



NGOs – Mobilising People For Development





Introduction

This document is about Irish non-governmental development organisations, in their varying shapes, sizes and views. It sets out the core values of Ireland's development NGOs, and aims to highlight their differences and combined strength.

It explains why NGOs continue to be to the fore in Ireland's efforts to combat global poverty, and it shows why NGOs are rightly proud of their diversity and different approaches.

For many decades, Ireland's overseas aid has been notable for the work of numerous missionaries and aid workers. Although the government established an official development cooperation programme as far back as 1974, its size and public profile have traditionally been dwarfed by 'charities' and missionary groups. Thanks to the work of the NGOs and missionaries, development cooperation still remains popular in the true sense of the word - being a commitment of and by ordinary people, working together through non-profit citizens groups.

Irish development NGOs are manifestations of active citizenship and people power: they are civil society groups, supported by over 850,000 Irish people, including hundreds of volunteers. Even with growing government funding, the bulk of their money still comes from the general public.

This document is a celebration of the professionalism, vision and creativity of Ireland's development organisations.



1.

The purpose and role of NGOs

Human need, poverty and injustice are the essential reasons for the existence of Irish aid agencies.

More than 1 billion people worldwide subsist on less than \$1 per day, millions more continue to live in abject poverty and thousands die on a daily basis from hunger and preventable diseases. This is taking place at a time when others, including Ireland, are enjoying unprecedented wealth and opportunity.

Simply put, Irish NGOs exist because ordinary people have been moved by this injustice and suffering - and resolved to act with others to address the imbalance.

These active groups of citizens (often known as non-governmental organisations, or NGOs) are acutely conscious that the provision of aid alone is not enough to address the inequalities and human rights violations that affect the world's poor. Aid is necessary in certain circumstances, where poverty, war, disasters or economic breakdown create particular and urgent needs. NGOs though, are broadly about **change, not charity** and they work in solidarity with people and communities in developing countries to effect that change.

They want to see more than just aid or debt relief, including fairer, more coherent systems and practices within developed countries and within international bodies such as the EU, the UN, IMF, World Bank and WTO.

The Irish aid agencies that comprise Dóchas are a diverse group - large and small, young and old, secular and missionary - and bring different priorities and approaches to development. However, they share one vital characteristic: their commitment to tackle poverty and inequality in the world.

Dóchas members share one vital characteristic: their commitment to tackle poverty and inequality in the world



Ilhan, aged 5, the youngest of Aminata's four children, playing at washing tea cups in the kitchen. South Wollo, Ethiopia





2.

Visionaries and Realists

Irish development NGOs have a vision of how society could be and work to create a world where justice, equality, respect for human rights, solidarity and hope are the norm. Their work is driven by the belief that their support for people and organisations in developing countries can bring about real and positive change.

NGOs are also realistic: they acknowledge that there are vested interests throughout the world working against equality and fair play. They know that supporting poor people's own efforts to better their lives can bring powerful change, but that they also need to mobilise public support in wealthy countries to deliver the changes needed. Many of the problems faced by developing countries originate in wealthy countries, so changes also need to happen there.

Irish NGOs are becoming increasingly professional, as aid agencies aim to secure and retain development workers with particular skills, qualifications and experience in order to improve their work. In designing and carrying out their programmes, aid agencies try to ensure that they maximise the benefit for those they intend to assist - and indeed, that they do no harm in circumstances that are often complex and difficult.

Supporting
poor people's
own efforts to
better their lives
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powerful change

3.

Many approaches, one direction

With Ireland now ranked among the wealthiest countries in the world, the Irish NGO community provides a channel for the public to offer financial support to the poor in the developing world. More importantly, it offers Irish people a chance to become actively involved with actions and campaigns that support the poor and vulnerable.

Irish NGOs

- Assist groups and organisations in developing countries
- Enable the flexible and cost-effective delivery of services and resources to where they are needed most. NGOs often operate where governments have not or will not become involved
- Work with their partners to bridge the gap between communities and policy-makers, helping those affected by political decisions to play a part in making or changing such policies



Different NGO Roles

Protection

providing relief to victims of disaster and assisting the poor

“Give A Man A Fish”

Prevention

reducing people’s vulnerability, through income diversification and savings

“Teach A Man To Fish”

Promotion

increasing people’s chances and opportunities

“Organise a Fishermans’ Co-Op”

Transformation

redressing social, political and economic exclusion or oppression

“Protect Fishing & Fishing Rights”

NGOs offer ways for Irish people to take action at lots of different levels

Assistance

Some Irish NGOs focus specifically, or in addition to their development work, on humanitarian work - that is, responding to disaster and conflict-related emergencies. They do so by assisting and protecting those affected in the short term, and by promoting recovery in the longer term.

