

# Bringing It All Back Home



*a history of comblamb's first  
21 years of global solidarity  
1975-1996*

by  
**Robin Hanan**

from research by Dermot McLaughlin

*This history is dedicated to Comhlámh's  
members, past, present and future.  
I hope you enjoy reading it.*

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*...to bring to bear their own particular experiences...*

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*a membership organisation of global development workers*

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Robin Hanan,  
December 1996

## INTRODUCTION

### *unashamedly a celebration*

For 21 years, Comhlámh has been constantly at the centre of campaigning and education on international issues in Ireland, with a consistently high membership and level of activism.

This is, in itself, worth celebrating and is an extraordinary tribute to the volunteer members who have made up Comhlámh over its first two decades. It is an important reflection of the willingness of Irish people to give up their time to tackle the causes of global poverty and human rights abuse. It gives the lie, at least to a certain extent, to the often-repeated mantra: "Irish people are good at giving to charity but not so good at looking at underlying causes".

In editing and writing up this history, the most difficult problem is to decide where to start. In just 21 years, Comhlámh members have taken on a dizzying range of activities towards the same general goal of greater international justice. Comhlámh has had remarkable success on a range of fronts: gender, trade, culture, images, education... the list is still being added to!

It might seem premature to write a history of Comhlámh after only 21 years. Most organisations wait until their centenary, or at least until they are half-way there. In Comhlámh's case, however, the turnover of members and the rate of activity mean that events of a few years ago can seem like ancient history. Rediscovering and understanding our history is an important part of planning our future. It is also an important inspiration for new members and activists.

Comhlámh's turnover of members is both a strength and a weakness. It is a strength because new ideas, approaches and activities are constantly

being introduced and tried out. It can be a weakness if the voices of experience are not fed back into new activities.

This history is one part of an attempt to rescue those voices of experience for Comhlámh, so that we can plan our future in an informed way.

The turnover of members is partly the result of the legendary international and national mobility of overseas development workers. It also reflects the fact that involvement in Comhlámh often leads to a longer-term commitment, either voluntary or employed, in international or domestic development or community work. I was very struck, in writing this history, how many of the people who figured prominently in Comhlámh's work are still at the cutting edge of development and development education agencies, community work, one-world centres and solidarity groups. Several are still working on projects which were nurtured within Comhlámh and grew into independent organisations in their own right.

I believe that, quite apart from Comhlámh's own direct achievements, this record validates a basic premise on which Comhlámh was founded: that Ireland has an enormous amount to learn from the so-called 'developing countries' and that Irish returned development workers can play an important role in bringing this learning home.

This history is unashamedly a celebration, not an analysis or a critique. Like any other voluntary organisation, Comhlámh has had its differences and disputes on questions such as policy, tactics, administrative styles, and personalities. In spite of this, or maybe because of it, members have been able to sort out their problems and move on. In fact, one of Comhlámh's appealing features is that its members are constantly self-critical.

I came to Comhlámh only two years ago as an employee. For me, researching and writing this history has been an important voyage of discovery (why do all our best metaphors have colonial overtones?). It captures some sense of Comhlámh's past but also acts as an inspiration for what we can do if we are clearly focussed on identified goals.

It is often easier to remember why a group wound up or a project finished than what it actually achieved. This is a particular temptation, when the sphere of action is so broad and the possible aims limitless. Of course, Comhlámh has not brought about a just world economic order. It hasn't brought its messages to every adult and child in Ireland. It didn't break the hold of the multinational companies on world commodity markets. In fact, it is generally recognised that the world is more divided, unjust and unstable now than 21 years ago.

Comhlámh members have, however, played a very important role in raising awareness among the public and in Government of the importance of development issues. Many of Comhlámh's campaigns have sowed the seeds of work continued by other groups and projects, often by people who received their training and experience in Comhlámh.

#### **Structure of this history**

This history follows Comhlámh's history chronologically as far as possible. However, from the early 1980s, I have tended to follow themes through to a logical break. Thus, some of the 'theme' chapters cover periods of up to ten years, while others are more or less confined to two or three years. I hope that this structure helps, rather than hindering, the reader.

30th October, 1980

Dear Mary,

Our paths obviously didn't cross on Monday, so I'm writing to you post-haste before your enthusiasm for starting a Cork branch evaporates!

I'm enclosing a list of names of people living in the Cork area - all men at the moment, but new names come in all the time. In fact there's one chap I'd like you to get in touch with, as he's just written asking to join a working contact in Cork - John Griffin is his name - address: Ballyreatha, Dungorinny, Co. Cork. He's a vet. Vincent Murphy is a longstanding member but possibly fading out. He'd be a good start, anyway. And I suggest you write to the Galway branch people to see how they started. If you can make the council meeting, you'll see them there, on the 8th, I think.

Let me know if you want more advice. And good luck. I'll look forward to hearing from you.

Yours,  
Flison

A Voluntary Association of Returned Development Workers for the promotion of  
International Development Co-operation

## PART A

### EARLY DEVELOPMENT

1975-1980

...to bring to bear their own  
particular experience...

The origins of the Cork Branch.

## Chapter One

### FOUNDATION



Margaret O'Grady

The initiative for an Irish Association of Returned Development Workers (not yet called Comhlámh) came largely from one person - Bill Jackson, then Chief Executive of the Agency for Personal Service Overseas (APSO).

APSO itself had only been established in 1974 largely by the driving force of Bill Jackson, George Dawson, Kenneth Whitaker and the then Minister for Foreign Affairs, Garret FitzGerald.

The idea of a single association to represent all overseas development workers returning to Ireland seems simple and obvious in retrospect, but at the time it was unusual. The nearest comparison would have been the UK Returned Volunteers Association (RVA), but neither the RVA nor the equivalent organisations in the other European countries have the same breadth of involvement of returned development workers and recognition by all sending agencies as Comhlámh.

APSO's mandate included the protection of the rights of returned development workers (RDWs), and their involvement in development education, and it was felt that this could best be carried out by supporting a membership organisation of returned development workers. Looking back on the foundation of Comhlámh, Bill Jackson, now Chief of External Relations for United Nations Volunteers, recalls that he saw potential for an association where returned development workers (RDW's) could get together to:



Alison Stancliffe

- welcome new RDWs home;
- help with their reintegration into Irish society;
- make a major contribution to development education and public awareness of development issues; and
- provide a powerful lobby for overseas development assistance.

He felt strongly that such a body should represent all RDWs, not just volunteers or those who had served with a particular agency. He was concerned that, if a single, inclusive association was not set up, the individual sending agencies would establish "returnees' groups" which could dissipate energy in competition with each other.

Bill Jackson also recalls how valuable the mix of volunteers and 'professional development workers' was. APSO itself had, from the start, paid development workers at four levels: "volunteer, semi-professional, professional and expert". He was keen that the new returned development workers' association would include a range of ages to create a mixture of enthusiasm and experience.

#### Exploratory meeting

On 23 May 1975, Bill Jackson called a meeting in the Clarendon Inn, Dublin of representatives of all sending agencies to discuss the possibility of founding an association for returned development workers. From this meeting an "organising group" was set up to propose a name and a set of objectives for the organisation.

This organising group advertised in local newspapers throughout Ireland and held a "Preparatory Assembly" in Broc House, Donnybrook, Dublin on Saturday 21st February 1976. This assembly, attended by about eighty development workers, was chaired by Bill Jackson.

A list of candidates for the Interim Executive, drawn up by the organising committee in early 1976, provides a useful snapshot of at least the more active members. Nine (nearly a fifth) had worked with Concern, and the same number with the lay missionary organisation Viatores Christi. The next biggest groups (four each) had worked with two British Agencies: Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) and the Catholic Institute for

International Relations (CIIR). Another three had worked with the Department of Foreign Affairs' Overseas Development Assistance programme. Only one had worked with Gorta, while several had worked with missionary organisations like the Volunteer Missionary Movement (VMM) (2), the White Fathers, Columban Fathers, etc. and some had worked with semi-state bodies (eg An Foras Taluntais) or United Nations bodies (UNV, FAO)

Thirty-one of these members, nearly two thirds, had worked in Africa, largely concentrated in Kenya (11); the rest of East Africa (8); the Frontline States of Southern Africa (5 in Zambia and 2 elsewhere) and West Africa (6). Surprisingly, given the high profile of Bangladesh in the Irish news, only 4 had worked there, and another five had worked in Southern Asia. Five had worked in Central America and a further five in South America.

The professions of this "candidate pool" are not recorded, but we know that the fifteen members of the Interim Executive Committee consisted of three secretaries, two training officers/advisers, two agronomists, an RTE producer, a schools inspector, a teacher, an accountant, a draughtsman and a solicitor - not quite a representative cross-section of Irish society!

Opening the meeting, Bill Jackson:

*stressed that this was the last time that APSO would play a prominent role in relation to the proposed association: henceforth it would be for the association to run itself and to seek from APSO or elsewhere such moral and material support as it might require from time to time!*

This was to be a key point in Comhlámh's future development. While Comhlámh has worked more or less closely with APSO for two decades and received important funding, it has always been an independent organisation, answerable only to its members.

### Position Paper

The "position paper" from the organising group proposed the name *Meitheal*, referring to the old Irish tradition of mutual cooperation at harvest-time. This name later had to be withdrawn, because it was already used by another organisation, and the name *Comhlámh* replaced it. *Comhlámh* (hands together), which has been variously translated as "handshake" and "cooperation" over the years, is now generally taken to mean "solidarity".

The "primary object" adopted by the meeting has also stood the test of time:

*to enable people who have rendered service overseas in developing countries, upon their return to Ireland, to bring to bear their own particular experience in order to further international development co-operation.*

The minutes recorded that a view was expressed that the primary objective should be "information and assistance... to its own membership, rather than the furtherance of international development as proposed by the Organising Group. However this view did not command wide support!"

Thus, the main focus of *Comhlámh* was to be on enabling development workers to get involved in education and action, on return to Ireland, with "mutual support" as an important subsidiary objective.

Interestingly, in view of later discussions on closer North-South partnership, the meeting removed the phrase "to maintain their friendship and partnership with the people of these Countries" from the organising group's draft of the principal objective and added it to the subsidiary objectives.

The "subsidiary objectives" agreed by the meeting have laid out the general lines for *Comhlámh*'s work ever since. The more outward looking objectives were adopted unanimously, including promoting:

- *Friendship and partnership with the people of the developing countries;*
- *Irish involvement in overseas development and international co-operation;*
- *Awareness and knowledge among Irish Government and people and public education;*
- *Overseas service by Irish people;*
- *Assisting RDWs to contribute from their experience to social and community development in Ireland and;*
- *co-operation with other like minded bodies in Ireland.*

There was controversy about the objectives related to supporting returned development workers, with a minority arguing that volunteering should involve "personal sacrifice" not "rights". The objectives agreed less than unanimously included:

- *protecting interests of development workers overseas and on return (70 votes to 4);*
- *assisting RDWs to readjust to Irish Life (57:17, there was a minority view that reorientation should be the responsibility of the sending agency);*
- *providing a social focus for members (70:2, the reasons for opposition are not recorded!); and*
- *co-operating with bodies welcoming overseas students to Ireland (70 votes to 1).*

About half of the eighty people present paid their £1.00 membership on the spot and an Interim Executive Committee of 15 was elected from the 33 candidates nominated. Frank McCarthy, an agronomist who had worked with Gorta in Brazil, was elected interim chairperson.

The other members elected to the interim Executive were Eunan Mc Ateer (Treasurer), Carmel Colclough (Vice-Chair), Donal Murphy, Tony O'Dwyer, Ray Cleary, Michael Taylor, Liz Mc Evoy and Mary Heffernan (Assistant Secretaries), Mick Mc Carthy (Information Officer), John Mc Namara, Ciaran Feighery, Brendan Riordan and Johnny Johnston.



## Chapter Two

### CONTEXT FOR GROWTH

Comhlámh is one of a number of organisations founded in the mid 1970s, often seen as a turning-point for Irish involvement with what was then called the "Third World" or the "Developing World". This is no coincidence, and reflects an increased Irish openness to global issues, including the start of the Bilateral Aid Programmes.

Although the actual numbers of Irish working overseas in the 'Third World' declined, there was a dramatic change in their composition, from missionaries to lay development workers.

Traditionally, Ireland had been one of the world's major exporters of missionaries. In the nineteenth century, Irish missionaries had formed the backbone of the British Empire's education system. In 1965, the number of Irish missionaries in the 'Third World' had peaked at 7,085 in 85 orders, but these numbers have declined constantly ever since. In addition, missionary work itself changed in the 1970s under the influence of Vatican II, liberation theology and the "option for the poor", and by the early 1970s, returning Irish missionaries were bringing home radical messages, from Latin America in particular.

The new secular development agencies provided new links for Ireland with the 'Third World' and new opportunities for work overseas. Gorta, the State-run but voluntarily-financed agricultural development agency, was the first strong Irish 'Third World charity', although both Oxfam and Christian Aid already had considerable support in the country. Concern, which had been set up in 1966 during the Biafra war as Africa Concern and broadened its name and mandate during the Bangladesh crisis of 1970, had made development a household word in Ireland,

supporting both emergency operations and longer-term development projects.

