Student Perceptions of Overseas Aid

Smith, T., Woods, R., Guiney, H. and Cronin, M

"The Government intends that every person in Ireland will have access to educational opportunities and understand their rights and responsibilities as global citizens as well as their potential to affect change for a more just and equal world"

- Irish Government White Paper on Irish Aid (2006)

Introduction

The Irish Government's overseas aid programme, implemented by Irish Aid - a section of the Department of Foreign Affairs – made a rare appearance in the headlines in May 2009 following a review of its operations by the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (Mac Cormaic, 2009). Lauding the programme as "cutting-edge" and "focussed", the report went on to note that support of overseas development assistance in general is strong amongst the public in Ireland (DAC, 2009). This report will use extensive research undertaken among students in University College Cork (UCC) to further assess these views on aid in general, gauge students' contributions in time and money to international development and measure attitudes to relevant areas such as government Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) budget cuts and their own philanthropic giving. The data, at the very least, will be of interest to Irish development NGOs, the Irish development education sector, generally more geared towards primary and secondary level education than in universities, and Irish Aid itself.

The last two to three decades have been a time of unprecedented mainstream prominence for issues of development among all age groups, in large part due to celebrity-fronted initiatives such as Live Aid, Make Poverty History, Jubilee 2000, Drop the Debt, Live 8 and

the frequent appearances of well-known personalities as good-will ambassadors for organisations such as UNICEF. The timing of the research, taking place in early 2010, has meant that this public awareness was particularly acute amidst widespread coverage of emergency relief efforts in earthquake-hit Haiti.

Another contextual factor to be taken into account is that the study was carried out at a time of considerable and relatively prolonged economic turmoil for Ireland. Budget cuts in all areas, including the most sensitive, dominated the public discourse and this made questions relating to aid cuts and whether charity starts at home all the more interesting. Cork City itself had extremely recent experience of severe flooding, including the evacuation and submergence of UCC student accommodation, and resulting in much of the city being without running water for prolonged periods (Roche & Siggins, 2009). This left much of the research with a particular resonance locally.

Findings of our study should complement existing literature in the field. High levels of support and public enthusiasm, combined with low levels of understanding and knowledge are the general findings across the board in relation to the Irish citizens and overseas aid (Connolly et al, 2008; DFA, 2006; DAC, 2009; Irish Aid, 2002). The general trend across all OECD states is for members of the public to overestimate their government's aid contributions when asked. For example, studies in America have put the public's estimation of government aid contributions at 20 times the actual amount (PIPA, 2001). Also, a 2002 MRBI study in Ireland found that 47% of people thought aid makes a real difference, with 43% replying 'a little bit' or 'not at all'.

In their 2008 survey of university students, Connolly et al. found that 50% of respondents were concerned that aid does not reach the intended people, indicating scepticism around development assistance, despite the genuine levels of support for it. 63% believed that aid makes 'a little bit' of difference to people in developing countries with only 5% feeling that it does not make any difference to the lives of the poor in developing countries. It was found that there was strong backing for even further increases in ODA beyond the promised 0.7% of GNP and this will be interesting to compare with our own findings, emerging as they do from different economic times. 61% of students were found to have contributed in money, time or service to overseas aid in the previous year (Ibid.).

A finding from previous research also with implications for our study is that overall, women and the most highly educated expressed the most concern about having a responsibility to help poor people in developing countries, while those aged 15-24 expressed least concern (Atkinson & Eastwood, 2007).

Methods

Data collection involved the use of both non-random and random sampling methods.

(1) Face-to-face interviews were conducted by students (interviewers) in various locations of the campus. Each interviewer was given a quota of 10 questionnaires. This resulted in 339 completed questionnaires.

(2) Five thousand students were randomly selected from a sampling frame of all student numbers by the UCC Computer Centre and e-mailed with a link to complete the questionnaire on a web-based survey tool (www.surveymonkey.com). This resulted in a further 359 respondents for our study (a response rate of 7.2%).

An incentive comprising of entry into a prize draw for a €50 restaurant voucher applied to both of the above cases in an attempt to encourage a high response rate. The resultant sample size was 698 students.