Awareness

As citizens' organisations, NGOs try to build bridges between different cultures and traditions. In Ireland, they raise awareness of the realities of life in the developing world. They illustrate what it means to live on less than a dollar a day, without access to basic necessities, but they also highlight the many ways in which our lives in Ireland are linked to - and impact upon - the lives of poor people around the world.

Action

NGOs offer ways for Irish people to take action at lots of different levels - from campaigning to buying FairTrade goods; from offering financial support to volunteering; from public debating to linking with people from other cultures; from lobbying politicians to working overseas.

Flexibility

NGOs work closely with others involved in development (Irish Aid, EU programmes, UN agencies etc) to reduce the risk of overlap and duplication. More positively, the diversity and independence of NGOs means that they are often able to respond quickly, flexibly and efficiently in ways that governments, the UN or other official bodies cannot or will not.



Fatima Muher Nur stripping dead leaves from eucalyptus plants she has planted on her plot at Derka enclosure, South Wollo, Ethiopia

4.

Strength in numbers

Irish NGOs are a diverse group working towards a common aim: making poverty history.

- Some focus on enhancing children's lives and opportunities, or tackling hunger, for example, while others pay particular attention to health, education or human rights
- Some draw their inspiration from their **religious beliefs**, others are **secular** in outlook
- Some have a clear **geographical focus**, others tend to work wherever the need arises
- Some prefer to work with and through **local partners** rather than placing workers on the ground themselves
- Some respond to **emergencies**, or work to build health and education systems, others specialise in building the capacity of local citizens' groups
- Some identify their strength in running **projects**, others define their role as mobilising people for **lobby** campaigns
- Some decide to focus on one **particular issue** to bring specialist knowledge to bear, others prefer a more **general** approach, bringing changes across a broad range of key issues. This includes tackling international policies and systems that can serve to keep the poor in poverty
- Some NGOs and missionary groups provide **services** to poor people, others assert that poverty is a violation of human rights, and see their role as **protecting and promoting** those rights.

No one NGO, or organisation of any kind, can hope to support all of the world's poor people, communities and countries work towards better and safer lives. The diversity of approach and focus outlined above is a key strength of the Irish NGO sector.

Diversity of approach and focus is a key strength of the Irish NGO sector

Who funds and supports NGOs?

Most of the funding for Irish NGOs comes through public donations, or official government aid.

In 2005, Dóchas members had a combined income of around €280m, the bulk of which came from the general public. Some 850,000 individuals support the work of Dóchas NGOs and missionary groups, meaning that over 30% of households in Ireland support at least one Irish NGO. Such donations, of time, energy and money, represent the lifeblood of Irish NGOs.

Financial support for NGOs also comes from Irish Aid, the development cooperation arm of the Department of Foreign Affairs, which recognises the particular role and value of NGOs in a range of areas. These include education and healthcare, HIV and AIDS, promotion of gender equality, humanitarian relief, human rights, public education and awareness raising, advocacy and campaigning, governance and accountability, and policy dialogue.

In times of international emergency or humanitarian crisis, public support for NGOs tends to increase. Following the Indian Ocean Tsunami of 2004, for instance, an unprecedented €110m was raised in Ireland through public pledges, corporate support and co-funding with the government and international agencies.

Irish NGOs are gaining increased support from the private sector through sponsorship, corporate responsibility programmes and trade initiatives. NGOs and private companies are looking at new and innovative ways to pool their skills and experience in helping to support the world's poor.

NGOs greatly value their independence and impartiality. Importantly, this allows them to be constructively critical of governments, in developing countries, within the EU and UN, and at home in Ireland.

Though registered as charities for tax purposes, contemporary Irish NGOs do much more than deliver charity. They are activists, watchdogs, witnesses, researchers and lobbyists for change in a world where inequalities are commonplace.

In an increasingly interconnected world, Ireland has important strategic reasons - as well as moral and historic ones - for supporting the poor and vulnerable in developing countries. The causes and symptoms of poverty and insecurity (violent conflict, refugee flows, environmental degradation, disease) often spill across borders, with international and even global consequences. The work of Irish NGOs in developing countries helps - in small but significant ways - to make the world a fairer and more secure place for all of us.

Making the world a fairer, more secure place for all of us



Photo by Simon Burch

Jaimie Ruiz (R) and brother Keivin
working on a coffee plantation
in Nicaragua



Poverty and Development - What Do We Mean?

Poverty defined

Since the first Human Development Report in 1990, there has been a widespread consensus that poverty refers not only to material deprivation, but also to aspects of social, economic and political exclusion.