#### **Bilateral aid programme**

Dr. Garret FitzGerald, the new Minister for Foreign Affairs, presided over a major expansion of Ireland's foreign policy. Unlike his Labour partners in Government, he had campaigned vigorously for Ireland's accession to the EEC in the 1992 referendum. As a member of the EEC, Ireland was expected to contribute to European overseas development funds. The diplomatic service was considerably expanded and foreign policy began to be taken seriously in its broader aspects, not just as a way of talking to London and Washington about Northern Ireland. Ireland's Bilateral Assistance Programme, established in 1974, concentrated aid on five priority countries: Lesotho, Tanzania, Zambia, Sudan and India (the last was subsequently dropped). Irish Aid offices were opened in Lesotho (1974), Tanzania (1979) and Zambia (1980). This led to a big increase in the number of lay development workers overseas in the 1970s.

These changes meant that, in the 1970s, larger numbers of lay people were coming home to Ireland from development work overseas. The changing nature and perception of work overseas from 'the missions' to 'development work' meant a change in the nature and motivations of the people involved in this work. Many had either gone overseas with a political motive or had been politicised by their overseas experiences. There was a common feeling that the solutions to the problem which they saw in 'developing countries' by changing attitudes and policies at home.

Most lay volunteers going abroad in the 1970s would have been old enough to remember appeals for money to save the souls of 'black babies', but young and modern enough to be scornful of this approach. Missionaries themselves were beginning to return from Latin America, in particular, radicalised by contact with the new liberation theology. Even the more mainstream religious orders were concentrating more on social projects to combat poverty in developing countries than on evangelism.

There was also a deep, even if somewhat simplistic, identification with the newly-independent ex-colonies, particularly in Africa and the Indian sub-continent, and a genuine optimism about their prospects.

These changes also reflected changes in the social and political climate in Ireland itself.

For much of the world, the mid-1970s was the time when the generation of the 1960s moved into the mainstream. The middle class generation politicised by the Vietnam War and rock music largely settled down to professional life and/or moved on to new protest movements, particularly green movements and the women's movement.

In Ireland, the movements of 1960s were even more a minority than elsewhere in Europe, so the settling down was less dramatic.

### Social Change

There were other movements about in Ireland, however. A generation brought up in what was left of DeValera's Ireland was beginning to question tradition and look at the world in new ways, politically, sexually and socially. In the 1970s, the traditional emigration of the landless and unemployed began to slow down and even, for a short time, reverse. Travelling abroad for work became more often a choice, an adventure and a liberation for many people with more professional qualifications. Students explored Britain, Germany and the United States on summer jobs and later went to build careers overseas. For many people leaving Ireland, the sense of freedom from what was still a very closed society was as important as the actual work.

Voluntary work overseas in countries of the South offered a way of expressing the idealism of the time in a practical way. In addition to the traditional charitable urge to 'help those less fortunate' there was also the more politically motivated support for newly independent ex-colonies. Overseas work offered an adventure in the best sense of the word - learning about new culture and experiences first hand.

By and large, however, the people who formed Comhlámh were cautious and pragmatic in their radicalism. Comhlámh provided a meeting-point and space for compromise between two increasingly converging movements: the more political *solidarity movements* and the more traditional *development organisations*.

Oxfam and Christian Aid, both UK-based but with substantial support in Ireland, were promoting the *New Internationalist* magazine, which was a vital educational tool, questioning the idea that 'development' simply meant the 'underdeveloped countries' catching up with the industrialized West, and looked for deeper explanations of injustice and poverty. Third World Groups, using the *New Internationalist* as a source of ideas, grew in colleges and neighborhoods.

The massive movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s against the Vietnam War had been highly political in nature, identified with the left of Irish politics and the general anti-establishment mood of youth. It won little support in the political system, although some of its leaders later moved into 'mainstream' politics. By contrast, the overthrow of the Allende Government in Chile in 1973 persuaded many on the left and centre that there was a need for broader solidarity movements to defend basic human rights.

The solidarity movement which had the greatest impact on Ireland from 1960s to the 1990s, however, was the Anti-Apartheid Movement, led by the tenacious South African political exile Kader Asmal (now a Minister in the South African Government) and his wife, Louise. The Anti-Apartheid Movement brought together left and liberal politicians, church people and individual human rights activists. Comhlámh both supported and drew inspiration from this movement, which contributed greatly to the growing dialogue between political solidarity and 'third world development' activists.

The election of the Fine-Gael/Labour National Coalition Government in 1973 marked both a modernising mood and a new Government interest in foreign policy. Several of the new Ministers had been involved in anti-Vietnam War protest and the Anti Apartheid Movement. One of these,

Conor Cruise O'Brien, who (believe it or not!) was constantly heckled in the Dail as a "Cuban Communist", had raised the hackles of the US, UK and white colonialists generally for his work in the Congo (now Zaire) and Ghana.

The negotiations of the Lomé Convention, linking Europe with most of its ex-colonies, were covered widely in the Irish media. In Ireland, Garret FitzGerald shared much of the credit for the more progressive aspects of Lomé with his radical Dutch counterpart, Jan Pronk.

The increased 'respectability' of Third World solidarity was symbolised in 1973 when Kader Asmal admitted to being pleased but disoriented when the Minister for Foreign Affairs (Garret FitzGerald) opened the Anti-Apartheid Movement's AGM. Dr. FitzGerald's Fianna Fail counterpart, Michael O'Kennedy, also associated himself with the Movement and with Chile Solidarity and later had close links with Comhlámh.

Thus, overseas development workers returning to Ireland in the mid to late 1970s found themselves in a context where development issues were taken seriously at political level, even if they were not exactly central to Irish politics. As the Bilateral Aid Programme and APSO grew, increasing numbers of articulate development workers contributed to Comhlámh's growth and influence on policy.

## Chapter Three

### EARLY WORK

Comhlámh's early years were marked by intensive debate on policy, principles and organisational priorities. This debate helped to move Comhlámh from being exclusively a "fraternity of former volunteers" towards an effective organisation to impact on Irish development policy.

On 30th September 1976, at the first official Annual General Meeting (AGM), a new Executive Committee was elected. The Executive in turn appointed Carmel Colclough, a "senior draughtsman" who had worked with Viatores Christi in Venezuela, as its Chairperson.

The Executive concentrated its energies on two main fronts:

- building an effective voluntary organisation, in terms of membership, support, policy formulation and structures; and
- influencing public opinion and the emerging development 'establishment' in Ireland: Government policy, APSO, development education and the non-governmental development agencies.

#### Membership

The levels of membership and of activity in Comhlámh's early years show the urgency of the issues being dealt with and the hunger for a forum to deal with them. Members' meetings tended to have attendances of around 70-80, while the more public events could attract several hundred.

In 1979, the Executive set out with a target of 100 new members during the year. By the end of the year they achieved nearly 200. Interestingly enough, only half of these had worked as lay volunteers, a quarter were

missionaries, an eighth had been employed on "professional contracts" and a tenth had been "experts" or consultants.

The Executive organised meetings of returned development workers in different parts of the country, leading to the establishment of Comhlámh branches in Kilkenny, Cork, Galway, Sligo, Donegal and Limerick. In spite of this, however, there was already a strong Dublin bias in the membership and activities, reflecting the fact that so many people found work in Dublin on their return from overseas.

At first, most Comhlámh members were recruited through public advertising and through the sending agencies' grapevine. In January 1977, however, the first "reorientation" weekend for newly returned development workers was organised.

By the following year, in agreement with APSO and the non-government volunteer sending agencies, Comhlámh took responsibility for organising two weekend "reorientation courses" each year. This was an important part of the welcoming home of development workers and has continued to the present day.

In 1979, work began on a "Development Worker kit", to be part of the resource for development workers' reorientation. The kit included sections on "coming home-coming down", health and social welfare entitlements; job and training opportunities; and voluntary work in Ireland. This formula, through several incarnations, is still used in Comhlámh's *Returned Development Workers Handbook*.

#### **Interests of development workers**

Another area of joint concern for Comhlámh members and APSO was the "protection of the interests of development workers" both in the field and on return to Ireland. A report published by APSO in February 1979, with considerable Comhlámh input, outlined the position of people who worked abroad and problems faced in areas such as "leave of absence and tenure of employment, superannuation, health and social welfare eligibility on return".

Comhlámh in particular took up the recommendations in relation to development workers not losing position in their employment through overseas work; incremental credit for work overseas, maintenance of superannuation payments and eligibility for health and social welfare benefits on return. All of these issues were subsequently pursued by Comhlámh and APSO for many years.

#### **Development issues and debates**

The main development issues taken up by Comhlámh members in the early years were:

- questioning the practice of development work overseas, looking both at fundamental questions about what development work is for and more immediate proposals for improvements in particular countries;
- examining causes of 'underdevelopment', particularly unfair trade;
- influencing the priorities for the newly developing APSO and Irish overseas development assistance programme;
- promoting understanding of the cultures of the countries where members had worked and the images of Southern countries shown in Ireland, particularly by the media; and
- learning about poverty and development patterns in Ireland, and comparisons with the 'Third World'; and
- promoting the rights of refugees coming to Ireland (this was the time when the Vietnamese 'boat people' were arriving, and there were a number of highly politicised refugees from the Pinochet regime in Chile).

Comhlámh continued to give particular attention to the debates on effectiveness of aid and development work, including providing space in *Comhlámh News* and a platform at public meetings, for fundamental criticisms from both Southern leaders and Comhlámh members of the basic aid philosophy and of contemporary practices. In the January 1979 edition of *Comhlámh News*, the Chairperson Des Doherty went so far as to say:

*I have an instinct that we may end up defining our key role as simply helping to make Irish personal service overseas more effective. Allied (but secondary) to this may be complementary roles in (a) helping to raise the level of development consciousness in Ireland and (b) monitoring Irish aid and trade policies affecting developing countries. (his emphasis)*

In 1977, Comhlámh organised a major public forum on development cooperation. Speakers included the Fianna Fail Minister for Foreign Affairs, Michael O'Kennedy, his predecessor and Fine Gael leader Garret FitzGerald, and the acting General Secretary of the Labour Party, Seamus Scally. The involvement of these leading decision-makers in this debate shows that Comhlámh had quickly established its credibility and importance.

Following the public forum, Minister O'Kennedy asked Comhlámh members to draft proposals on Ireland's overseas aid programme. This, in turn, led to an intensive discussion within Comhlámh on development policy and the Government and APSO responses.

The public forum was a model for a style of public meeting which was to bring understanding of development policy to a wider audience. In 1978, the public meetings were formalised into the Comhlámh Autumn Debates, with attendances of up to 180. Some of the key thinkers in international development debates, such as Susan George, who had produced a detailed critique of the consequences of food aid. This generated considerable press coverage, further broadening consciousness of the issues.

In 1979, the debates covered subjects such as "The Church in The Third World"; "The Brandt Report", with Senators Mary Robinson and Kenneth Whitaker; "Development Work, Help Hindrance or Holiday", with Bill Jackson of APSO and Neville Jayameera, an Indian Critic of traditional development models; "Communications", with Seán MacBride, then in the news for his United Nations report on the World

Media and Paul Gillespie of the Irish Times, and a debate on the "Third Development Decade" with representatives of all political parties.

In 1981, the debates ran over five consecutive Tuesdays, followed by a half-day Seminar on issues in the Brandt Report - "Powdered Milk", "Women's Rights -Universal or Local", "Food Aid", "Ireland and the Common Agricultural Policy" and a case study of development assistance and Lesotho.

In parallel with the public Autumn Debates, from 1978 there were also smaller members' internal education seminars each spring, known imaginatively as the Spring Seminars. These allowed members to explore issues in more depth on the basis of the ideas presented by returned development workers. In the first year, these concentrated mainly on Irish social issues, with some international comparisons and references. Comhlámh's future involvement in development education was pre-figured by the setting up in 1979 of a group to plan a programme of "concientisation" and development education.

#### *Comhlámh News*

The popularity of these debates, and of the nearly established *Comhlámh News* showed that there was an interest in going deeper into development issues than the traditional 'charity' responses. Although originally intended for internal debate and news, *Comhlámh News*, founded in 1978 quickly became Ireland's leading magazine on development issues. Previously, the only widely-read journal of development issues had been the UK-based *New Internationalist*. As we shall see, *Comhlámh News*, under various titles, has flourished to this day, reaching its 55th issue in 1996.

The early issues of *Comhlámh News* had a mix of personal news, news of Comhlámh activities and broader Comhlámh debates. The first issue, in May 1978, had a front-page wedding photograph of Tony O'Dwyer ("Ex-Philippines") and Bernie Coyle ("Ex-Sierra Leone"), alongside editorials on Irish approaches to development cooperation. The personal news columns continued to be an important part of the newsletter for many years.

The early issues also included analytical articles not only on 'Third World' issues but on poverty and disempowerment in Ireland. Debates on the direction of Comhlámh, APSO and the various bodies to which Comhlámh was affiliated such as Ex-Volunteers International (EVI) and CONGOOD.

Throughout the magazine, as in the public debates, there was an emphasis on the critique of current development models, the linking of development issues at home and abroad and the images of the South shown in Ireland, all still highly topical Comhlámh themes.

