

## National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Ireland

### ***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?***

In a time of national financial hardship, the Irish people are likely to be worried about how their slender resources are spent. However, this very situation may also increase their empathy with suffering in other countries and make people more inclined to help, as long as they don't feel their hard-won resources are being squandered and if they can develop empathy with the recipients.

To address these core issues two broad approaches might be undertaken:

- i) A high level of transparency - Irish Aid - and the groups with which it works - should be encouraged to make frequent reports that are circulated widely in the media. These reports should be accurate but should be written in such a way that the ordinary Irish citizen can readily relate to and understand the content. The more 'user friendly' and widely circulated these reports are, the more comfortable - and hopefully proud - the ordinary person will feel about facilitating this work.
- ii) There is still a high level of prejudice in Ireland regarding, 'looking after our own' and a feeling that much of the money spent on overseas aid would be better spent on our own disadvantaged population. As this is a view based on a prejudice it is worth addressing. It may be possible to combat much of this prejudice with simple educational initiatives. For example, rather than promoting an approach that encourages us to be 'charitable' and look after the 'less fortunate', it might be more useful to undertake a campaign to raise the awareness of how alike people are throughout the world. If the Irish people could see everyone as part of the same 'family' - then overseas aid would become part of the national psyche as everyone in the world would become 'our own'. Many of the videos already on the Irish Aid website would do this job admirably if they were more widely circulated. Perhaps RTE and TV3 could run these videos during advertisement breaks etc? At the moment, these videos are most likely

being watched by those already motivated in this area but they could be used to great effect as a means of educating the Irish public in the reality of the oneness of humanity.

***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?***

The areas named are all pivotal and are certainly a good place to start. Given the limited resources available and the need to focus, it may be best to concentrate on the 'how' rather than extend the 'what.' With this in mind priority should be given to establishing real dialogue with the people receiving the services.

The people in need of the services provided are, whether they realise it or not, not only in need, they are also in the know. If this approach is to be successful it is essential to see the dialogue undertaken not just as a fact finding exercise but rather as an irreplaceable tool of effective and sustainable development. This dialogue needs to be a genuine two-way conversation that is allowed to grow and change and develop.

The objective of this dialogue should be to help those living with the problem(s) read their own reality and then - in consultation with agencies who can offer assistance - to create bespoke solutions. Sometimes, processes that create true and dynamic dialogue can help to uncover insignificant-looking details on which success will, ultimately hinge. There are countless examples of this happening throughout the world.

In order to move from a scenario of persuasion to actual real participation, proper consultation needs to be undertaken and plans made that acknowledge the unique, discrete reality of the people and the situation/s. If this happens and these local people are then truly involved in the implementation of the plans, then capacity will be being built without any other intervention for this purpose necessary. There are already a number of tried and tested development methodologies such as Positive Deviance, which can be used as templates to create the consultative process needed for creating systems, plans and programmes in order to maximise the use of limited funds.

***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?***

Effective aid programmes will always focus on engaging with each individual and community, as opposed to generic populations like 'the poor' or 'the oppressed.' However, to do this properly requires a rethinking of culturally received notions regarding human nature, status and capacity. The simplest way to look at this is to see that every person alive - regardless of disadvantageous states such as poverty - is still capable of acting with dignity and honour. This acknowledgement helps to avoid a paternalistic approach and ensures that everyone is seen as having a whole, real and complex reality that transcends economic or social position.

Time and time again human beings all over the world prove that there is no simple algorithm of behaviour - being abused does not make one an abuser, being poor does not make one dishonest or stupid - people are far more complex and mysterious than that. Approaching the important work that Irish Aid does from this seemingly philosophical viewpoint may seem unnecessary but it is, in fact, essential, as otherwise, unwittingly, all dialogical and even practical interactions will run the risk of being coloured by unconscious beliefs that may be counterproductive. If all human beings are seen as valuable and potentially capable then each will also be seen to be capable of acting with honour and dignity, regardless of circumstances. Each person will then be viewed as not only valuable with regard to their own reality but also as a potentially priceless resource for her or his society.

In a submission to the 18th Session of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development in May 2010, the Bahá'í International Community submitted a statement entitled, *Rethinking Prosperity*, which address the issue of poverty thus -

*"The Bahá'í International Community understands poverty as a symptom of a system of economic and social relationships – in the family, the community, the*

*nation, and the world - that promote the advantage of the few at the expense of the many. As such, remedies to this complex issue must be rooted in a systemic approach that directly addresses the harmful and destructive values driving human attitudes, behaviors, and decision-making. In light of this perspective, we conceive of poverty as the absence of resources – material, social, and ethical – necessary for the establishment of conditions, which promote the moral, material, and creative capacities of individuals, communities, and institutions."*

(Ref- <http://bic.org/statements-and-reports/statements/guiding-principles-extreme-poverty-human-rights>)

As a line of action, it is well known that educating girls is a very effective way to help reduce poverty in families, communities and even nations therefore Irish Aid could prioritise the education of girls in its plans. In particular, Irish Aid could look at initiatives that might help girls to continue with their education in spite of the fact that they are forced to leave school in order to marry.

Early marriage is, a significant obstacle to girls finishing their education. According to UNICEF, one in seven girls in the developing world will be married before they are fifteen. Caroline Bacquet-Walsh of UNICEF, describes early marriage as a violation of the human rights of girls and suggests that efforts need to be made to open up new possibilities for girls in these situations. She also suggests that the expertise exists to create these opportunities. It is likely that this practice will not stop until girls are educated and then they, as mothers, will make more informed decisions for their own daughters. However, at the moment there is a vicious circle in operation and it is necessary to break it with some innovative thinking.

For example, rather than taking a traditional approach and insist that the girls stay at school, perhaps it might be better to roll out programmes that find innovative ways to bring the education to these girls after their marriage so that they, and their future children, will benefit? There are a number of examples worldwide of educational systems that have been developed to educate children where the more traditional classroom model is not appropriate. One such system exists in rural Columbia and Honduras where the challenge is poverty and remoteness from schools. This system was developed by FUNDAEC as a modular and locally resourced curriculum that has been very successful in delivering a comprehensive educational programme, recognised by the governments of these countries, to remote, otherwise unserved areas. Though the issues are different, this system - or others like it - might serve as valuable models to be used to develop a system of education for married girls.

The first step might be for Irish Aid - and its agents - to challenge their own conception of how education is best delivered. Our approaches to education are learned and part of our cultural hegemony but are not necessarily the only ways to proceed. This is not a criticism or a cause for despair, it's just a fact, and a fact that means that solving the problem of offering continuing education to girls after marriage will certainly take some innovative thinking.

Perhaps it might require having only female teachers? Perhaps it will need to forget the classroom environment entirely? Maybe working with husbands and parents as well to convince them of the benefits of facilitating the education of their wives/daughters will be the first step that needs to be taken? Whatever it takes it will, no doubt, require the application of bespoke solutions. However, as a first step, if the goal of educating girls after marriage is adopted by Irish Aid then it will be more likely that solutions can be found.