Following extensive face-to-face piloting of the survey, data collection was carried out in the period of January to March 2010. The sample of students were asked questions on socio-demographic details, educational status, personal contributions to overseas aid, attitudes to overseas development assistance with likert scale questions being used to analyse opinions. SPSS version 17.0.2 was used for analysis.

Frequency tables are most commonly used, with one-sample T-tests being used also, for example to determine variation from Ireland's promised ODA of 0.7% GNP. In the case of cross-tabulation, Pearson's chi-square test was used in hypothesis testing for independence, using the 0.05 level of significance.

One caveat is that there was one uncorrected error in the final questionnaire, related to what amount of its GDP students think the Irish government currently gives as ODA[1], but the answers should still be representative of actual perceptions.

Results

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of our sample. Of the respondents, 63% were female. Median age was 20 years, ranging from 17 to 60, with the majority clustered around the early twenties. Eighty six percent of the sample was Irish, and 70.0% grew up in the countryside, a village or a town. In terms of education, 86.5% of those interviewed were studying in UCC at undergraduate level, with 13.5% carrying out post-graduate studies, which is reflective of broader figures at UCC[2]. Again, our figures for respondents' respective college of study were reflective of UCC as a whole, with the largest proportion, at 36%, studying in the College of Arts, Celtic Studies and Social Sciences[3]. One third of our respondents were in receipt of an education grant, which is also representative of national figures whereby 34% of third-level students received some form of means-tested financial support in 2004 (ESRI, 2009).

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the sample

	n	%
Gender		
Male	258	37.1
Female	438	62.9
Nationality		
Irish	600	86.0
Other	98	14.0

[1] 0.7% was put in as a choice, instead of the correct figure of around 0.5%. However, it was the only variable in that numeric region so should still be reflective of respondents' opinions.

[2] See http://www.ucc.ie/en/mandc/factsandfigures/

[3] See http://www.ucc.ie/en/mandc/factsandfigures/fullstory,34959,en.html

Where they grew up		
Countryside/Village/Town	484	70.0
City/Dublin city or county	207	30.0
Level of Study		
Undergraduate	598	86.5
Postgraduate	93	13.5
College of Study		
Arts, Celtic Studies, Social Sciences	249	36.0
Science, Engineering and Food Sciences	189	27.3
Business and Law	152	22.0
Medicine and Health	102	14.7
Year of Study		
First year	238	34.6
Final year	156	22.7
Neither first nor final	294	42.7
In receipt of an education grant		
Yes	228	33.1
No	461	66.9
Parents combined annual income		
<30,000	113	17.5
30,000 - 50,000	161	25.0
50,000 - 75,000	161	25.0
75,000 - 150,000	98	15.2
>150,000	27	4.2

Table 2 presents findings from questions regarding personal contributions. Our findings indicate that 10% of students have previously volunteered overseas for an aid organisation; of these, 66.6% spent a period of 3 months or less abroad. The countries most volunteered in were India and Kenya, at 1.4% and 1% of total respondents respectively.

The majority of respondents had not contributed time to an overseas aid organisation (65%), but a larger majority *had* contributed money (76%); 34% of students were found to have contributed both time and money.

Table 2: Personal contributions

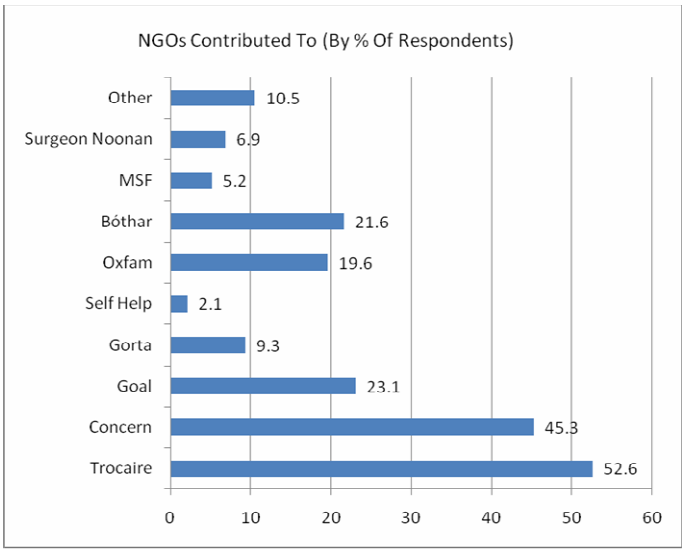
	n	%
Previously volunteered for an overseas aid agency abroad		
Yes	68	9.9
No	619	90.1