### **Setting up office**

By 1978, in another sign of long-term thinking, Ray Cleary and Ciaran Feighery had drawn up the Memorandum and Articles of Association for Comhlámh to become a company limited by guarantee, or a non-profit company. Comhlámh was registered as a company in 1979.

Under the new Constitution, the primary decision-making body in Comhlámh between AGMs was the Council of about 30 members, which met for a weekend about five times a year. The Council in turn elected the Executive of about 15 members which met much more frequently. The Council also established most of the policy committees and working groups.

With Comhlámh's growing activity, the question of establishing an independent office and employing staff inevitably arose.

In 1979, an office was rented from the Society of Friends (Quakers) in Eustace Street, Dublin. Both APSO and Comhlámh felt that the previous arrangement whereby Comhlámh had worked out of the APSO offices in Baggot Street did not reflect the mutual desire for a clearer division between the two organisations.

Employment of staff proved more controversial. Before this, Patricia Cleary had provided secretarial support in a voluntary capacity. At the 1978 AGM, a motion proposed by the Council to allow the employment of full-time staff was passed, but only after a lively debate. Some

members argued that employing staff could undermine the voluntary nature of Comhlámh and disempower members. Indeed, the Council found it necessary to put a motion to the same AGM that "the basic priority of Comhlámh for the coming year will be to increase membership and encourage greater involvement of the membership".

In May 1979, Margaret O'Grady was appointed Executive Secretary. Margaret had been employed in the University of Papua New Guinea as a librarian and had worked as a volunteer in Zambia and India. In August 1980, Margaret resigned after a period on maternity leave and was replaced by Allison Stancliffe. Both Margaret and Alison showed how much more could be achieved with staff support without taking away from the voluntary nature of Comhlámh.

Alison was joined in 1982 by Mary Quinlan, working half-time, in the first of her three stints as a Comhlámh employee. When Alison moved on in 1982, she was replaced for a short time by Dave O'Brien, who had already been a key activist in Comhlámh.

Dave in turn moved on to the Lourdes Community Resource centre in 1983. He was replaced by Mary Jennings, who had been working for Comhlámh on a consultancy project on the interests of development workers. Mary was Coordinator of Comhlámh for the next five years and presided over an expansion and professionalisation of the organisation. In her time, Comhlámh came to be recognised as a significant player in development and development education work in Ireland.

### **Making links**

As a group of experienced and focused development workers, Comhlámh members put a lot of effort into building up contacts and influence with Irish and international bodies.

The relationship with APSO was probably the most important for Comhlámh. Although both organisations had been clear in founding Comhlámh that there was to be a separation, there was still a close overlap of interests and personnel. In 1978, for example, a Comhlámh

sub-committee was set up to respond to a request for a submission on APSO philosophy. Bi-annual meetings of Comhlámh Executive and APSO staff dealt with a range of issues concerning training and reorientation policy. Comhlámh chairperson Carmel Colclough was appointed by the Minister for Foreign Affairs to the Board of APSO in 1978, and she was joined by the new chair person Des Doherty in 1981. Comhlámh lobbied strongly for increased pre-departure training for development workers and Comhlámh representatives played an active part on APSO training committees.

In 1977 Comhlámh joined the Confederation of Non-Governmental Organisations for Overseas Development (CONGOOD - which later merged with the National Platform to form Dóchas). In 1978, Comhlámh was represented on CONGOOD's development activities commission by Margaret O'Grady and on the Development Education Commission by Noreen Kavanagh.

Relations with Concern were particularly important, since Concern development workers have always represented the largest single group of Comhlámh members. Concern contributed to Comhlámh funds from the start, in spite of some strong correspondence between the two organisations on some of the articles in *Comhlámh News* (interestingly, Comhlámh's Chairperson PJ Howell, who later became Chairperson of Concern, argued Comhlámh's case in this correspondence). Trócaire was also a major contributor, supporting Comhlámh's public debates. Staff members of both organisations were also very much involved in joint activities with Comhlámh in development education.

The relationship with the Department of Foreign Affairs was also crucial. The Department funded much of Comhlámh's development education work. However, this type of support was never unqualified, and there was constant pressure for "more balance" (ie. less criticism of Government policy) in the Autumn Debates. This funding has continued up to the present, through the succession of semi-state development education funding bodies.

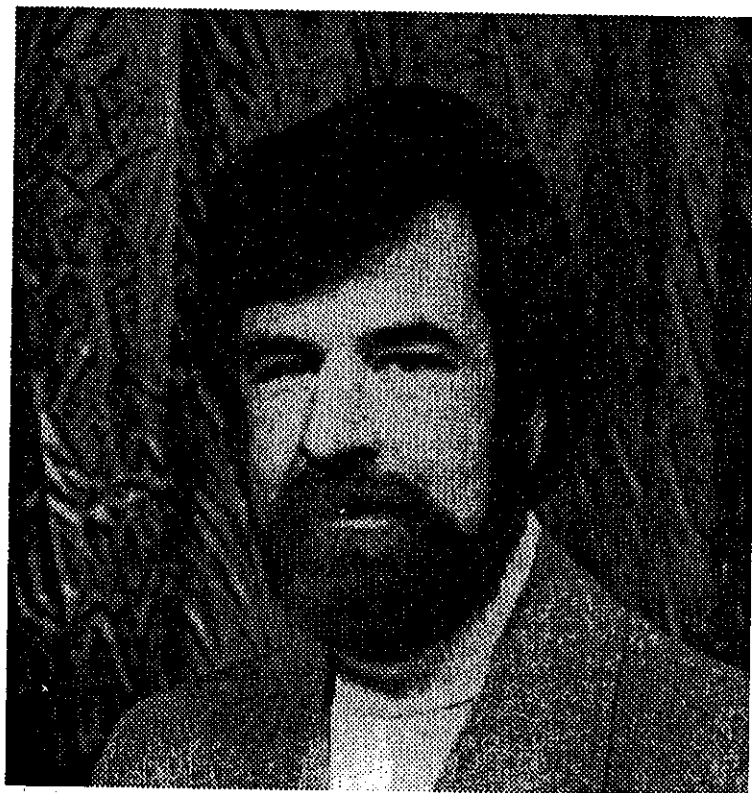
The good working relationship between Comhlámh and the Minister for Foreign Affairs was reflected in the appointment in 1979 of Ray Cleary to the Advisory Committee on Development Cooperation (AC-DC), the forerunner of the present Irish Aid Advisory Committee (IAAC). The establishment of this Committee to oversee Ireland's overseas development assistance had been one of the proposals in Comhlámh's submission to the Minister, and Comhlámh continued to play a strong role throughout the 1980s.

Internationally, one of the first contacts made by Comhlámh on its foundation was with the British Returned Volunteers' Action (RVA) and the international alliance Ex-Volunteers International (EVI). RVA was in some ways a model for Comhlámh's founders although there were some differences in approach between the two organisations.

Comhlámh affiliated to EVI in 1977 and soon took an active part. In early 1978, five Comhlámh members attended the EVI Conference in Oslo and agreed to host the next Conference in Ireland. From 1979 to 1981, Carmel Colclough acted as secretary of EVI on behalf of Comhlámh.

The "Glencree Conference" of EVI, which lasted for nine days, in June/July 1978, was a key turning-point for both EVI and Comhlámh. The *Glencree Charter* thrashed out at the meeting laid out proposals on development workers' conditions, recognition, roles and responsibilities. The Charter was adopted and promoted both in Ireland and internationally. Comhlámh members played an important part in promoting the Charter in Ireland and at European level over the next few years, with APSO support. Some issues which caused major discussion were whether development workers were entitled to the minimum wage of their home country and whether they should actively engage in progressive movements in their host country.

By the end of 1980 Comhlámh had a strong, active membership, well-established structures, an office and a sense of optimism about the future, which turned out to be well justified.



John Kilcullen, B.Arch.

PART B  
BRANCHING OUT  
1980-1985

*personal and political*



## Chapter Four

### TAKE-OFF AND GROWTH

The consolidation of the late 1970s paid off decisively with a take-off of new projects and activities in 1980-1981, most of which continued to have a major impact throughout the decade.

As we have seen, by 1980 time Comhlámh was already well established as the first port of call for returned development workers, as a major influence in development education and as a serious influence on Government and development agency policy. There had been an enormous amount of discussion to reach consensus on policy positions and on refining Comhlámh's structures and working methods.

Much of this work came to fruition during the life of the 'long Executive' from 1980-1981 (due to a change in the time of year for the AGM, the Council and Executive continued for 16 months). In effect, the planning which took place in 1980-1981 period set the agenda not only for most of Comhlámh's work in the 1980s, but for many of the work areas of the whole global development sector to the present day.

Reflecting this activity, the early 1980s saw a dramatic rise in membership. In 1980, the Executive had set a modest target of 100 members by the end of the year. This was nearly doubled during the year, and went on to pass 300 in 1983 and reach nearly 500 by 1985.

#### **Increased public interest**

The increased public attention on global issues was partly reflected by and partly created by the publication in 1979 of the *Brandt Report*. The growing recognition in the 1970s that global patterns of resource-use and consumption were unsustainable had already been articulated through

publications such as the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth* and the Ecologist's *Blueprint for Survival* and the highly publicised United Nations Conferences.

This increased public interest provided a constituency for serious development education work and campaigning which either fell between or linked the previously hostile camps of 'Third World charity' and political solidarity.

It is no coincidence that much of Comhlámh's work in the 1980s involved support for Tanzania and Nicaragua, two countries known principally for their experiments in participatory, as opposed to centrally-run, socialism, which were seen as models by both the political left and the development agencies. Comhlámh's work in this area was lead by the Coffee Group, of which Colm Ryder was the mainstay, which marketed coffee from both these countries. The other main "country focus" of Comhlámh work in the 1980s had a somewhat different character, with the Apartheid Government in South Africa being the target of sustained moral outrage and campaigning action.

#### **Flexible structures**

As in any voluntary organisation, the key to success and the danger of failure lie in the balance between advantages of allowing small enthusiastic groups of members to follow their own nose and make mistakes if necessary and the need for an overall unity of purpose among members which can slow down decision-making. The answer which Comhlámh came up with in 1980-1981 was to combine a strong encouragement of Comhlámh members' groups with a particular issue-focus, while at the same time promoting an intensive policy debate throughout Comhlámh through policy committees, members' Council Weekends, AGMs and public debates.

This highly successful formula to balance collective needs of Comhlámh as an organisation with the interests and enthusiasms of individual members has served Comhlámh well ever since and has provided a model for many other voluntary groups. It has not, of course, eliminated conflicts of interest and priorities, not to mention personalities, of which

Comhlámh has had its fair share, but it has provided a framework for resolving them.

The explosion of Comhlámh activity in the early 1980s, and more importantly its effectiveness, are a tribute to the enthusiasm of members, but particularly the Executive, who met roughly fortnightly throughout the period to plan and co-ordinate, as well as to the very small staff. It is significant that so many of the 1979-1980 Executive (Des Doherty, (Chair), Liz Mullen, Ned Byrne, Mary Cole, Helen Buckley, Paud Murphy, Ray Cleary, John Heffernan, Sally O'Neill, Bernice Maher, Pat Lavin, Fred Gale and Kate O'Brien) are still well known and active in development organisations in Ireland or overseas.

The 1980-81 Executive was chaired by Ray Cleary who, together with his wife Patricia had played a central role in founding Comhlámh after their return from Jamaica. They had been inspired by the achievements of Jamaica under the radical Government headed by Michael Manley and shocked by the experience, which has since become so familiar all over the World, of the destruction of those achievements by the rich and powerful with the help of the International Monetary Fund.

The Executive oversaw the work of three important policy committees, on Personal Service Overseas, Development Education, and Aid and Trade. Each of these committees drafted policy papers which were discussed by the membership at Council Weekends, publicised in *Comhlámh News* and incorporated into Comhlámh's lobbying strategy. This intense process of policy discussion led to a reaffirmation of the work which Comhlámh was doing in supporting returned development workers, in advocating rights and responsibilities of development workers generally and in promoting public debate on international issues. The main development, however, was the growth of "single-issue development education groups" and the founding of the Comhlámh Women's Group, both of which are considered in more detail later.

### Development education groups

In 1981, the Development Education group called a members' meeting in Dublin, but with representatives from throughout the country, to set up what was known as the "large Development Education Group". This group considered a document from Ray Cleary assessing the impact of Comhlámh's educational work to date in the light of new ideas and international perspectives in development education. As we have seen, Comhlámh's educational work was primarily in the areas of public debates, internal training for members, talks to schools and adult groups and publications such as *Comhlámh News*.

The meeting decided to set up a series of single-issue groups under the general development education banner. These groups were to deal with:

- Spring Seminars, continuing Comhlámh's internal education programme;
- the Commodities Campaign, to promote sales of fairly traded coffee in Ireland and to increase awareness of trade issues;
- adult education courses: in the first year, a seven-session course was organised in Ballymun;
- producing a development education information pack;
- organising joint visits to schools with VSI (Voluntary Service International);
- organising One World Day in St Patrick's teacher training college, with films, slide-shows, lectures and photos from students, Comhlámh members and other groups and some curriculum development work;
- Public debates on development, which was already one of Comhlámh's most successful areas;
- preparing a radio series on development;
- putting together a "mobile developing world exhibition";
- bookstalls at teachers conferences, etc; and
- "getting your message across" courses.

