

Response by Small Foundation to the Review of the White Paper on Irish Aid

April 2012

Introduction

Small Foundation (SF) is an Irish-registered charity whose objective is the speedy and permanent elimination of the threat of famine from Africa. SF believes this can be achieved through the widespread creation of opportunities for food-insecure rural African smallholder families and communities to gain economic independence through income generation. SF's contribution to this is to fund the scaling up of initiatives that open up access for these people to knowledge, finance, technology and markets. SF is a funding organisation and has no implementing operations of its own.

Given our objective and analysis, it was natural that we would welcome the recognition in the 2006 White Paper that hunger and food security were fundamental elements of the global development challenge. We also welcomed the creation of the Hunger Task Force and the recognition in its report that Ireland, because of its history and commitment to development, can play a pivotal role in the global fight against hunger. We agreed with its top-level analysis that the most important tools in that fight were:

- Increasing the productivity of smallholder, mainly women, farmers in Africa
- Ensuring real political commitment, at national and international levels, to give hunger the absolute priority it deserves.

The third tool mentioned – implementing programmes focused on maternal and infant undernutrition – struck us as more a valued prize of victory in the fight than a key tool.

We believe that Irish Aid is doing an excellent job of meeting the detailed objectives set out in the White Paper. However, this falls far short of the pivotal role in the fight against hunger outlined in the Hunger Task Force report. In our view, the Irish government and people can and should play that role. This pivotal role requires the Irish government to take responsibility for eliminating hunger from Africa and requires Irish Aid to devote the bulk of its resources to that fight. Taking responsibility in the way we suggest does not in any way relieve others, especially African governments, of their responsibility.

Progress Made

We believe Irish Aid's own analysis in the consultation paper of whether the commitments contained in the White Paper on Irish Aid have been met is honest, accurate and comprehensive. This, together with several external evaluations (some of which are mentioned in the consultation paper), suggests that, with a few qualifications (which we will not discuss here), the commitments have been met. The management and staff of Irish Aid are to be commended for this.

Changing context

There have been major changes in the development context in recent years and they fall into two broad categories.

One category shows that the problem is even worse than feared. It includes rising food prices, actual famines in Africa and, in some areas, increased vulnerability to famine.

The second shows that the challenges can be met and, indeed, are being met. It includes high recent and projected economic growth in many African countries; rising investment in agriculture by African governments; increasing interest from multinationals in developing their supply chains in Africa; a build-up of interest in commercial and social investment in Africa, including in agriculture and agri-business, by investors backed by significant funds.

We broadly agree with the analysis of both categories in Irish Aid's consultation paper and in the Irish government's Africa Strategy document. We also agree with the recognition in Irish Aid's 2010 annual report that the rise in economic growth and the increased investment in agriculture and other sectors have been accompanied by significant improvements in various well-being indicators such as infant and maternal mortality, childhood stunting, primary school enrolment and various poverty and food security indicators.

We find this dual change inspiring: it shows that, while the need for action is great, the right policies, implemented with a determined focus, can bear spectacular fruit. This is a welcome change from recognizing that the need was great while not being sure whether we were wasting our resources in trying to address it.

Another change in context is, of course, the deterioration in Ireland's public finances. In our view, this is no reason to reduce our efforts (government or private) in the fight against hunger. To the extent that our overall financial resources are reduced, we have to prioritize so that, if possible, the resources devoted to the fight against hunger are not reduced. To the extent that this cannot be avoided, we have to be smarter in the use of the resources available.

Key issues

We acknowledge, and are proud of, the contribution made by Irish Aid to development in Africa and, specifically, to the fight against hunger there. There are millions of extremely poor people in Africa whose lives have been transformed by that contribution.

Nevertheless, we are disappointed that the contribution is not even greater. This has nothing to do with the level of funding given to Irish Aid, though that itself is disappointing. The Irish government's contribution to the fight against hunger could be so much more, for any given level of funding, if it took seriously its declared intentions to play a pivotal role in the fight against hunger and to make this the priority of its development strategy.

Taking responsibility for the fight against hunger and giving it real priority

Playing a pivotal role in anything means taking responsibility for it. It does not matter that the primary responsibility lies elsewhere, in this case with African governments and with the broad international community, especially the large countries of the rich world and global organizations like the United Nations and World Bank. It does not matter that the problem is enormously large relative to the resources of the entity taking responsibility, which is clearly true of Ireland taking responsibility for eliminating hunger in Africa, or even a single country in Africa. In these circumstances, the entity taking responsibility must work with others who, combined, do have resources equal to the task. It also means enabling those suffering from the problem to develop their own solutions. It means mobilizing a campaign for change that stimulates international and cross-sector collaboration and mobilizes all stakeholders to create shared

NGOs occurs in famine situations is not a rebuttal of this point – the fight against hunger must focus on long-term elimination of causes, not short-term relief of symptoms.

Working with NGOs and companies with a global perspective

Another key issue, and the final one we wish to comment on, is the Irish government's near-exclusive focus on Irish NGOs and, in the future (it seems from the Africa Strategy document), on Irish private-sector companies. It would be better if the focus were single-mindedly on the fight against hunger in Africa with support given to those capable of making the best contribution, no matter where they were located. The focus on Irish entities is, of course, natural and, perhaps, a political imperative, even though it may be sub-optimal with regard to the impact on hunger because of the mismatch between Irish resources and market size and the scale of Africa's need. A way of mitigating this is to focus government support on those Irish NGOs that take a global view with regard to fundraising and partnerships and those Irish private-sector companies that take a global view with regard to fundraising (be it equity, debt or funds under management), partnerships and scope of operations.

In summary, the overarching issue is whether the Irish government, and the Irish people, are really serious about making hunger and food security the priority of development efforts. This translates into whether it is politically feasible to convert into reality the sincere wish to play a pivotal role in the fight against hunger. If it is judged not to be feasible, then the Irish government can continue to play an honourable, though not pivotal, role in that fight, with the results enhanced by the involvement of the private sector mooted in the Africa Strategy. But, in that case, we would like to see the empty rhetoric about 'pivotal role' and 'priority' dropped. Unless based on reality, this diminishes Ireland's achievements and standing.

Ways of working

Irrespective of the outcome of this issue, Small Foundation will continue its own work to eradicate the threat of famine from Africa and will remain open to every opportunity to collaborate with other Irish entities, including Irish Aid and other agencies of the Irish government, engaged in that fight.

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