

Introduction

The purpose of this submission is to reinforce the importance of Irish Aid programmes in Liberia and how with continued support significant improvements to the socio-political, economic, peace and security needs of its citizens can be met. Irish Aid programmes have worked directly with the government of Liberia and made significant advances towards building a strong and thriving democracy. The continued focus by Irish Aid on poverty reduction, hunger, health, gender equality, fragility, governance and human rights is commended and is a positive indicator of the government of Ireland's determination in respect of reaching the targets set out in the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) framework. We would anticipate that this intensive overseas aid programme continue with the energy which has put Ireland at the fore of donors of development aid within the international community. The context which aid works within is changing. To maintain a valuable contribution in overseas aid distribution the way aid operates needs to become more sustainable, transparent and there needs to be an increased emphasis placed on the role of civil society.

Liberia

Liberia has recently emerged from a fourteen year period of civil war during which, an estimated 300,000 people may have been killed and countless injured, internally displaced or forced to seek refuge in neighbouring countries. The war touched every family in some way and many people are still experiencing persistent trauma and psychological aftershock. In addition, the war destroyed most of the basic infrastructure such as roads, bridges, water and electricity supplies and fundamentally undermined the social and economic infrastructure necessary for the functioning of a sustainable society. Peace has been restored with the assistance of the United Nations and some of the infrastructure is being restored, but progress is slow and the majority of the country still has no clean water, basic road infrastructure, power or communications.

The Liberian economy has also been fundamentally damaged by the war and activity has been substituted by a rudimentary food and basic items production and petty trading system. Unemployment is running at 85%. Large scale employment opportunities are limited. Some employment has been generated by aid organizations and multinational companies, although concessions granted to MNCs in return for resource development (oil, rubber, diamonds and precious metals) have brought only minimum benefits to communities, despite efforts to build a stronger social benefit into concession policy. Because of the depressed and informal nature of the economy very little tax-take is generated, leaving government with little scope to develop basic utilities and essential services such as health and welfare services.

In 2007 the government introduced a National Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS). There have been some notable improvements but the consensus among the population is that the PRS did not deliver the improvements that were expected. A new government initiative, Liberia Rising, aims to establish a medium income growth corridor within the country by 2030. Aid is now beginning to shift substantially towards supporting the development of government provision and statutory services rather than bolstering civil society organizations (CSOs).

Development Education Network Liberia (DEN-L)

Founded in 2000, the Development Education Network Liberia (DEN-L) is a non-profit, non-governmental, non-partisan, and non-denominational organization, located in Gbarnga City, Bong County. The mission of DEN-L is to establish a network of organizations committed to promoting grassroots participation in sustainable development and good governance, leading to a nation at peace with itself and its neighbours.

DEN-L is an innovative local NGO that undertakes work regionally, nationally and locally. Through its community awareness programs DEN-L works with women's groups and local communities through theatre workshops and music/theatre sessions in public spaces. The organization also undertakes literacy training and through the DELTA (Development Education Leadership Teams in Action) training workshops for community leaders, local institutions and public officials and is making a significant contribution to maintaining peace and promoting a just and sustainable future for Liberia.

Sustained peace and democracy require proactive strategies to raise people's consciousness to positively address critical issues that affect their lives. In Liberia, the government is slow to become actively involved in the consciousness raising of its citizens to promote sustainable peace and development in the country. DEN-L is one of the local institutions which have made reputable mark in the country in increasing the voice of grassroots people and organizations to increase their participation in decisions that affect their lives.

DEN-L welcomes the opportunity to be involved with the consultation process and feels it a valid opportunity to make its own contribution to the review of the White Paper on Irish Aid. We believe it is of major significance for future Irish Aid policy to promote and maintain partnerships with Liberian Civil Society Organizations. This submission aims to highlight the key issues that should be taken into consideration within the review process and will concentrate on the importance of **Strengthening Civil Society Organizations, Gender Equality, Ethical Trade, Health (HIV/AIDS), Governance and Human Rights, Poverty, Hunger and Food Security, Fragility and Basic Needs.**

Progress Made:

Since the publication of the White Paper in 2006 much progress has been made in Ireland's contribution and commitment to reducing worldwide poverty and hunger. With less than 4 years to go until the 2015 deadline, a number of the MDGs are on target to be met. In Liberia, Irish Aid has successfully supported the long term reconstruction and development efforts working in partnership with the Liberian government. Ireland's development programme with Liberia supported the Government's Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) (2008-2011), in areas such as water, sanitation, good governance and health. A limited level of support for civil society has reduced the potential benefits for the advancement of Irish Aid priorities through grassroots partnerships working for positive change.

