abuja commitments, and Irish Aid should ensure this is matched by financial support to national health plans where necessary to meet basic healthcare needs.

Disability and Marginalisation

It is estimated that 15% of the world's population has a disability. Disability is both a cause and a consequence of poverty, and yet disabled people have been forgotten in many development efforts – for instance, there is no mention of disabled people in the Millennium Development Goals.

People with disabilities experience barriers in accessing food; they have greater problems obtaining access to clean water, fertile soils, and suitable growing conditions for cropping and livestock. They face difficulties in accessing healthcare, and disabled women may face further barriers. As access to anti retro-viral drugs is expanded, people are living longer with HIV, leading to an increased incidence of disabilities related to HIV and AIDS including visual impairment due to HIV retinopathy. Disabled women can face double discrimination from family and community members on account of their gender and their disability, and are at greater risk from exclusion and abuse, while the stigma associated with a disability such as blindness can have a huge impact on opportunities such as marriage prospects.

- Sightsavers recommends a twin-track approach of mainstreaming disability along the lines of the current approach to gender. We agree with the Dochas White Paper submission which states: “... *there would be specific programmes and funding lines to address the issues of people with disabilities and the mechanisms for ensuring that a disability perspective is integrated into the planning, delivery, monitoring and evaluation of all programmes and policies. This in turn requires a consistent oversight of both tracks.*” (Dochas, Submission to the Review of the White Paper on Irish Aid, February 2011, p. 15).
- Specific programmes should focus on issues faced by people with disabilities. The Irish Government should have a *Development for All Strategy* similar to AusAID's initiative, which has been recognized as an example of best practice by the *World Report on Disability* (WHO & World Bank, 2011, p. 264).
- Ireland should build on its signing of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and work towards ratification, and integrate its provisions into all its development programming.
- Irish Aid should encourage Programme Countries to implement the CRPD.
- The Irish government should ensure that its efforts on food security, access to fuel, environment and livelihoods take account of the specific needs of disabled people and the barriers they face in maintaining a healthy level of nutrition.
- All health interventions should be designed with the needs of disabled people in mind, along with other marginalised groups.

Education

International conventions state that primary education should be free and compulsory for all children without discrimination. This underpins MDG 2: Universal Primary Education, where there has been good progress. Yet disabled children have been left behind. Irish

Aid can play a valuable role in addressing this crisis of access, and the equally important problem of poor quality education, that disabled children experience.

Irish Aid can support developing country partners to:

- Make school buildings accessible and safe, and ensure the timely provision of quality teaching and learning materials in ways that are accessible
- Revise and adapt curriculum content and testing methods to ensure that all students learn effectively
- Establish training for all teachers in inclusive education practices
- Develop mechanisms to monitor exclusion and progress, including the collection of disaggregated data on disabled children in education.

It is important that Irish Aid creates appropriate targets to ensure that disabled children access quality basic education, and dedicates appropriate funding to meet these targets.

Engaging the private sector in development

The private sector undoubtedly has an important role to play in development; it can generate investment, innovation, employment, goods and services, and much needed revenue for governments. Recently, through policy processes such as the EU *Agenda for Change*, donors are increasingly placing emphasis on using aid to generate further private investment. The private sector can be an engine of economic growth, but economic growth in itself does not necessarily lead to addressing issues of income inequality and poverty eradication.

People with disabilities are amongst some of the world's most marginalised, and women with disabilities are disproportionately affected on account of both their gender and their impairment. Unemployment among people with disabilities is as high as 80% in some countries. When working with the private sector, particular attention needs to be paid to the dangers of further marginalising those who already have least access to the services and opportunities the market provides. Any focus on private sector engagement needs to bear in mind the situation of these marginalised groups, to ensure that they are not pushed further into poverty, and to enable them to play a role in the economic development of their society where possible.