Previously donated time to an overseas aid organisation		
Yes	241	35.3
No	442	64.7
Previously donated money to an overseas aid organisation		
Yes	503	76.2
No	157	23.8
Frequency of contributions		
Weekly	9	1.8
Monthly	116	23.2
Yearly	273	54.6
Less often than yearly	102	20.4
Contribute more if knew how it was being spent?		
Yes	568	83.7
No	110	16.2

With regards to whether being in receipt of a grant had an impact on propensity to give to charity, an independent samples t-test found that there was no relationship between the mean amount donated to charity and whether a student received a grant ($p = 0.982$). In addition, we did not find a significant relationship between charitable contributions and parents' level of income, where the respondent grew up, level of study or college of study ($p>0.05$). A significant relationship was found, however, between those who feel that overseas aid money is well spent (30.5%) and their willingness to donate their time to aid organisations ($p = 0.038$).

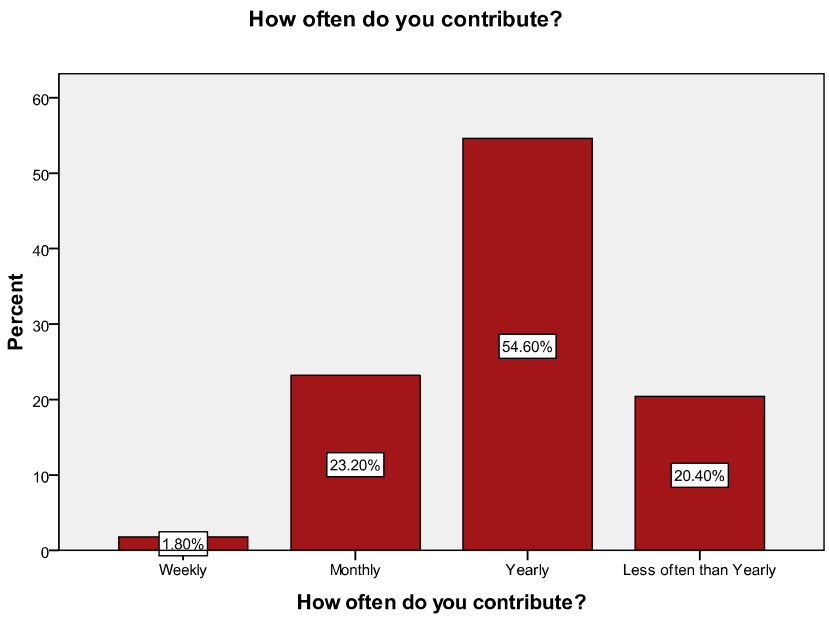
Figure 1 presents the NGOs that students donate money to: 52.6% of respondents donate to Trócaire, 45.3% donate to Concern, and 23.1% donate to Goal.

Figure 1: NGOs to which students contribute money



Almost one quarter of students (23.2%) said they contribute monthly to aid organisations, with the majority of respondents giving less frequently (Figure 2). Crucially, 83.7% of students maintain that they would give donate more money if they knew better how it was being spent.