In addition, a study group on development education practice encouraged all of the groups to evaluate and plan their work in a broader context of current ideas on issues and methodology.

This expansion from one group to 12 seems at first sight to be ambitious, if not foolhardy, particularly coming at a time when the new dynamic Comhlámh Women's Group was also starting up and the support for returned development workers was expanded. With the benefit of hindsight, however, we can see that the strategy worked. Most of the single-issue groups set up in 1981 flourished and grew and had a significant impact both on the public and on development educators.

The development of these groups through the 1980s will be the will be the subject of later chapters.

### Coordination

To coordinate this level of activity in a membership-run organisation required a well-structured working system. In 1981, Comhlámh's Constitution had been adapted into the Memorandum and Articles of Association of a Company Limited by Guarantee, that is a non-profit making company. The basic structure adopted from the start continued: the members at the AGM elected a Council, to meet four or five times a year, and the Council in turn elected the Executive and set up the Working Groups.

Although this structure remained into the mid 1980s, it was soon found that the Council Weekends were more practically run as full members' weekends, with a mixture of educational workshops, policy and planning discussions and social events. The Executive became the key decision-making structure between AGMs, which, with attendances approaching a hundred, played the decisive role in shaping policy.

## Chapter Five

### BRANCHES IN CORK, KILKENNY AND GALWAY

Throughout its history, although Comhlámh has always had members throughout Ireland, there has tended to be a perceived difference of working method between Dublin and elsewhere.

This partly reflects the fact that Dublin has always had the largest concentration of members, which in turn led to the creation of single-issue members' groups to allow for more manageable meetings and greater specialisation. The single-issue groups which emerged from the 'large development education group' in 1981-2 and the Women's Issues Group founded at around the same time were all Dublin-based, but all tried to build up contacts with the other groups of Comhlámh members around the country to cooperate on joint activities.

On the other hand, the existence of so many single-issue groups based in Dublin meant that over time it would be difficult to develop an overall sense of a Comhlámh Dublin Branch. In contrast to this, the Comhlámh Branches in other areas tended to be more cohesive and members' worked more closely together on a range of issues.

As we have seen, in 1979 Branches were established in Kilkenny, Cork, Galway, Sligo, Donegal and Limerick. Of these, only the Kilkenny, Galway and Cork branches were to remain active into the 1980s. While many of their activities are touched on in the chapters on national groups, it is useful to mention here the general lines of their development as Branches.

#### Cork

In 1979, Vincent Murphy had tried to set up a branch of Comhlámh in Cork, but it was not until Mary Mangan re-started the process in 1980, with strong prompting from Alison Stancliffe, that the Branch really took off.

Mary had come to live in Cork in 1979 after returning from West Africa. She joined Comhlámh in 1980, when Alison Stancliffe was Coordinator, and was encouraged by Alison to take the initiative to restart the Cork Branch. She contacted Liz Corcoran and David Mangan, and together they advertised in the *Cork Examiner* and on the radio, inviting people to the Imperial Hotel in March 1981. They arranged to use the Cooperation Studies Unit in UCC as a base and rapidly built up their activities.

Within less than a year, the Branch had 34 members, two-thirds returned development workers. They had already organised nine public meetings, with attendances ranging from 15 to 250; set up a fortnightly study group on development; organised talks and side-shows to residents' associations, youth groups etc. on members' experiences overseas; organised political lobbying and built up coffee sales to 400 bags a month. In the 1981 Annual Report they described this as a learning period!

The Branch established a pattern of members' meetings every month, with public meetings four or five times a year. They maintained a close relationship with the UCC World Development Society, the Cork Development Network and Trócaire. The Branch was very active in talks in schools and in the media as well as in campaigning up to about 1986.

By 1988 the Branch was in serious decline, with Mary Mangan abroad and a large number of members leaving at the same time. John Walsh, who returned to Cork from Zambia, provided much of the energy to pull the Branch together again. John had been active in the Anti-Apartheid Movement in the early 80's, and in the collective which produced the magazine *Cork and the Wider World*, both of which worked out of Comhlámh's Cork office. John originally joined Comhlámh, along with

other members of the magazine collective, to prevent the Branch collapsing, bringing the office with it

Over time, however, he became enthusiastic about Comhlámh as such, and in December 1988 he and the Coordinator, Marius Schoon, convened a meeting in the Grand Parade Hotel. Thirty people turned up, among them many who are still active in the Branch, including Sean Cottrell, Vera O'Donovan, Phil Kelly, Maura and Barry Ahern.

A committee was set up to find ways to save the office. They concentrated on building up the office as the only resource centre for RDWs and development students and educators in Cork. Both Oxfam and UNICEF supported this project financially.

Since being re-established, the office has been used as a meeting place for a wide range of campaigning and educational groups, including CND, Central America Week, Cambodia Solidarity and, more recently, Bosnia Action. It is also a central point of reference for development studies students in UCC and for schoolchildren researching for the Concern debates.

In 1994, Comhlámh took on its first employee in Cork, Barbara Hegarty, who was joined in 1995 by Wendy Knott on a Fás project.

### **Kilkenny**

The Kilkenny Branch of Comhlámh was founded at a meeting of thirteen members on 27 March 1982, and it continued until 1986. The first year was very active, with a visit by the Karibu cultural exhibition, a stand at a Gorta exhibition and considerable coffee sales.

Although the 1983 Annual Report says that the Branch had only "5 regular and 3 occasional members" at their monthly meetings, they generated an impressive amount of activity, including media work, slide shows, public debates and coffee sales. By 1985 Marion Breen, who had convened the Branch, had left Kilkenny, but there was still active involvement in fair trade work and public meetings in the Carlow Kilkenny region, spearheaded by Carol Bergin.

### **Galway**

Galway had an active Comhlámh Branch from 1981 to 1984.

In 1981, the Branch organised the Comhlámh national Council Weekend in Cluain Mhuire with a central theme of development in the West of Ireland. The speakers were Minister for the Gaeltacht Maire Geoghegan-Quinn and Labour Party Chairperson Michael D. Higgins, along with the Galway Comhlámh member Clodagh Duggan.

In its first two years, the Branch also had a strong emphasis on cultural links between Ireland and Africa, and linked up with the UCG Overseas Students' Group. They also cooperated with UCG Third World Society in their action week.

In 1983, the main activities were the public meetings, on "consumerism", with UCG Third World Society, and "the Philippines" with the Galway Council of Trade Unions. Once Mary Kelly, who had been a key convenor in the Branch, moved out of the area activity began to fall off, as most of the other Comhlámh members were already over-stretched with other commitments.

In general, in spite of maintaining a membership throughout the country, Comhlámh did not manage to build long-term active groups outside Dublin and Cork until the Bringing it All Back Home Project of the late 1980s.

## Chapter Six

### COMING HOME

As we have seen, Comhlámh's founders saw their mandate not just in development education and campaigns but also in supporting overseas development workers and improving the appropriateness and effectiveness of development work.

Comhlámh's policy committee on Personal Service Overseas, which met 15 times in 1980, chaired by Cathy Gaynor, decided to consider development work under seven headings:

- project selection;
- personnel selection;
- training;
- back-up services in the field;
- protection of volunteers' interests;
- resettlement in Ireland; and
- integration of returned volunteers.

The policy committee carried out a survey of sending agencies and of volunteers themselves to study the policy and practice in these areas.

Two areas of relations with development were to continue to be central:

- personal advice and social support for returned development workers on a 'peer-to-peer basis especially through 'reorientation courses'; and
- campaigns and lobbying to promote the interests of development workers (often known as the 'Protection of the Interests of Development Workers - PIDW in the jargon!)

#### Reorientation courses

The pattern of reorientation courses established in Comhlámh's early years has been followed, with some variation, ever since. Within this pattern, however, the numbers participating and the emphasis have changed.

In Comhlámh's early years, reorientation weekends were closely tied to membership, which was a condition of participation. Sessions centred around a guest speaker, a Comhlámh member who talked about the ways in which returned development workers could become involved in promoting development, mainly through Comhlámh. The sessions also included a social get-together, usually a cheese-and-wine party, briefing sessions on questions such as social welfare entitlements and a discussion on the experience of development work overseas.

In 1979/80, two reorientation weekends were organised, and Comhlámh continued to organise between two and four weekends per year throughout the 1980s. The attendance was in the region of 10-15 per session (or 20-30 per year) and did not rise much above 50 per year until the 1990s. It is interesting that these reorientation sessions attracted significantly less people in a year than Comhlámh's members' meetings.

From 1980 to 1993, reorientations were held in Glencree Town House in North Wicklow, allowing Sunday to be devoted to a hike in the Wicklow mountains. After 1983, they moved to central Dublin for cost reasons.

In the mid 1980s, it was agreed that the weekends would incorporate APSO's "debriefing" weekend. The debriefings had been APSO's way of consulting development workers on the training and support which they had received overseas. APSO's debriefings had not attracted large numbers and it was felt that combining with Comhlámh's reorientations could avoid duplication. Gradually, the two processes became merged so that Comhlámh took responsibility, in a more general way, for helping returned development workers to evaluate their own overseas experience systematically. This process included looking at relations with sending agencies, but also with the host communities.

Reorientations were also expanded in 1987 to include individual careers advice provided by Comhlámh members. The same year, the idea of a "follow-up day" for people who had attended reorientations was piloted, but it was not continued due to the law turn out.

### ***Resettlement Manual***

The *Resettlement Manual* produced in 1981 built on similar manuals from earlier years. The manual gave advice to overseas development workers returning to Ireland about resettling in Ireland and becoming involved in development work here.

There was a strong emphasis in the manual, and in its 1990s successor *The Returned Development Worker's Handbook* on "reverse culture-shock" or "the shock of coming home".

Helping people to overcome this reverse culture-shock has always been an important part of Comhlámh's re-orientation and social events.

Most Irish people going to, say, Zambia experience only slight culture shock. You expect it to be different from home in most ways, and it is. In some cases both the host country and the expatriate lifestyle are more like home than you expect.

Coming home is a different matter. No-one really expects home to be different. Most people find that home has changed and, more importantly, they themselves have changed. Friends have moved on, settled down in new areas, had kids, changed their political views and their 'local' pub. People returning to Ireland in the mid-1980s found that computers had sprung up everywhere, consumerism had increased and social divisions had become both deeper and more accepted.

In addition to this disorientation, most overseas development workers are shocked at how little their Irish friends are interested in their anecdotes, much less the deep cultural and political insights learned overseas.

Comhlámh has always provided an interested environment for talking about and comparing stories and insights - between socials and courses.

For much of the 1980s, these socials took the form of "pub nights" for recently returned development workers to get together, hill-walking groups and quiz-nights.

### **Interests of development workers**

Comhlámh's promotion of development workers' interests stemmed from the philosophy outlined in EVI's *Glenree Charter* of the late 1970s. This argued that development work should be recognised as a serious commitment, bringing with it responsibilities and rights, not just as a 'charitable' past time.

In the 1980s, with increasing unemployment at home, eligibility for unemployment benefits, social welfare benefits and pension rights served to discourage development workers from working overseas. A meeting on welfare rights and other entitlements, or lack of them, was called in 1983. Mary Jennings, a social worker attending her first Comhlámh meeting, found herself clarifying the questions about entitlements raised by the other participants. The next day, the administrator Dave O'Brien rang her to offer her a 4 week research contract. This 4 week contract grew into a major project, leading to the publication in August 1983 of a major study on *Protection of the Interests of the Development Worker: A Study of Current Practice in Ireland and Recommendations*.

The study developed themes from a 1978 study by APSO and surveyed policy and practice in both the public and private sector on leave of absence, pension rights, incremental credit, social welfare, health cover on return and insurance.

The study recommended:

- leave of absence without loss of seniority;
- incremental credit for work overseas;
- payment of pension contributions by the state and
- eligibility for social welfare on return to Ireland on the same basis as employees who have paid PRSI contributions.

The latter problem was to be central to Comhlámh's and APSO's lobbying. Even if development workers had paid PRSI contributions

before their departure, their time overseas was considered a lapse in employment. The report outlined ways in which development workers could lose out through this "lapse in contributions", including: unemployment benefit, pay related benefit, invalidity pensions, dental, optical and aural treatments, maternity allowance and old age pensions.

By the end of 1983, Mary Jennings had become Administrator of Comhlámh, in succession to Dave O'Brien, a post which she held for five years. During most of those five years, she represented Ireland on the NGDO/EC Liaison Committee on Volunteer Development Work, where the protection of the social and legal rights of overseas development worker became a European issue. Comhlámh also took this issue up in Ex-Volunteers International (EVI) and represented EVI on the influential Regional Conference of International Voluntary Services (RCIVS).

Soon after the submission of the Comhlámh report on the interests of development workers, the social welfare rules on contributions were eased to allow PRSI to be paid on allowances overseas, but this still did not benefit most development workers.

In June 1985, after major lobbying through Irish and European channels, the social welfare rules were changed to allow for recognition of service overseas with recognised Irish agencies as the equivalent of PRSI contributions at home. While much of the rest of the agenda was not substantially resolved until the 1990s, this research and campaign established Comhlámh's credibility as an effective lobbying body in Ireland and Europe and this helped further expansion.