Changing context:

Current global conditions and the worldwide recession are changing the nature of development and aid effectiveness. The world population is set to reach 7 billion in 2012 and dwindling natural resources lead to greater disparities between rich and poor. Sub Saharan Africa is currently at the greatest risk of progress coming to a standstill. The need to prioritise aid is important if goals are to be achieved in the program to reduce global poverty. Support for civil society is essential for development and strong civil society organizations are key to challenging injustice. It is a crucial time for Liberia within this context of change to develop and break the cycle of poverty and conflict which has stunted its development in recent decades.

Key Issues:

1. Strengthening civil society in Liberia

Within Liberia, the government is attempting to decentralize some of its operations throughout the hinterland. This is a slow process and there is a reluctance to engage fully with the policy on decentralization. This leads to fragile governance systems and hence an increasingly uncertain space for civil society to exist in.

Irish Aids renewed vision should embrace civil society and work directly in partnership with civil society organizations as a means to assuring effective and strategic development. A predominant focus on supporting and assisting government in rolling out governance structures and economic growth can create an even smaller space for civil society and does not necessarily contribute to good sustainable development. This compromises the ability to contribute to increasing the capacity of local communities to engage with wide ranging development issues. Working with indigenous community based partners using rights based approaches and empowerment models will build community and civil society ownership of development. We believe that a maintained program of working directly with, and in partnership with civil society organizations should remain a priority during the review process of the White Paper.

2. Gender equality

Increasing women's access to fair justice, civic participation and economic empowerment are some of the main priorities for Liberia at present. Despite Liberia having Africa's first democratically elected female president, there are still huge disparities in equality between women and men.

Gender based violence is a common occurrence and the highest reported crime at present is rape. During the war, women experienced a disproportionate level of violence that included, rape, sexual slavery to soldiers and forced conscription, the repercussions of these events are still widely felt.

Women are expected to take care of children and all household duties which include difficult manual labour. There is a need to address the value of women's work and translate it for equal economic opportunities and to enable women to obtain control over the product of their labour.

Literacy rates among women are significantly lower than men and there is less encouragement to send female children to school. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, in her inaugural address vowed to "Empower Liberian woman in all areas". She pledged to strengthen laws and law enforcement to protect women against rape, support the education of children, notably girls, and to provide programs to enable women to play a key role in the economic revitalization process.

Liberian women have specific and particular needs and additional interventions are necessary in order for women to achieve equality with men. We must recognize that the unequal status of women is deeply embedded in society, thus requires grassroots consciousness raising and strategies for action. Priorities of women and women's liberation need to be mainstreamed in any future effort to develop Liberia.

DEN-L feels that Irish Aid can play a major role in supporting grassroots civil society organizations in Liberia to work towards a more sustainable practice in gender equality throughout Liberian civil society.

3. Ethical and sustainable trade

It is imperative for Liberia's future growth to develop strong and fair trade links with developed economies. Future development aid should ensure ethical enterprise and sustainable practices which place the spotlight on the growth of the economy on a national level. Due to weak governance structures in Liberia, there is a danger that Transnational Corporations (TNCs) and extractive industries contribute very little to the communities affected by their work and undermine development. The environmental destruction caused by these practices may also have a long term effect on our changing climate. We feel there are needs for increased responsiveness to natural resource governance; management and exploitation using human rights based approaches and the UN framework and guiding principles for business and human rights. Better coherence of Irish Aid development policy with existing trade policies ensures just, ethical and sustainable two way relationships tempered by good governance and human rights.

4. Health (HIV/AIDS)

The fight against HIV and AIDS is both a strategic and most timely priority for the people of Liberia. The HIV/AIDS epidemic poses a major challenge to the socio-economic development of Liberia and if not addressed, it will undermine post-war social and economic reconstruction and sustainable development. The estimated prevalence rate is 1.5 per cent according to UNICEF (2009) but 5.7 per cent in the antenatal clinic sentinel survey of 2006. Generally, young people aged 15-35 are worst hit by HIV and AIDS, and the disease affects women more than men. The knowledge level about HIV and AIDS is low among the entire population in Liberia. This betrays the need for grassroots level activism and awareness programs and a strengthening of civil society organizations to address the issue as well as sexual and reproductive health awareness.

A lack of access to health care impedes the provision of treatment and care for people living with HIV and AIDS. There is an urgent need to scale up towards universal access to HIV and AIDS

prevention, treatment, care and support for those infected and/or affected, as well as to address widespread stigma and discrimination. Attention is needed to address the ways the disease is spreading with a concentrated effort on children, women and young girls. We believe that through its revised strategy Irish Aid future policy can continue to strengthen the country's health systems and basic primary health care services with particular emphasis on the ability of NGO's to raise consciousness and highlight health issues.