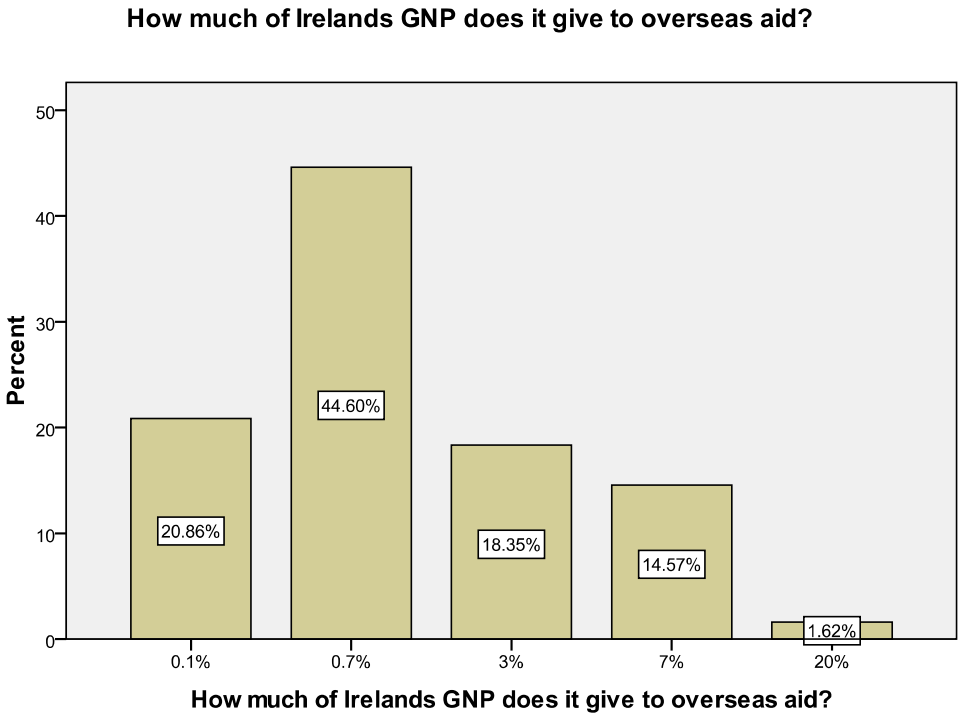
Figure 2: Frequency of contributions



Regarding how much of Ireland's GNP does it give to overseas aid (Figure 3), a large proportion of students were correct in their belief that current giving is (or was)

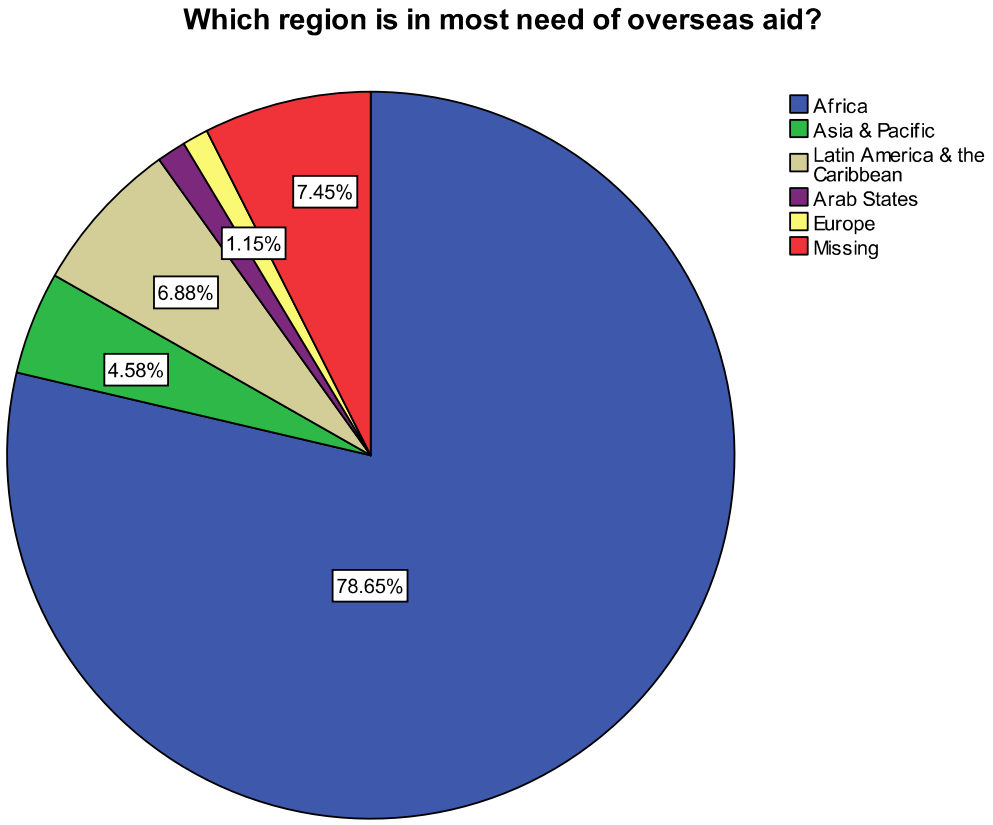
approaching the 0.7% level of GNP. A sizable combined proportion of 35%, however, put the figure at 3% or above.