In Comhlámh's early years, members had a strong input into training of development workers, especially through proposals to APSO and through work on APSO's policy and training committees. In addition, the theme of improving the effectiveness of development work was central to much of Comhlámh's educational and campaigning work.

## Chapter Seven

### DEBATES AND SENATORS

Much of the early impact of Comhlámh's work, as we have seen, came from the Comhlámh Debates which attracted large attendances and had a considerable impact on the thinking of development agency and political decision-makers. Following the reorganisation of development education work into single-issue groups after 1981, the Debates were run by a small but effective group of volunteers.

#### Debates on a Divided World

The debates continued to grow in scale and in impact into the early 1980s. From 1981 to 1987, the debates consisted of a series of 5 public debates each year in Dublin, known as the Comhlámh Autumn Debates, and about 7 or 8 other debates in other parts of the country. Outside Dublin the debates were held principally in Cork, Kilkenny and Galway where the Comhlámh Branches were best established, although in 1984 they had extended to Derry, Limerick and Waterford, and drew on the international speakers who came over for the Dublin debates.

The debates involved high-profile international and national speakers, and many were chaired by broadcasters and other journalists. Attendances were consistently high until 1986, working up from about 150-250 in 1981 to nearly 500 at some of the debates in the mid-1980s. They had a profound impact on thinking not only of Comhlámh's own activists but of decision-makers in all of the agencies and in politics. In addition, the consistent flow of articulate and radical speakers from both the 'Third World' and Europe who came to Ireland for the Debates made an impact on public understanding through radio, television and newspaper interviews which went far beyond the influence on the immediate debate audiences.



Certain themes run through the debates, particularly a highly critical assessments of different aspects of development work, from both Southern and Irish development workers' perspectives. Increasingly, the themes of women in development and fair trade, promoted by other Comhlámh single-issue groups also took a central place in the debate..

The 1981 series of debates on topics from the *Brandt Report* were followed in November 1982 by a series of five debates in Dublin under the heading of *Debates on a Divided World*, chaired by public figures including RTE's John Bowman and Rodney Rice and the Employment Equality Agency's Sylvia Meehan. Attendances at the debates ranged from 190 to 240, and media coverage included a half-page in the Irish Times and several radio and television interviews with speakers.

A highly controversial start to the series was provided with a debate on the Ethics of Fundraising under the title "Merchants of Misery", in which Neville Jayaweera, a Sri Lankan from the World Association for Christian Communication criticised some development agencies for the exploitation of shocking and superficial images of suffering to raise funds, and thereby distracting attention from the underlying causes of under-development. In reply, Elizabeth Stamp of Oxfam argued that development agencies were in fact in the forefront of arguing for solutions to the causes of poverty, while also working to alleviate the symptoms.

Other topics in 1982 included "Development by Diplomas or Degrees", a critical look at European expatriate involvement in African education; "The Sugar Trade: Jobs for Ireland or the Third World?", a debate on the impact of the Common Agricultural Policy on Africa which pitted the Patrick Wright of the Irish Farmers' association (IFA) against David Morris of the Commonwealth Secretariat; "Disarm for Development", with Altaf Gauher, Editor of *South Magazine*, and John Wood of the Institute of Economic Affairs looking at the use of Western arms to control "Third World" countries; and a debate on "Population" hosted by the Comhlámh Women's Group (and covered in the chapter of this history on that Group).

The Debates continued to have a strong Dublin bias, but most of the speakers took part in at least one meeting organised by one of the Comhlámh Branches in Cork, Galway and Kilkenny. In Kilkenny, there were high-profile public debates on the sugar trade and on population. The Comhlámh branch in Cork organised joint public meetings with UCC on disarmament and population, attracting over 70 people to each. In Galway, Comhlámh ran a successful debate on disarmament.

Topics over the next few years included the impact of tourism, the follow-up to the *Brandt Report*, North-South dialogue, women's perspectives on development and consumerism in the Northern countries.

The Autumn Debates were discontinued in 1988, although Comhlámh has continued to organise conferences, public meetings and more informal discussions ever since. The most direct successor to the debates would be the Development Forum meetings which were held monthly in Dublin until 1996 and the Public Lectures held several times a year in Cork.

The main reasons given by people involved in organising the Debates for discontinuing them from 1988 were:

- the disappointing turnout for debates in 1987, which concentrated on the theme of aid;
- a feeling that they were continuing to draw the same crowds and as Irish understanding of development issues became more sophisticated, at least in limited circles, they were increasingly "preaching to the converted";
- sheer exhaustion at the scale of the operation, carried by a small group of volunteers.

In spite of these reasons for discontinuing the Debates in 1988, however, both organisers and participants interviewed for this history felt that they were very successful and could be used again as a model in the future.

#### Media profile

In the early 1980s, Comhlámh's urge to spread understanding of development issues was manifested in a highly active media strategy.

This was fronted by a succession of very articulate Information Officers, particularly Fred Gale (1981), Justin Kilcullen (1982- he later became Chief Executive of Trócaire) and Fionnuala Brennan (1983-she was later Coordinator of the Development Education Study Centre- DESC- and of the National Committee for Development Education - NCDE).

The presence in the media included a series of three RTE radio programmes on development topics initiated by Comhlámh in 1983. Considerable effort was put into compiling lists of experts on different topics within Comhlámh for the benefit of journalists, following up a "getting your ideas across" course for returned development workers run by Tony O'Dwyer, Cathy Gaynor, Gretchen Fitzgerald and Sister Maureen McMahon in 1981.

Comhlámh had a particularly high profile in the *Irish Times* and the *Cork Examiner* throughout the 1980s on the basis of the Debates and the lobbying campaigns, particularly at election time.

#### **Running for the Seanad**

Comhlámh's only direct foray into electoral politics was in 1983 when Justin Kilcullen was put forward as a candidate for the one of the three NUI graduates' seats in the Seanad. This followed a decision by the Executive in November 1982 that a Seanad election campaign would be a useful way of raising development issues with an important constituency.

This was an ambitious move. With a constituency of 29,000 at the time, throughout Ireland and overseas, and a packed field of candidates, the NUI Seanad election is notoriously harder than any Dail campaign.

The election leaflet was posted to half of the voters, representing the younger voters registered in the last 13 years, and another 10,000 to RDWs, religious orders and development educators. The leaflet called for a political response to global poverty and explained Comhlámh's composition and motivation.

Although there was some correspondence from members who were against giving credibility to an elitist election, most members threw

themselves enthusiastically into envelope stuffing, canvassing friends and publicity, not to mention raising the £1,850 needed to run the campaign. In the April 1983 edition of *Comhlámh News*, Justin Kilcullen describes trawling schools, laboratories and even the Galway abattoir in search of voters!

In the event, Justin won 714 votes, which was highly creditable considering the opposition. Other candidates fighting for the same 'political space' included two of those elected, Michael D Higgins who had a strong 'Third World' profile from his solidarity work with Nicaragua and Brendan Ryan of the Simon Community, as well as defeated candidates, Joe Costello of the Prisoners' Rights Organization and candidates from two of the teachers' unions, the ASTI and INTO.

The campaign was judged a success, and there was talk of contesting future elections. In the event, Comhlámh did not contest any more elections, not least because it could undermine lobbying and good relations with other Senators. It is undeniable, however, that the effectiveness of Comhlámh's future lobbying was enhanced by this modest but significant demonstration of electoral clout.

#### **Membership discussion and education**

All of this public education activity depended on the internal process of self-education and policy development which had been a basic core of Comhlámh's work from its foundation. As we have seen, the primary fora for internal discussion in the early years were the Spring Seminars, in which members considered development and justice issues. In 1981, these took the form of examining a range of issues in Ireland, such as education, housing the media and the role of multinationals in the economy, with case studies from countries such as Brazil and Tanzania. In addition, the same year, a series of more informal monthly "educational/social evenings" was organised to provide an introduction for new members and to talk in a relaxed way about development topics using films, videos and discussions.

Later in the 1980s, much of the internal education and discussion took place at the Council Weekends and through members' participation in the

development education courses. Although the Council was still the governing body of Comhlámh between AGMs, the Weekends took on a more and more educational and fun format, with those who were not Council members encouraged to come along as observers.

## Chapter Eight

### TEACHERS AND EDUCATORS

Some of Comhlámh's strongest contributions to development education in the 1980s were made through the Comhlámh Teachers' Group. Like the Health Action Group, it was able to draw on a large constituency of potential members, since teachers have always formed a significant part of Irish overseas development workers.

The group was officially launched as the Teachers' Liaison Group in September 1982. A number of members of the development education group had laid the groundwork for this move by writing to all teaching members of Comhlámh inviting them to a series of planning meetings.

The group launched itself with the initial objectives of self-education on development education methodology and the potential for development education in the curriculum and building up the teachers' resources in the Comhlámh library in Dublin.

Using this learning, they went on to run two day-long teachers' courses were organised in Drumcondra and Carysfort teacher training colleges in 1983, facilitated by David O'Brien, Colm Regan and Sr. Patricia Murray. These concentrated on simulation games and other forms of experiential education which were relatively new in Ireland. They had a combined attendance of over 70 primary teachers and were followed by "recall" days the following year. In 1985, two eight-week courses were run for teachers in Tallaght and Maynooth respectively, and in 1987 a five-day full-time in-service course was run in Kimmage Manor, including a module on the use of puppets.

The Group suffered in the early days from a high turnover of volunteers. Of the ten in the original group, only three were still around the following

year. Brian Tubbert, described as a "real workhorse" and motivator of the initial group was one of those who was not around the following year. They succeeded, however, in recruiting new members to keep it going.

In addition to the workshops for teachers, the Group was involved from the start in producing a wide range of materials including, in 1983, a joint pack with the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) and El Salvador Committee in Irish; collaboration with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) on a 'peace pack', and creation of a series of posters showing students' reactions to simulation games and outlining ways of integrating development issues into the curriculum.

The group also organised displays and sold materials at the teachers' subject association conferences for Geography, Home Economics and Science, and at the Convent Managers' Association Conference.

By 1984, the Group was working closely with the National Federation of Youth Clubs on joint educational programmes. They made presentations at the AGMs of various teaching groups and continued to build links with teachers in El Salvador.

The Teachers' Group continued throughout their life to put a strong emphasis on self-education through updating themselves on new ideas and techniques and by going back to first principles in "values seminars". In 1986, a special weekend course was run for members in Kimmage Manor in group dynamics, facilitation skills and clarification methodologies.

By 1986, the Group had grown to twenty teachers in primary, secondary and adult education. Members visited a number of development education centres in Britain and took part in the National Association of Development Education Centres' (NADEC) conference nearly every year.

#### **Beyond Live Aid**

The most ambitious project run by the teachers' group was the twenty-two-week "Beyond Live Aid" course started in 1986. The name built on

the popularity of Bob Geldof's Live Aid concert for Ethiopia, while pointing to the need to go deeper in our understanding of the causes of underdevelopment. The course was designed to meet the needs of both primary and post-primary level teachers as well as youth leaders. It encouraged participants to formulate their own understanding of development issues, expose them to participative methodologies and encourage them to apply them to different practical settings.

After the first year, it was decided to divide the course into two ten-week courses, one to explore issues in development and one to look at ways of exploring these issues with groups. Each course attracted about 25 participants.

This basic pattern of courses laid the foundation for Comhlámh's development education courses in Dublin for the next decade. The 'issues' course became the "World on Our Doorstep" (WOOD) course in 1990 and the "Issues in Development" course in 1995, while the second part of the course became the "Skills in Development Education" course. In spite of the name changes, the basic structure and the participative methodology of the courses have remained largely the same.

The focus of the courses, however, has changed over time. By the 1990s, with more in-service training for teachers available from other sources, including groups in the NODE Network, the courses concentrated more on providing skills and exploring issues for development educators and activists in the 'informal sector'. In addition, Comhlámh now organises similar participatory ten-week night-courses in both Human Rights and Environment and Development.

#### **The new Development Education Group**

In 1989, eight years after the break-up of the original Comhlámh Development Education Group into single-issue groups, the Teachers' Group renamed itself the Development Education Group. This was a reflection of the new Comhlámh emphasis on the 'non-formal' adult sector, with a strong emphasis on activism. The Group has continued to the present day not only to run the courses but also to pioneer resources and training for both formal and non-formal sectors.

## Chapter Nine

### COMHLÁMH WOMEN'S GROUP

The Comhlámh Women's Issues Group was formed in October 1981, as a result of a workshop in Glencree in October 1981. The group, which originally had a core of about 12 members in Dublin, with contacts in Cork, Galway and Sligo, defined itself as a "research and pressure group on women in development".

The Group in Dublin met every fortnight in 1982, with a Chairperson, Secretary and Treasurer. Some initial activities in 1981/2 included:

- Contributions on the role of women in development to the Comhlámh submission to the White Paper on Development Cooperation;
- Articles for *Comhlámh News*;
- Developing materials for educational courses and reorientation sessions and building up a stock of relevant educational resources in Comhlámh.

#### Personal and political

In July 1982, the group decided to define itself as a women-only group and to organise its meetings on a consensus basis, rotating facilitators from meeting to meeting. The only male member, Justin Kilcullen, had to leave the Group. The Group saw its brief as including promoting gender analysis on personal issues. It provided a space for members to consider their own role and position both as women development workers and as women in Comhlámh itself. In 1984, the group changed its name to Comhlámh Women's Group to reflect this unity of the personal and political dimensions of their work.