5. Governance and Human rights

Irish Aid's commitment to governance and human rights is strong in the 2006 White Paper and should be maintained as a fundamental component of Ireland's overseas aid program. Through the work of UNMIL (United Nations Mission in Liberia), Ireland has assisted Liberia in the post conflict period and supported in the fair election process. Programs should promote an inclusive model of development effectiveness for local NGO's in working towards this by effective mainstreaming and prioritization of human rights. Focus on the maintenance and development of organizations as the mechanism through which the range of social, societal and economic goals can be achieved is vital. There is a need to build on organizational and skills capacity and capability of developing and delivering effective strategies but also to be conscious of the need to further enhance effectiveness by striving for continuous improvements and efficiencies. The review should also prioritize an aid approach that promotes government's capacity to deal with corruption throughout all its levels of office and advocates accountability and transparency.

6. Focus on poverty

The people of Liberia are locked into a cycle of poverty as the problems it propagates such as malnutrition and illness further isolate individuals from attaining meaningful means to support themselves and their families.

Although there have been notable improvements from the Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS)(2008-2011), Liberian government needs significant support from partners if it is to make a real impact on reducing poverty. In order to attempt to deliver comprehensible improvements new goals are being set in 'Liberia Rising', the government's strategy to lift Liberia to a medium income country by 2030.

It is vital that the review process concentrates on providing support to alleviate poverty as the Millennium Development Goal's (MDGs) deadline for eradicating extreme poverty rapidly approaches and the government so far have not made significant progress alone. The social and economic structures are currently insufficient to provide people with opportunities to achieve adequate or achievable standards of living and meet their basic human needs. We believe these

basic human rights needs significant attention in the review process to work towards the goal of poverty eradication.

7. Hunger and Food security

Whilst the country is not experiencing famine, a major food shortage does exist. Liberia is rich in agricultural land, and the climate suited to varied crops, yet does not have the capacity to grow food on a worthwhile and sustainable scale. There has been a focus on cash crop production without the basic foods needs being met. The staple food of rice must be imported to meet the needs of the population. With over 65% of the population living on less than \$1USD/ day, it is difficult to see how families can find a realistic path out of extreme poverty. People are considered food secure when they have all-time access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life (Definition adopted by the 1996 World Food Summit). It is paramount that Liberia can reach the target of meeting its foods needs internally to begin reversing the cycle of poverty.

Therefore, we believe that the review process builds on the EU policy of advancing food security in developing countries and ensures coherence between trade and investment policies, especially agricultural trade and investment policies with the right to food and the commitment to eliminate hunger.

8. Fragility

Young people in Liberia aged 15 to 24 make up a significant percentage of the population of the country. The number of young people under 15 is almost 40%. With the average life expectancy as low as 45 years of age due to HIV/AIDS, this age group will become the dominant group in society. These young people are the ones who are most affected by change and also the most likely agents of change. It is the youth of Liberia who will either sustain peace or generate further instability.

Massive youth unemployment and weak skills capacity of young people further highlight this as an important area for efforts in maintaining sustainable peace. The government of Liberia despite having the political will lacks the capacity to deliver basic services to its citizens. Unless this capacity is built on, through education and enhancing the skills of the population, there is a real danger of a return to conflict. Irish Aid programmes played an important role in promoting peace and promoting democracy in Liberia through its work with UNMIL (United Nations Mission in Liberia). The 2006 White Paper further asserts the commitment to maintain peace in Liberia through governance and the strengthening of civil society organizations. We believe this continued focus needs to be preserved as Liberia grows as a nation.

9. Basic needs

The creation of Liberia's Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) (2008-2011) was the foundation on which to rebuild a post War Liberia. With the help of Irish Aid this process was rolled out by government to considerable effect but despite this there is still a long way to go to meet the basic needs of the population. Liberia is still one of the world's poorest countries and was ranked 182 out of 187 countries on the 2011 UN Human Development Index (HDI). The country continues to face considerable challenges in delivering basic health services and in rebuilding critical infrastructure devastated by the civil war. It is estimated that 64% of Liberians live below the absolute poverty line. Considering Liberia's current position on the UN HDI and with Irish Aid policy concentrated on Least Developed Countries (LDCs) the objective of targeting those who experience most poverty should play a major part in Irish foreign aid in both program countries and non-program countries.

Ways of Working:

The importance of economic growth should not overshadow development and those who need to benefit from it most. Maintained focus on poverty reduction is a key strategy for future aid programmes effectiveness in reaching the goal of eradicating poverty. With civil society space becoming increasingly threatened it is important to build partnerships with civil society actors in delivering programs, capacity building, of both staff and organisations, and support for good governance. CSOs will be central in creating participation and engagement leading to civil society ownership of development.