Positive examples of private sector engagement include:

- Pharmaceutical companies such as Merck have supported the fight against NTDs by donating Mectizan, providing as much of the drug as is needed for as long as it is needed to eliminate onchocerciasis. The success of these partnerships has contributed to the move from control to elimination for 10 of the NTDs.
- In 2010 Sightsavers piloted an employment fair for people with disabilities in partnership with Standard Chartered bank in Ghana. Collaboration with the private sector ensures that opportunities are offered to people with disabilities which are outside the traditional sectors available in emerging economies.

D. Ways of Working

Aid Effectiveness

Sightsavers urges Irish Aid to strengthen its engagement with efforts towards implementing all of the aid effectiveness principles as agreed at the Paris and Accra

High Level Forums on Aid Effectiveness, in particular the principles of country ownership, alignment with national priorities, harmonisation of donor aid, and predictability of financing.

As part of its efforts to more fully implement these principles, Irish Aid could consider strengthening its engagement with the International Health Partnership and Related Initiatives (IHP+). IHP+ seeks to achieve better health results by mobilising donors around a single country-led national health strategy, guided by the Paris Principles and Accra Agenda for Action. IHP+ aims to harmonise donor funding commitments and improve the way in which international agencies, donors and developing countries work together, through methods such as joint assessments of national strategies, a common monitoring and evaluation framework, and a joint funding platform. This style of working could be expanded to other sectors and exemplifies how to put aid effectiveness statements into practice in a way that should be studied and replicated where possible.

Towards Better Policy Coherence

We welcome the increased focus on development within Irish foreign policy-making; this coherence leads to better results for both sets of objectives. Most importantly Irish aid remains untied; as mentioned before this is one the strongest steps towards aid effectiveness that can be implemented.

Working with Programme Countries

The statement in the consultation document that “working with and through government systems in partner countries is essential if the improvements put in place are to be sustainable”, is one Sightsavers fully supports and would like to see made a central tenet of guidelines in the white paper review on how to work with programme countries.

Country ownership is crucial in ensuring and maintaining development progress. This can be achieved through working with Ministries of health, education, development and so on; but it is important not to over-focus on government, and to make use of other mechanisms of accountability such as civil society and Parliaments. Both institutions should be involved in helping citizens monitor their country’s progress towards development outcomes.

Sightsavers works closely with Government Ministries of Health in all its programme countries. This has been successful in Irish Aid-funded work in Sierra Leone, where following advocacy efforts, the process of integrating eye health into both the National Free Health Care System for all pregnant women, lactating mothers and under-fives, and the government’s Basic Package of Essential Health Services has begun. This has improved access to services including eye care to vulnerable groups, reducing the incidence of blindness and visual impairment.

Working with Multilateral Organisations

Ireland has a particular opportunity to play a global role on development issues through its upcoming Presidency of the Council of the European Union. There has been a de-emphasis of development issues at EU level in recent months as the Union has struggled to maintain its own financial security. While these efforts are vital for the

wellbeing not just of Europeans but of the world, there is a danger that temporary reductions in aid or refocusing of efforts away from the world's poorest people could become permanent, and undo the years of work that went towards making the EU a global leader in development.

As well as continuing efforts to tackle hunger and new challenges such as climate change, it would be welcomed if Ireland put development financing firmly on the agenda during its presidency. European nations' progress towards the 0.7% GNI target is slowing, and many aid pledges made at summits such as Gleneagles and L'Aquila have not been fulfilled. Using the Presidency to examine the factors behind this failure and propose and implement methods of keeping these pledges on track would be a beneficial and lasting legacy of Ireland's six months at the helm of European affairs.

Working with Civil Society Organisations

Irish Aid's history of support to civil society is one that should be continued. Civil society organisations have a crucial role to play, not just in delivering services and providing a link to communities, but also in coordinating and carrying out advocacy, holding governments to account, and policy development.