#### Education and research

The primary focus of the group continued to be education and research on women and development. Talks were given to both women's groups and 'Third World' groups in colleges and communities, as well as to Comhlámh groups and public meetings. The range of members' interests and knowledge is reflected in the topics of their talks in 1982:

- *One World Feminism*;
- *Women and Work*;
- *Development Aid Projects and Effects on Women*;
- *Oppressive Practices Against Women*;
- *Women and Islam*; and
- *Women in Central America*.

The Group used the Comhlámh Autumn debates and their own public meetings as well as *Comhlámh News* as a way of reaching a wider audience. The 1982 debate on "Overpopulation and Population Control", with Roxanne Clear (ISIS Feminist Network) and Eric McGrath (Population Concern) attracted about 240 people. The 1983 debate on "Changes in Women - Development for Domestication or Liberation" with Joji Carino (Philippines) and Barbara Rodgers (Author of *Development for Domestication*) also attracted large crowds. Both debates were claimed by Sylvia Meehan, Chief Executive of the Employment Equality Agency.

In 1984, a major Seminar on "Women, Aid and Agriculture" brought together speakers from development agencies and their critics. This was followed in 1984 by a Conference with the World University Service (WUS).

Major policy submissions prepared by the Group included a Submission to the Government White Paper on Development Policy in 1983 and one to the delegation to the Nairobi Conference in 1984 to close the *United Nations Decade for Women*

The Group saw itself as having a special responsibility in relation to future development workers. In 1982, they presented a workshop on

"Justice, Human Rights and Development" at an APSO induction course for outgoing development workers. Also in 1982, members collected personal accounts of experiences overseas, with Cathy Gaynor of APSO "to share with prospective women development workers attending orientation courses". In 1984, the Group made a submission to APSO on use of sexist language in its publications and activities.

In 1985, a Seminar on "Images of Women in Development Agencies" attracted over 50 participants, leading to the foundation of a Development Agencies Women's Network (DAWN).

#### **Building alliances**

The Group played a particularly important role in the 1980s in putting themselves and Comhlámh in touch with the broader women's movement. The Group's contacts included counterpart groups in the UK, Netherlands and Peru, as well as wide range of Irish women's groups. In 1982, for example, there was some controversy within Comhlámh over the Group's decision to bring the Comhlámh banner on a march against the 'pro-life' constitutional amendment organised by the Anti-Amendment Campaign. In 1984, the group played a part in the Women's Peace Camp in the Phoenix Park, modeled on the Greenham Common protests to focus opposition to the visit of US President Reagan.

In April 1982, the Group became a full member of the Council for the Status of Women (CSW), giving an opportunity to learn from other Irish women's groups and to talk to them about women and development.

The group was very active in the CSW for several years, particularly in the International Affairs Committee. Sheila Dillon and Patricia Conboy participated, on behalf of the Group, in the Conference in Nairobi in July 1985 to mark the end of the United Nations Decade for Women and the Comhlámh Women's Group ran a workshop at the follow-up Irish Women's Forum in Dublin the following October. Even after the Group ceased activity, in 1986, Comhlámh contributed to be represented on the CSW by, among others, Joan Burton, later Minister of State for Development Cooperation.

#### **Moving on**

Although the Group was not active from 1986 to 1990, its work was carried forward in other ways. One of the lasting legacies of the group was participation, along with other women's groups, in the foundation of Banúlacht - Irish Women in Development, which still brings together Irish women in international and domestic development and Southern women in Ireland and is at the forefront of development education and gender awareness. Many women who became active in Banúlacht had previously been involved in the Comhlámh Women's Group.

#### **Fresh start**

The Women's Issues Group (WIG) was revived in 1990, following a letter to NODE News by Mary Van Lieshout, who was active in as a volunteer Comhlámh and also worked for Oxfam. The group was launched with ten members, and became involved in exploring a range of issues linking Irish women with women in Southern countries. Both Mary Van Lieshout and Ann Fitzpatrick who were active in the revived group, played an important part in Irish inputs to the series of United Nations conferences in the 1990s on Human Rights, Population, Social Development and Women.

The Group ran a number of important seminars for women's groups, produced a special issue of Third World Now on Women's Health Worldwide and an important 'overhead' slide pack for development educators on the same subject.

## Chapter Ten

### FROM COMHLÁMH NEWS TO FOCUS

As we have seen, *Comhlámh News* was founded in 1978 as a forum for communication and education within the emerging Comhlámh membership. The early issues contained a mixture of members' personal news, news of Comhlámh activities and debates and analysis of development issues at home and abroad.

While it continued to act as a Comhlámh communication channel into the 1980s, the magazine increasingly came to be seen as one of the main Irish sources of ideas and information on development issues for a broader public. Through its various name changes, as *Comhlámh News*, *Third World Now* and *Focus on Ireland and the Wider World*, the magazine has maintained a consistent output of three-to-four high quality magazines a year up to Issue Number 55 at the end of 1996 and will hopefully continue to flourish.

It was natural that *Comhlámh News* would broaden out to reach this wider constituency:

- there was a clear gap in the 'market': the hunger for ideas on development, which has been noted in the response to Comhlámh debates and public events, had largely been filled by the British-based *New Internationalist* which had been required reading for radical development activists from the early 1970s. There was no publication better placed than *Comhlámh News* to provide the same type of coverage from an Irish perspective. Although several magazines with a radical or alternative perspective, such as *Resource*, *Gralton*, *Alpha* and *Z*, achieved much higher sales than *Comhlámh News* in the 1980s, none lasted for more than a couple of years;

- Comhlámh's constant influx of new members' returning from overseas development work provided a wealth of experiences and fresh ideas;
- Comhlámh was well connected with all of the other development organisations and was seen as a neutral and independent meeting ground where ideas could be discussed;
- Comhlámh's debates and development education work meant that Comhlámh was in touch with ideas and thinkers as they emerged;
- Comhlámh's voluntary nature meant that production and sales costs were kept to a minimum.

None of these factors would have accounted for the success of *Comhlámh News* without the basic ingredients of fresh ideas, good writing and editing which are still striking to anyone looking over the back issues today.

To reflect the desire to use *Comhlámh News* as an educational tool, the Collective which produced it adopted a detailed set of objectives, including

- publication of ideas, analysis and opinions on issues of world development, and stimulating critical thinking;
- promoting "the concept of integral world development"
- highlighting structural causes of dependency and obstacles to development, including the Cold War, "capitalist consumerism and socialist rigidity", dictatorships, multinational companies etc.;
- connecting Irish and international development issues and attitudes;
- publicising activities of Irish people and groups "working for the development of One World"; and
- publicising Comhlámh activities and acting as a means of communication between the different members' groups carrying them out.

The development themes in *Comhlámh News* in the early 1980s continued to reflect the breadth of members' interests and involvement. A quick skim through the first few years shows some themes constantly

recurring (women in development, poverty in Ireland, racism, trade unions and development, aid, development education resources, South Africa, refugees, etc.). Other topics cover a wide range of countries where members had worked or had contacts and subjects as diverse as (to take a random sample) Vietnamese boat people, Islamic art, how children's attitudes form, nuclear power, land reform, Europe's common agricultural policy, Irish Travellers, bottle feeding, prostitution, liberation theology, women and technology and conditions of banana growers.

Irish responses to the Nicaraguan Revolution of July 1979 become a major theme, with an appeal for technical personnel as early as January 1980 and an article by Peadar Kirby on the literacy crusade later the same year, followed in subsequent years by a range of personal accounts, analyses and appeals for solidarity.

#### **Towards *Third World Now***

From April 1983, the magazine, which by this time had become more 'glossy', began to concentrate each issue around a theme, which took up about a third of the magazine. Some themes over the next few years included India, Marxism, One World, civil liberties, aid, US-predator or protector?, soviet expansion, Christianity, the world media, women and development and racism.

In addition to these themes, however, the magazine continued to contain the same mix of Comhlámh news, gossip, events, policy papers, accounts of hikes, opinions and analysis as before.

In 1985, there was considerable discussion in the editorial collective and Comhlámh generally about how to broaden the appeal of the magazine and get its messages to a wider audience. The decisive change in direction of the magazine was agreed in time for the Spring 1986 issue. Although it continued to be produced by Comhlámh members on a voluntary basis, and received funding through Comhlámh, the magazine changed in three vital respects:

- it changed its name to *Third World Now*;
- it gave much less space to news specifically about Comhlámh; and

- each issue concentrated almost exclusively on the special theme, rather than merely devoting a few pages to it as before. This followed the highly successful *New Internationalist* model.

This loosening of the public identification with Comhlámh was an essential step to increase the magazine's circulation by giving it a more recognisable name and making it look less like an in-house-paper to the casual reader. Circulation increased by 20% to 2,000 in 1986 (200 on subscription, 300 sold through bookshops and the remainder distributed free to Comhlámh members, other voluntary groups, politicians, libraries etc.).

On the other hand, the change in the magazine also contributed to lessening Comhlámh's identification as a natural way of becoming involved in development education and campaigning. To a certain extent, *Third World Now* came to be seen more as a magazine helped by Comhlámh office than as one owned by the Comhlámh membership.

By the late 1980s, these changes began to swing back slightly towards the older formula, with a stronger Comhlámh branding on the cover and inside, and with more general interest development articles and debates alongside the main theme.

#### **Merger**

The next changes came in 1989-1990 with two issues, one of which presaged a long-term change in the nature of the magazine. The winter 1989 issue, dealing with debt, was produced jointly by the members of the Joint Solidarity Forum which grouped Comhlámh with the solidarity groups which linked Ireland with Mozambique, Nicaragua, the Philippines and Chile. This formula was tried again for another issue on democracy.

The more fundamental move, however, was the long process of discussion and the eventual merger of the predominantly Dublin-based *Third World Now* with *Ireland and the Wider World* (previously *Cork and the Wider World*). Cooperation between the two magazines was logical since there was such an overlap in issues covered and many of the



key people in the Cork-based magazine were Comhlámh members anyway. Among those involved in the merger several, including John Walsh and Mary Mangan from Cork and Jerry Crowley, Marc Prochasson and Colm Ryder from Dublin, had been active in Comhlámh almost from the start.

On the other hand, there had been a significant difference in style, with the Cork magazine including more Irish and local news than *Third World Now*, while the latter generally went into more depth on its themes. Working out the practicalities of the merger represented a lot of hard work in discussion to reach a consensus not to mention a lot of inter-city travel!

The first joint issue, carrying the two banner-heads of both magazines, was produced in 1990. Its editorial started: "No, this is not a take-over, or a sell-out - though we hope it will!" It explained that the two editorial groups had decided to produce four issues in 1990, but did not mention longer-term cooperation. The magazine had a format similar to that of *Third World Now*, but it included Cork local activist news in a special section.

By 1992, the double-masthead of the two 'parent' publications had disappeared, and the magazine was renamed *Focus on Ireland and the Wider World*. However, it was not until 1995 that the reference to two editorial collectives (Comhlámh and Ireland and the Wider World) gave way to a single Comhlámh collective, based in Dublin and Cork. During all of this time, and since then, issues of the magazine have been produced alternately in Cork and Dublin, with increasing coordination on themes, planning, content, style and distribution.

The merger is seen by most people as a success. Some of the issues, on subjects such as debt, population, the media, South Africa and development work have become classic resources for development educators and activists and are in demand long after publication. Several of the latest issues have been produced with particular Comhlámh themes and campaigns in mind and have acted as a valuable resource.

### The wheel turns...

In 1995, recognising the same need for a new channel for communication and discussion within Comhlámh identified by their predecessors nearly 20 years before, the Executive launched a new internal newsletter known as *Comhlámh News*. This was later renamed *Comhlámh Newsletter* to avoid historical confusion.

## Chapter Eleven

### HEALTH ACTION GROUP

The Comhlámh Health Action Group was formed in 1984 to raise awareness of health and development issues. A large proportion of Irish overseas development workers have always been in health areas as nurses, doctors and, increasingly, community health workers.

Many Irish health workers became aware of the debates about the balance between the traditional hospital-led approaches to health care and the smaller scale community health education initiatives while overseas. They were conscious of the damage which can be caused by trying to impose Western models in different cultural contexts, and by the promotion policies of the big pharmaceutical companies.

In 1985, the Group launched an ambitious programme of information activities, drawing on the experience and commitment of returned health workers and on their collective research as a group. Members addressed all of the APSO Health Care Courses for future overseas health workers.

The group also presented ideas to Comhlámh public meetings, student groups, public health nurse courses and Ex-Volunteers International Conferences. Each presentation included a video, a talk, a discussion and an invitation to join the group.

The main themes of these presentations were the problems of dangerous and inappropriate drugs promoted by the pharmaceutical companies and the importance of primary health care and health education. These talks and public education work continued to be a key part of the Group's work for the rest of its life.

The Group also made contacts in its first year with overseas health workers in Africa, Asia and Latin America and with health workers from India, Philippines, Nicaragua, Mauritius Kenya, Tanzania and Lesotho visiting Ireland.