Figure 3: Responses to question on how much of Ireland's GNP is given to overseas aid



Africa, despite not being a country, is perceived as being "the country which receives the most aid", being the response for at least 25% of people surveyed. Ethiopia was the number one actual country, with 10.5% of responses. Haiti also featured highly, reflecting its prominence in the public's mind, and reports of massive amounts of aid pledges at the time of surveying (BBC, 2010). Africa too, was overwhelmingly perceived to be the region most in need of aid (78.7%) (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Responses to question on which region is perceived to be most in need of aid



When told for contextual purposes that Ireland spends roughly 10% of its GDP on the healthcare budget, and were asked, given this information, what proportion they felt should be spent on the overseas aid budget, responses differed significantly from the promised government figure of 0.7% ($p < 0.001$). In fact, figures given by interviewees averaged at 3.57%, more than 700% times the actual aid budget figure.

The students were asked, using likert scale questions, their opinions on various statements related in particular to Ireland's aid commitments as a country and whether our national priorities are correct (Table 3). When queried regarding the substantial recent cutbacks in the aid budget, significantly more people disagreed with the cuts than agreed (41.9% vs. 29.3%). Forty two percent of students felt Ireland's overseas aid programmes are effective, with a further 36.8% neither agreeing nor disagreeing. In the context of the country's current economic difficulties, the largest proportion of students (46.6%) agreed that the government needs to focus on the domestic financial crisis before attempting to help developing countries. Conversely, more people disagreed than agreed with the statement that the international financial crisis hit Ireland worse than developing countries (44.7% vs.

38.4%). A large majority (47.1% vs. 18.5%) disagreed with the statement that Ireland should actually increase ODA at the current time.

A large proportion of respondents (42.6%) agreed that overseas aid has made a significant difference for developing countries, with 20.2% disagreeing. When asked about government motivations globally for giving ODA, the majority of respondents (54.6%) agreed that most aid is in fact politically motivated. Finally, relating overseas aid to developments closer to home, the largest proportion of respondents disagreed that money should be taken from the overseas aid budget after natural disasters within Ireland (such as the floods in Cork, mentioned above), at 40% vs. 30.6%, with a further 21.8% neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

Table 3: Responses to statements on Ireland's aid commitments as a country and whether our national priorities are correct

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
The recent €222 million cutbacks on the aid budget were necessary and fair	12.9	29	28.8	23.7	5.6
Ireland's overseas aid programmes are effective	1.7	19.3	36.8	38	4.0
The government needs to focus on the domestic financial crisis and recession before attempting to help developing countries	4.5	26.8	22.1	30.8	15.8
The international financial crisis affects Ireland as much as it affects developing countries	12.8	31.9	17.0	27.8	10.6
Ireland has its own problems with poverty and social exclusion; these should take priority over international development concerns	6.2	29.0	29.0	25.4	10.4
In the current financial climate, Ireland should actually increase overseas aid	9.8	37.3	34.2	16.2	2.3
Developing countries have made significant progress due to overseas aid	4.2	17.9	31.2	39.7	7.1
Most overseas aid from governments is politically motivated rather than humanitarian	2.3	15.9	22.8	42.4	16.6
Money should be taken from the overseas aid budget in times of natural disasters in Ireland (e.g. the recent floods)	11.5	31.8	23.6	23.1	10.1

Discussion

Numerous noteworthy findings stand out from what's presented above. No evidence was found that variables such as receipt of a grant, parents' level of income, or spatial origin have impacts on propensities to give charitably. What does have an impact is whether aid is seen to actually make a difference, indicating a discerning student body which gives based on reason rather than background or origins. The high level of monetary donations (76%) indicates enthusiasm for overseas development, but these donations tend to be sporadic and relatively infrequent.