This means that:

- To be poor not only relates to a lack of food or money: to be poor is also to **lack control** over one's life and resources.
- Poverty is not simply a matter of scarcity: it is the result of **human interaction**. People keep other people poor.
- Poverty is **exclusion** - from social, economic and political processes that affect one's life.
- Poverty is **political** - reflecting inequality and injustice.
- Poverty is **indignity**. Poverty is the denial of access to the resources, capabilities, security and power that people need in order to realise their human right to live with dignity.
- The various dimensions of poverty (insufficient food, bad health, powerlessness, insecurity, etc) go hand in hand, and reinforce one another. As a consequence, fighting poverty by focusing on one dimension is destined to fail.

Poverty is not merely about material deprivation, but also relates to social, economic and political exclusion

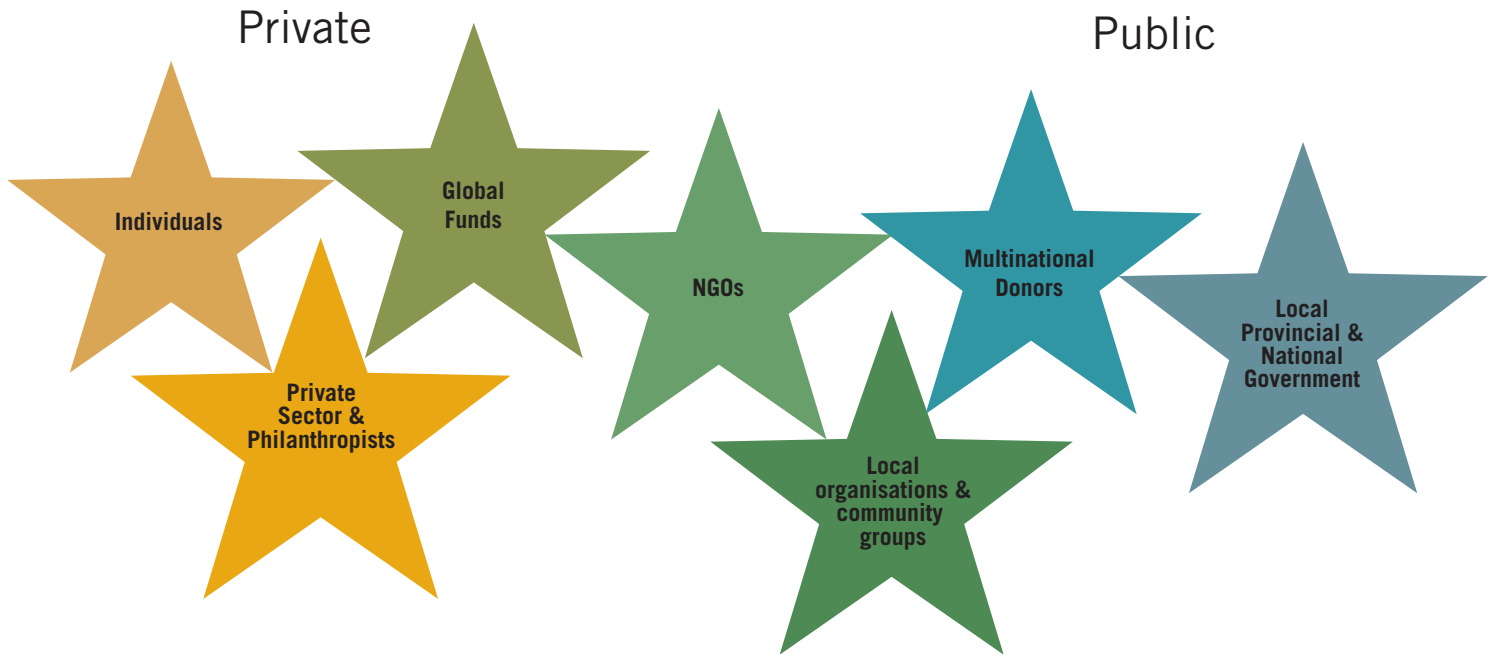
Development defined

When NGOs speak of development, they use it as shorthand for **human development** - not just economic development or, narrower still, economic growth. Development is about reversing poverty and inequality, increasing the choices and opportunities available to the poor, and protecting their human rights.

Development is not simply the improvement of economic and social conditions. It is a process of **continual provision** to the well-being of a country's entire population and of all individuals.



Different Actors in Development



Development is not a status, but a [process](#). It can be promoted, by putting in place the mechanisms that encourage participation and inclusion, for example, but also by offering people protection from (or helping them to cope with) disastrous events that set back their ability to control, shape and improve their own lives.

Development is a process of continual provision to the well-being of a country's entire population

The right to development is a [fundamental human right](#) rooted in international law. Individuals, states, local organisations and authorities, private companies, aid donors and international institutions each have a role to play in helping people achieve that right.

Development is ultimately about [people](#), people who require institutions and information to enable their participation. There are no quick fixes: it requires time and committed involvement.

Irish NGOs, as citizens organisations can provide support to these groups and institutions. They can mobilise people for justice and equality across cultures and continents. In short, citizens organisations are at the heart of what development really means.



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