In 1986, the Group strengthened its international connections through Health Action International (HAI). The same year, the group also increased its research, concentrating even more on the pharmaceutical industry and contributing to the report by Dublin Fine Gael MEP Mary Bannotti to the European Parliament and writing for *Third World Now* and *Consumer Choice* on the issues.

The newly identified problem of AIDS in Southern countries was seen from 1986 as a key research priority and in April 1987 the Group ran a major seminar on the issue. AIDS had been discussed in the press up to then as a rich person's problem in California, but Irish development workers were well aware of its impact on Africa.

From 1987 -9, the Group increasingly concentrated on a campaign against a mercury soap factory in Arklow. Mercury soap was widely promoted by pharmaceutical companies throughout Africa as a 'skin - whitener', in spite of being condemned by all reputable international health authorities. In much of post colonial Africa, and particularly in South Africa under apartheid, a lighter skin was widely regarded as the key to status and employment.

The Campaign against the Mercury Soap factory won broad public support, with letters to newspapers and lobbying at EEC and Irish Government level.

The Group continued until 1989, with a continued emphasis on primary health care and pharmaceutical issues. It eventually wound up, as members moved on to other issues.

In its five year life, the Comhlámh Health Action Group had a major effect on the consciousness of public opinion, decision makers in Government and development workers and agencies. Although the

Group no longer exists, the issues of primary health care and the role of pharmaceutical Companies, as well as an understanding of the need to base health programmes on the actual needs and skills of communities, are still central to development education and health training in Ireland.

## Chapter Twelve

### FAIRLY TRADED COFFEE

Throughout the 1980s, one of Comhlámh's best known activities was selling fairly traded coffee. From the early policy discussions in Comhlámh in the 1970s, unfair trade structures and the dominant role of multi-national companies had been identified as a major obstacle to development.

In several European and North American Countries, development and solidarity groups had started to sell fairly traded products, particularly commodities like tea and coffee and artifacts made in 'Third World' communities. These groups ensured that the products were produced under acceptable working conditions and that the producer was paid a fair price, in contrast to the exploitative price paid by multinational companies. In the case of tea and coffee, it was also an important principle that they were processed in the country of origin, keeping an important part of the added value at home, rather than in an industrialised country.

Comhlámh's Coffee Committee was formed in February 1981 by some members of the Development Education Group. The group saw the import and sale of coffee as important not only for its practical benefits but as an educational tool to raise consciousness about trade patterns. It was also one of the few Comhlámh activities which could be undertaken by members outside the cities.

The Committee identified Tanzania as the best place to import from. Most of Tanzania's coffee was produced by small farmers and cooperatives. The Tanzanian model of African Socialism, based on building up rural cooperatives rather than industrial production, was widely supported in development circles. Tanzanian president Julius

Nyerere was one of the most respected advocates of African self-sufficiency and had strong contacts with Ireland.

The committee started by researching the practical issues in importation, tariffs, storage, advertising, marketing and distribution of coffee. They found that, initially, it would be more practical to buy coffee from the British fair trade organisation Trade Craft than to import directly from Tanzania.

With £600 of Comhlámh funds and a loan of £1,000, the first coffee was imported in April. Sales soon built up to a level of 600 bags per month.

Although contacts were made with supermarkets, actual sales were built up through sales to friends, church groups, development committees, conferences, sales and the like.

During its first year, the Committee built close contacts with European counterparts. Stephen Lee went to an Alternative Marketing Organisation (AMO) meeting in Holland in October 1981.

In the early 1980s, as membership of the Coffee Committee fluctuated, a strong network of sellers was built up. An effective, and entirely voluntary, administration was developed to manage importation, distribution and marketing. Comhlámh's branches in Dublin, Cork and Kilkenny were the main centres of activity in the early years.

The educational side of the Campaign was seen as the key - after all, voluntary sales were never really going to break the grip of the multinationals in themselves. In the 1981 Comhlámh Annual Report, the Committee members felt that knowledge of the coffee trade, and the particular case of Tanzania, was becoming widespread in Ireland as a result of Comhlámh's coffee sales, development education materials and publicity.

In 1983, the group produced a "fact pack" for use by Community groups, although the planned "slide pack" took longer than expected to materialise, being finally produced in 1987.

In 1983, although sales and educational work continued to grow, the group turned down the chance of a ad on RTE because they were unsure of their ability to handle the increased demand.

By the mid 1980s, the idea of fairly traded coffee was widely understood and there was considerable demand from individuals, schools, youth groups and other development and social justice groups. Sales of £17,500 (10,300 packs of coffee) in 1986 was a dramatic achievement for a group of five or six volunteers, with Colm Ryder as a mainstay, in a country where coffee was still a minority drink. The group worried that the level of sales activity was undermining the development of the educational side of their work.

By this time, the Campaign, renamed the Commodities Group in 1984, had taken on a new political urgency with the selling of Nicaraguan coffee. There was widespread support for what Nicaragua was achieving in education and health and for its resistance to US attempts to stamp out what Oxfam called "the threat of a good example". The United States was trying to break the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua by financing the *Contra* guerrillas and by an international trade blockade. Hundreds of Irish people went to work in Nicaragua in the 1980s, mostly on work/study brigades organised by the Irish Nicaragua Support Group (INSG).

By 1986, Traideireann was well established, but Comhlámh was still selling about half of all of the fairly traded tea and coffee in the Republic. From 1987 onwards, however, Comhlámh coffee and tea sales started to decline, but these were replaced by sales through Traideireann, who supplied health food shops as well as their own distributors, and through the Irish Nicaragua Support Group (INSG), Oxfam and Trocaire.

By 1990, when the Comhlámh Commodities Group decided to merge with the Development Education Group, the issues in commodity sales were more complex. The imbalance in trade terms between 'Third World' producers and multinationals was as blatant as in 1980 and the need for a

channel to sell directly to the consumer was just as important. However, Nicaragua had finally succumbed to the US blockade and *Contra* attacks, electing a pro-US Government in 1990, which brought it into the orbit of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and plummeted it into rapid economic and social decline. Tanzania had also been forced to adopt an IMF run structural adjustment programme from 1985, undermining the protection for small producers. In this new climate, solidarity groups moved from support for particular states to more complex relations with communities. The symbolic value of Tanzanian tea and Nicaraguan Coffee gave way to a more complex project to challenge the international commodity trade.

The consciousness of international trade issues, which is now relatively widespread, owes a lot to the decision of a small group of Comhlámh members, in 1980, to combine educational work with practical sales. This is taken forward into the 1990s by the newly emerging Irish Fair Trade Network's Campaigns on European trade policy and the World Trade Organisation.

PART C  
EXPANSION AND GROWTH  
1986-1992  
*reaching a wider public*

## Chapter Thirteen

### NEW PROJECTS

The growth of Comhlámh activities in the 1980s was reinforced in 1986 by a major shift in the organisation of Comhlámh's development education work which would be as significant in the long term as the change in 1981. However, while 1981 had seen an explosion of members' involvement in development education, 1986 saw the start of relatively large funded projects employing full-time facilitators.

Previous to 1986, Comhlámh's staff had been small, and staff roles were confined to backing up members' initiatives. In 1986, with the African Arts in Education and Bringing It All Back Home Projects, Comhlámh began to use major European development education funding to employ staff whose role was to initiate and facilitate educational work. This trend was reinforced in later projects.

The effects of this change were controversial at the time, and still provoke disagreement among former members interviewed for this history.

Some of those who had been involved in Comhlámh from its' early years argued that this growth was too rapid - from 1.5 staff in 1985 to 6 in 1987. This posed two problems:

- the Executive Committee, made up of volunteers, were largely untrained to handle the responsibility of employment on this scale; and
- the more 'professional' development education atmosphere in Comhlámh could be off-putting for new volunteers joining.

As against this, most of those interviewed saw the new departures as having many benefits. With major staff support and funding, Comhlámh was able to bring development education and development issues to a much broader audience than before. The Debates, which had been Comhlámh's public face from the start, were still drawing large crowds, but were now largely preaching to the converted. On the other hand, the African Arts in Education project, over time, reached into nearly every school in the country and put Comhlámh at the heart of innovative development education. The Bringing it All Back Home project broke through Comhlámh's traditional over-concentration of activities in Dublin and allowed members throughout the country to become involved in development education for the first time.

In addition, much of Comhlámh members' work was carried out under other names, such as Campaign Aid and *Third World Now*, in order to reach a wider audience.

The changes in Comhlámh mirror changes in many Irish voluntary organisations in the 1980s, not only in the international solidarity field. The increased availability of Government and European funding made it possible to recruit staff for 'projects' with a defined beginning, middle and end. This funding was more substantial, but because it was more closely tied to specific projects it was less flexible in backing up members' activities than the money raised by voluntary groups themselves.

As well as reaching a wider audience in Irish society, the European funded projects were positive because of the increased sophistication of development education. With a number of different organisations working in the area, many staffed by former Comhlámh activists, Comhlámh needed to present a more 'polished' face to make a useful extra contribution.

Whatever the rights and wrongs of the changes, in the late 1980s Comhlámh came to be seen as more of a resource for development educators and less of an activist organisation in its own right.

Fundamentally, however, Comhlámh has continued to be membership-based, drawing on the experiences of returned development workers to run and oversee its various projects. In Comhlámh's Annual Reports from 1986 into the early 1990s, however, there is a division between "Group Reports" and "Project Reports". At first, the projects make up a relatively small part at the back but by 1990 they had moved to the front and dominate the Reports.

By this time, the concept of Associate Members (Non-RDWs) was accepted within Comhlámh. Many of Comhlámh's activities and groups rested on a combination of full members and associate members. While Comhlámh's Bringing It All Back Home project promoted training for returned development workers outside Dublin, its successor, NODE, supported a broader range of development educators.

The late 1980s also saw a change in Comhlámh members' development education and action groups themselves. The Comhlámh Women's Group ceased activity in 1986, and the Comhlámh Health Action Group in 1989. The Coffee Group continued until 1990. In 1987, Comhlámh Autumn Debates gave way to the more modest Development Forum.

The immediate support for newly returned development workers continued largely unchanged in nature. Reorientation weekends continued to be a key part of Comhlámh's work, in close cooperation with APSO and other sending agencies, while the *RDW Handbook* was the first information which most members got about Comhlámh.

APSO continued to be one of the main sources of Comhlámh. However, pressure on APSO's budget also led to some questioning of this support. There was always a certain tension, moreover, since APSO was a State Company, owned by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, who was often the target of Comhlámh Campaigns. One senior APSO official told the researcher for this history that they seriously considered cutting off funding to Comhlámh in the early 1990s, saying "*it is not APSO's role to fund political activities!*" APSO saw a danger that, in 'professionalising' its development education work, Comhlámh was in danger of losing sight of its main aim, the involvement of RDWs.

This was, however, only a temporary hiccup in the long-term close relations between APSO and Comhlámh. In 1990 a consultant commissioned by APSO to examine its financial support of Comhlámh's activities recommended increased funding, and recommended that it should be for core operations and not specifically 'tied' to particular services such as reorientation weekends.

The other main source of funding, apart from the European Union, was the National Development Education Grants Committee (NDEGC) set up by the Department of Foreign Affairs to distribute its Development Education grants. Grants and other support from Concern for support for returned development workers and from Trócaire for development education were also very significant in maintaining Comhlámh's work.

During this period, the Executive concentrated very much on managing the growth of the new development education projects and the support for returning development workers. The Executive was chaired by Maire Cris Ni Chionna (1985-1986), Ita Sheehy (1987), Margaret Grogan (1988-1989) and Anne Dolan (1990-1991).

Mary Jennings, as Administrator, from 1983 to 1988 played a key role in the development of Comhlámh. When she left to work as a development consultant, she was replaced by Marius Schoon. Marius was living in Ireland as a political refugee from South Africa, where he had spent many years in prison.

Marius' understanding of the situation in South Africa led to a close relationship between Comhlámh and the Anti-Apartheid Movement. In particular, a group convened by Regina Flynn and Bláthnaid Ní Rathaile organised a support group for the women in Dunnes Stores who were locked out for not handling South African oranges as part of their union's policy on boycotting South Africa.

At the 1990 Comhlámh AGM, Kader Asmal of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, forecasting change in Southern Africa said that "although we love your country, it is time for Marius and me to go home". Within a year, the startlingly fast changes in South Africa allowed them both to

return. After the election of the ANC Government, Kader became Minister for Water Affairs and Marius became head of the state investment bank.

Marius was succeeded as Coordinator of Comhlámh in 1990 by Marc Prochasson. Marc had been involved in Comhlámh as a member since moving over in the mid-1980s. He had previously been in touch with Comhlámh as a representative of the French *counterpart Freres des Hommes*.

Marc came to Comhlámh at a time of financial instability. Some of the major funded projects of the late 1980s (Bringing It All Back Home (BIABH), Ethnic Arts in Education) had come to an end. At the end of 1990, Marc was the only employee left, where there had been six employees a year before.

Marc, an accountant by training, worked incredible hours to rescue the situation. This was achieved through a major funding appeal to former members and through the start-up of a number of new funded projects. These new projects included NODE, which replaced BIABH. New projects funded by Europe included one to promote twinning between Irish and Southern towns an "Environment and Development" course which led to a new Comhlámh course and ultimately a new activist group; and an "Age and Opportunity" project.