There was a relatively accurate perception among students of how much official aid the Irish government currently gives, although a sizable proportion believe it to be 3% or more, reflecting a considerable belief that the country gives far more than it actually does. This corresponds with the average view that Ireland should in fact be giving 3.57% of GNP as overseas aid, which reinforces findings in relevant literature in the field which demonstrate that the general public in many OECD states believe consistently in increasing the aid budget.

The overwhelming proportion of responses indicating that Africa is the region most in need of aid, and that African countries are the greatest recipients of aid, reflects the widespread perception of the continent as the world's development basket case. While the first statement is subjective and a matter of opinion, the second clause relating to it being the largest aid recipient is factually erroneous and contrary to reality, as the latest available OECD figures from 2007-2008 show Iraq and Afghanistan respectively as the largest recipients of bilateral aid. The highest African country on the list is in fact Sudan, at number 7 (OECD, 2008).

Finally, widespread contradictory opinions were found among students in relation to overseas aid priorities. The largest segments disagreed with recent aid budget cutbacks, and agreed that aid has made a difference; the latter is generally consistent with findings presented in Connolly et al. (2008). Yet, despite this fundamental support, a majority expressed scepticism related to overseas aid, agreeing that it is commonly given with political motivations, rather than humanitarian, and a large section of the sample think the

government should focus on domestic financial crisis before attempting to help developing countries.

Importantly, the general view is that overseas aid should be ring-fenced at a time of disaster or hardship at home, and not used for domestic needs. This finding is particularly robust in that it came just after many UCC students had a direct experience of financial loss due to natural disasters in the form of floods.

With regards to overall comments given by interviewees, the most common related to what are deemed as unnecessary administration costs and a lack of transparency among international development NGOs (although only a small minority took the time to mention the concern). "I believe too much money is spent in the administration of these organisations, so I do not contribute to them". "I believe that most of the money collect[ed] at fundraisers such as concern is spent on administration and not actually on the poverty overseas". "It is well known that 90% of Aid companies are not transparent enough to see what is actually getting to the people that really need it". These statements underpinned the relatively polarised opinions relating to aid and its efficacy.

A number of discrepancies in the study may impact on the results, and it is important to be aware of these. However, I believe that such issues can be taken into account and the conclusions still stand. For example, as previously highlighted, 0.7% GNP was an option in one multiple-choice question, instead of the actual figure of around 0.5%. Also, some questions lack a distinction between NGO-delivered aid, bilateral (e.g. government-to-government) aid, multilateral aid, emergency aid and military aid. In discussions on overseas aid with the general public, however, such a nuanced questionnaire would undoubtedly have caused undue confusion, with consequent impacts on feasibility and results.

Overall, the sample was robust and representative, with strong potential for extrapolation to students in other Irish Universities. Results could possibly even be viewed as an approximate indicator of opinions among the population in general.

Conclusion

A number of conclusions can be drawn from the data presented above, and numerous recommendations made.

The existence of support for overseas aid from interviewees, even at a time of economic hardship, must be qualified in two major ways – with a heavy underlying scepticism of the motives and opacity of donors, as well as a general lack of knowledge of any real depth about aid. Aid organisations must address these real concerns, even if they are factually questionable ("90% of Aid companies are not transparent enough" etc.), in order to sustain philanthropic donations particularly at a time when their government-sourced funding is being cut back. A clear demonstration of the impacts of aid would likely result in increased support among students and the general public.

Smaller NGOs, at a time of tightened resources, must look to Trócaire and Concern to see what they are doing, or what they have done in the past, which has left them ahead in the donation and name-recognition stakes. Either interviewees saw them as the most reliable organisations and hence donated to them, or the two NGOs have more successfully tapped into the public consciousness through campaigns, media, branding etc. Further study could be conducted in this area to ascertain reasons for giving to particular aid organisations.