Sightsavers has worked to support local civil society in its Irish Aid-funded work in Liberia, through the community drug distributors (CDDs). CDDs have been trained on human rights issues, and good practice in engaging communities to build their capacity to advocate for themselves. This has improved community participation in the control of onchocerciasis, as well as in the distribution of bed nets, and education on HIV/AIDS, TB, and malaria. In Zimbabwe Irish Aid has supported Sightsavers work with visually impaired people, who were mobilised to form Blind People's Organisations. As a result, people with disabilities have been able to register to vote in forthcoming elections. Sightsavers highly values the support it receives from Irish Aid that enables it to deliver these, and other innovative programmes and is keen to see Irish Aid continue to work in partnership with civil society to deliver development results.

Irish Aid's recognition of the increasingly difficult operating environment for civil society organisations in programme countries is very welcome, as is its willingness to address these issues, which are becoming ever more serious and having a profound effect on the prospects for democracy and development where they occur.

Results and Accountability

Sightsavers urges Irish Aid to continue to ensure that development aid delivers concrete impacts that lift the poorest and most marginalised people out of poverty - including improvements in access to health, education, social welfare services and supporting disabled people to become active, productive and valued members of their communities; and to make use of monitoring, accountability and transparency to achieve this aim.

It is, however, important to be clear about what is being measured and on what time-scale. Monitoring frameworks must be designed to appreciate that not all aid will produce short term results, and that in some cases attributing success or failure will be

difficult when aid is only one of a set of complex variables contributing to a stated end. The ultimate goal of all efforts to strengthen the results focus of Irish Aid's work should be to increase country ownership and other aid effectiveness principles; this means focussing on accountability to the ultimate intended beneficiary.

Financing Aid

Sightsavers recognises and supports the Irish commitment to meeting the OECD target of spending 0.7% of GNP on overseas aid. Some of the challenges in meeting this target have already been discussed in section A.

In order to protect the existing aid budget and support plans to reach the 0.7% target, it would be helpful to give the target a formal status. This could be achieved through legislation, as is currently being planned in the UK; through an EU-wide Compact, similar to the Fiscal Compact being introduced at the moment; or perhaps through inclusion of aid targets in the Irish Constitution when it is reviewed in the near future. Whatever the mechanism chosen, it is important that Irish Aid not only meets international minimum targets, but does so in a predictable way, so that it can play a full part in meeting the Millennium Development Goals and the other challenges of global poverty beyond 2015.

E. Other comments

Negotiating the Post-2015 Development Framework

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have been successful on many counts: they have mobilised funding, rallied activists, provided a framework for discussions and served as a useful set of benchmarks by which to measure progress. However, there are serious gaps in the current framework which need to be addressed in any replacement for the MDGs if it is to succeed in achieving meaningful development outcomes for all. These are:

- The **inclusion of disabled people** - in the framework, its development, monitoring and implementation
- A greater focus on **inclusion of marginalised children in education**
- More attention paid to the **neglected tropical diseases** and their impact on poverty
- Integration of **eye health** and work to prevent avoidable blindness and visual impairment and ensure the necessary health, education, social protection and employment services are put in place for those who are unavoidably blind.

Disabled people were not consulted or considered in the drawing up of the MDGs; as a result, their needs do not feature in the framework and there is no monitoring at all of how far they as a group have been progressing towards the goals. This is a crucial error; disability and poverty are closely intertwined, as is marginalisation. Without specific measures to tackle the poverty and exclusion of disabled people, and the collection of disaggregated data to measure how far they are benefiting from general programmes, they will be left behind once again.

Irish Aid has an opportunity in the next months and years to play an important role in shaping the outcome of these discussions to ensure a development framework that will get meaningful results for the poorest and most marginalised people in the world.

As such, Sightsavers calls on the Irish government to:

- Include disabled people in the process for drafting new global development goals
- Support a greater focus on equity in a revised framework
- Ensure that any post-2015 global development framework is inclusive of all marginalised groups, including people with disabilities.