The aforementioned lack of knowledge manifests itself as an overwhelming and stereotyping view of all African states as almost the only ones with significant problems. This has been highlighted in past studies, not just our own. Yet, in absolute figures, more than twice as many people go hungry in Asia as in Sub-Saharan Africa (WFP, 2009). Of course, Sub-Saharan Africa have been marred by seemingly unending hunger and poverty, perhaps like nowhere else on the planet, yet it would be interesting to study awareness of positive stories coming out of Africa. For example, it would be safe to conclude that very few interviewees would have a reasonable knowledge of Botswana, situated beside Zimbabwe, which has achieved greater rates of per capita economic growth since it achieved independence than any other country in the world, even China (World Bank, 2010). Further, the role and influence of the media in cultivating such infinitely negative views must be assessed. Most people would equally be surprised if you told them that no African country is anywhere near the biggest aid recipient, and it is in fact Iraq top of the

list. This misunderstanding has major implications for their world-view and knowledge of the world, politically.

Further, a large proportion of people abstained from expressing opinions on such issues as whether Ireland's overseas aid programmes are effective, possibly indicating a lack of awareness of the key issues. Even when there is a willingness to express opinions, they are often somewhat contradictory. While it cannot be expected of all people to have a depth of knowledge about all topics, it is an understandable assertion to make that a reasonable level of comprehension is important in relation to overseas aid for numerous reasons, not least for knowing where taxpayer money is going and why.

The importance of intelligent questioning by an educated citizenry of a perverse status quo, a status quo which includes aid giving but simultaneously results in 15,000 children dying from hunger-related causes globally every day, is also vital if anything is going to change substantially. This possibly indicates a need for more comprehensive global citizenship education at all levels of education and beyond, to explore the issues more thoroughly, and get to the point of having citizens with coherent and accurate views, as necessitated in a functioning democracy, and as acknowledged by the Irish government in the opening quote of this study.

Acknowledgements

We wish to sincerely thank NAIRTL for providing the funding for this project. We also wish to thank the 2009 International Development and Food Policy Class for designing the questionnaire and collecting the data, and Andrew Grannell for all his help.

Bibliography

Atkinson, R. & Eastwood, A. (2007) ***Public Attitudes to Overseas Giving: Does Government Make a Difference***, University of Southampton Statistical Sciences Research Institute Applications & Policy Working Paper A07/05

BBC (2010) Haiti Aid Effort One Month After Earthquake, Available from http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8509333.stm

Connolly, E. Doyle, J. & Dwyer, F. (2008) ***Public Opinion and Development Issues: a Survey of Irish University Student Opinions***, Irish Studies in International Affairs, Vol. 19, pp. 209-226

DAC (2009) ***Ireland: Development Assistance Committee Peer Review***, available from www.oecd.org/dataoecd/50/1/42704390.pdf

Department of Foreign Affairs (2006) ***White Paper on Irish Aid***

Economic and Social Research Institute (2009) ***Study on the Costs of Participation in Higher Education***, Available from www.esri.ie

WFP (2009) ***Who Are The Hungry?*** Available from http://www.wfp.org/hunger/who-are

Irish Aid (2002) ***Attitudes Towards Development Cooperation in Ireland***, Edited by Weafer, J., available from http://www.irishaid.gov.ie/Uploads/Attitudes.pdf

Mac Cormaic, R. (2009) ***State's Overseas Aid Programme is 'Cutting-Edge' Says OECD***, Irish Times, 08/05/09

OECD (2008) ***Total DAC Countries***, Available from http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/17/39/44285701.gif

PIPA (2001) ***Americans on Foreign Aid and World Hunger: A Study of US Public Attitudes***, available from http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/pdf/feb01/ForeignAid_Feb01_rpt.pdf

Roche, B. & Siggins, L. (2009) ***18,000 Cork households face week without water***, The Irish Times, 21/10/09

World Bank (2010) ***Botswana: Country Brief***, Available from www.worldbank.org