In 1994, when Marc left Comhlámh, he worked for a short time with APSO and then returned home to work for *Freres des Hommes* in France. He was replaced by Robin Hanan (the present author), a former civil servant who had been active in the Irish Nicaragua Support Group which shared a building and several campaigns with Comhlámh.

Comhlámh's work with other non-government organisations continued to be an important part of the strategy for promoting development aims. In particular, Comhlámh played an important role in CONGOOD and the NGDO-EC Liaison Committee. Ita Sheehy represented Comhlámh on CONGOOD's Executive and on the Refugee Policy Committee, while Mary Jennings worked on the Development Education Commission.



## Chapter Fourteen

### AFRICAN ARTS IN EDUCATION

From the start, Comhlámh's objectives have included increasing understanding of cultures of 'developing countries'. Cultural evenings, with music and food from particular countries have been an important part of Comhlámh's life from the start, with benefits including returned development workers' nostalgia, improved Irish cultural understanding and fund-raising.

In June 1981, a working group was convened by Mike Walsh to put together an exhibition of artifacts from Southern countries. An initial exhibition in Coolock Library created three 'spaces': a Yemeni sitting room, a Malaysian kitchen a collection of items from tropical Africa.

Other exhibitions in the first year included a collection of Bangladeshi puppets.

The Comhlámh multi-cultural exhibition was named, from 1981, "Karibu - One World, Many Peoples". It included many donated pieces and, as time went by, members and friends on trips overseas bought new pieces. The exhibition was important in bringing to people in Ireland a feel for different cultures.

This exhibition was a centre-piece of Comhlámh's multi-cultural education throughout the 1980s. There was a particular emphasis on the way in which materials are recycled and reused in the South, in contrast to the western throw-away culture.

#### African Arts in Education

The Comhlámh African Arts in Education Project was launched in September 1986 with a spectacular performance of African dance and

music by four artists in Dublin's Mansion House. Over the following three weeks, the artists worked with children in ten schools in Dublin and three in Cork and Castletownbere. They taught tie-dying, bead-work and papier-mâché mask - making based on Asante traditions from Ghana. The artists gave intensive training to two Africans living in Ireland, Camilla Dorcey from Lesotho, who had previously worked in Comhlámh on administration, and Margaret Maher.

Comhlámh was always seen anti-racism as a central part of its work. This project was designed to overcome some of the simplistic and patronising images of Africa common in Ireland and to give a more balanced picture of life in Africa. It was modeled on a project in London sponsored by the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA).

Camilla Dorcey remained the dynamo of the project, which was renamed Ethnic Arts in Education in 1987. It was initially piloted in Dublin, with funding from HEDCO (Higher Education for Cooperation), and subsequently went nationwide with European Community support.

In 1987, two models were tried out in Dublin schools. In one version, Camilla Dorcey and Winston Lewis visited nine schools one day each week for eight weeks. In the more intensive version, Camilla and Desmond Carty visited four schools full-time for a week. Both were deemed a success.

The schools visits included song, dance and artifact-making. They were backed up with training for teachers and dance and music workshops in teacher training colleges and youth and community groups.

In 1988, the project workers Camilla Dorcey and Joseph Menghe moved around the country. Between September and December, they visited ten schools in Mayo, nine in Belfast and nine in Waterford.

The two African artists ceased to be employed by Comhlámh in December 1987, as the funding came to an end. Ed du Vivier completed and piloted a resource pack for primary teachers on multi-cultural materials which was updated a number of times over the next few years.

The Comhlámh Ethnic Arts in Education project was an imaginative and exciting initiative which has probably brought an understanding of African culture to more people than any other project. The project owed a lot to the abilities and exuberance of Camilla Dorsey. Since 1988, Camilla has continued the work of the project in close co-operation with Comhlámh with her own African Arts in Education group, still one of the brightest stars in Irish development education.

## Chapter Fifteen

### CAMPAIGNING ON AID

Throughout Comhlámh's lifetime, one thing has remained constant: the Irish Government is one of the lowest contributors of official development assistance (ODA) among the economically developed countries of the OECD. This contrasts sharply with the Irish people's record as major donors to non-governmental organisations.

Comhlámh became widely known in the late 1980s and early 1990s for the campaign to increase Irish ODA to move towards the United Nations target of 0.7% of Gross National Product (GNP).

In Comhlámh's early years, the campaigns for increases in ODA were continuous, but of low intensity. Much more attention was given to the debates on improving the effectiveness of aid, on gender implications of development work and on the impact of trade structures and other structural obstacles to development.

In 1980, for example, a campaign against Government cuts in ODA included circulating a special issue of *Comhlámh News* to TDs and Senators. Similar campaigns were organised sporadically during the 1980s, but without major success.

In 1988, the AGM passed a motion committing Comhlámh to campaign actively for an increase in ODA. The campaign aimed to get commitments from politicians and other opinion-formers to restore ODA immediately to the 1986 level (0.25% of GNP) and to increase this percentage by 0.045% per year, so as to reach the UN target of 0.7% by the end of the century.

The Campaign was launched in April 1989, after a year of preparation. Special Comhlámh headed note paper was used, with the names of 64 sponsors, half of whom were TDs, Senators or MEPs. The unexpected general election shortly after, for which the Campaign was not yet ready, pushed it out of the news. However, within a fortnight of the formation of the Fianna Fáil -Progressive Democrats Government, all Cabinet Ministers and Ministers of State were contacted. The issue was also raised by supporters in the Dáil and Seanad, and received some media coverage.

It was soon realised that a bigger campaign was needed to have a serious effect. Two members of the UCD One World Society, Danny Dunne and Danny Cusack, proposed to the Comhlámh Campaign that a broader organisation be set up. In November 1989, Campaign Aid was launched in the Rathmines office of the Church Missionary Society (CMS). Campaign Aid was financed by four large development agencies. The three working groups set up initially included representatives of Macra Na Feirme, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, the National Youth Council of Ireland, UNICEF, Trócaire and UCD and TCD students.

Campaign Aid immediately generated considerable coverage on RTE and in the newspapers. A protest outside the Dail on 29 November before an important Dail debate involved about 400 people throughout the day. It was followed by a petition with 21,000 signatures.

Some of the success of the Campaign came from the involvement of public figures such as Irish Times journalist Fintan O'Toole who wrote several important columns in the subject.

As the 1989 Annual Report states "a large amount of the credit for this must go to the work of Colm Roddy". Looking back in Comhlámh's 1991 Annual Report, Colm Roddy described how he got involved in this campaign:

*I came back after four years working in Ethiopia in September 1987 and it was a month later that the Government announced its estimates for spending in 1988*

*and ...(ODA)...was cut by £11 million that year. Having seen the level of poverty and the struggles of people because of deprivation in Ethiopia, that was very strong with me. So I felt very angry and really that's what stimulated my involvement in campaigning then...*

*Comhlámh was certainly a very important support for me because the anger was there...but not having been involved in campaigning or in any political activity...it was important to have access to a pool of people (and) to have the actual support structure. The fact too that Comhlámh had built up a reputation and had clout - when we were campaigning some politicians took notice purely because we had a good name and had standing.*

The Campaign continued into 1990 from Comhlámh's offices, with considerable media coverage but little sign of affecting government policy. As in so many other areas, the address to a Campaign Aid meeting by Presidential candidate, Mary Robinson was a significant portent for the future. Nevertheless, the 1990 Comhlámh Report ends on a despondent note, with the money allocated by agencies spent and little sign of movement.

In 1991, Campaign Aid concentrated on obtaining pledges from the opposition parties to increase ODA after the election. In January 1992 the political climate created by Campaign Aid and by Mary Robinson paid off when the incoming Fianna Fail Labour Government's *Programme for a Partnership Government* included a specific commitment to increase ODA by 0.05% of GNP per year to move towards the Government target. Despite the significant growth in Irish GNP, and some slippage, the promise has been largely adhered to since. The commitment was broken in the estimates drawn up by the Minority Fianna Fail Government in December 1994, but these estimates were never adopted by the Oireachtas. The new Fine Gael - Labour - Democratic Left Government, with some prompting from Comhlámh and others, repeated the specific commitment. The new Minister of State for

Development Cooperation in the new Government Joan Burton, had been a Comhlámh member and Campaign Aid supporter for several years.

Campaign Aid, and the Comhlámh Campaign Group which conceived it, can genuinely be said to have changed the political climate in relation to overseas development aid. The decision to concentrate on the *quantity* of aid, when most debate before and since has been on the *quality* and nature of aid was controversial. It was feared that it would lead to a simplistic 'aid answers everything' approach.

In fact, this does not seem to have happened. The increase in the public recognition of aid as a political issue has also helped make it possible for resources and expertise to be put into considering the impact and context of aid.

Since the 1992 Government commitment on aid, Comhlámh has concentrated on studying the quality and nature of aid and campaigning for aid to be based more on the needs of recipient communities so as to be both more appropriate and effective.

## Chapter Sixteen

### BRINGING IT ALL BACK HOME TO NODE

Bringing It All Back Home (BIABH) and its successor, the Network Outreach for Development Education (NODE) were the most ambitious projects ever run by Comhlámh. They were the first large-scale effort to extend Comhlámh's work beyond Dublin and Cork. Together, they involve over a decade of work to build up development education skills and activities throughout the country (the third phase is still in progress as I write).

The Bringing It All Back Home project was launched in 1987, with three year funding from the European Communities, matched by Irish funding from the Department of Foreign Affairs and non-governmental organisations.

The late Dympna Meaney was employed in 1987 as Project Leader. Dympna was a teacher who had worked in Zimbabwe and had been active in Comhlámh as a volunteer since the early 1980s. She was an unusual mixture of commitment, effectiveness and personal inspiration. Dympna worked on the BIABH project until its completion in 1990. In 1991, when she was working for the Development Education For Youth (DEFY) project of the National Youth Council of Ireland, she died tragically in a road accident. She is remembered affectionately by all of her friends in Comhlámh, the NODE groups which she helped to set up, DEFY, the Irish Nicaragua Support Group and the other areas where she was active.

The BIABH project was set up with three main aims:

- to channel the energy and enthusiasm of returned development workers into development education;
- to provide training to make this work more effective; and
- to extend development education beyond Dublin, using returned development workers as a starting point.

As a starting point, 1,000 returned development workers were contacted with information about Comhlámh and an invitation to a package of six one-day seminars and four weekend workshops on development issues and skills in public speaking, media work, use of audio-visual materials and facilitation skills. There were 35 participants in the first seminar, which was followed by regional workshops in Dundalk, Dublin, Galway, Cavan and Kilkenny and by weekend sessions where all the participants came together again.

In late 1988, a field-worker, Jane Clarke, was appointed to work with individuals and groups planning development education activities. She helped the development of the new Comhlámh Branch in Cavan, which became very active in primary teacher training and in promoting events around Central America Week., and in giving support to the newly revitalised Cork Branch. In other parts of the country, with courses organised in Coleraine, Kilkenny, Tullamore and Sligo, BIABH helped strengthen existing and emerging development education groups. She was succeeded in December 1989 by Catriona Nic Ghiolla Phadraig.

In its final year, in 1989, the project workers concentrated on running intensive courses and coordinating development education initiatives in particular areas. Sligo and Donegal were targeted for this type of intensive work. Training days were also held in Belfast, Kilkenny, Tullamore, Cavan and Waterford.

After the end of the Project in 1990, Comhlámh prepared a new European funded project, known as the Network Outreach in Development Education (NODE) project, to further extend the reach of development education outside Dublin. Throughout the lifetime of the project, and the transition to its successor project in 1995, its driving

force was Ann Fitzpatrick who was the fieldworker throughout. Ann, who returned to teaching in 1995, was an extraordinary source of inspiration not only for the emerging NODE network but for Comhlámh generally and for a range of other networks. She was joined in the early stage of the project by Steven Sefton and later by Morína O'Neill, who was central to developing *NODE News*.

Although continuing to support the Comhlámh branches in Cork and Cavan, there was much less emphasis on Comhlámh membership. The project did not target returned development workers as much as the BIABH project, but put its effort into providing training, support and networking opportunities for grassroots development educators generally.

One of the most useful services developed under the BIABH project was the "development education calendar", a poster listing events around the Country, with profiles and addresses of development education groups. Under the new project, *NODE News*, a bi-monthly newsletter and listings magazine, has come to be seen as the main source of information on development education and campaigning activities in Ireland. For a period it also served as the internal newsletter for Comhlámh members until the appearance of a separate Comhlámh newsletter in 1995.

Comhlámh intended that NODE would be run by participant groups and centres after the end of the project, in 1994. After a period run by an Interim Committee, however, groups asked Comhlámh to resume the management of the project from February 1995. A third three-year European-funded project (1995-8) is now in progress. Although Comhlámh takes ultimate responsibility for the finances and management, the Project, now staffed by Isobel O'Duffy and Maeve Taylor, is effectively run by a Management Committee, and a number of working groups, representing the 10-15 local development education groups and centres which are gradually moving from being participants in the project to membership of a self-managed network.

The participants in BIABH and NODE can take credit, collectively, for changing the face of Irish development education. There are now development education centres in most major towns and cities and the

role of these resource centres and the membership-based development education which they sponsor is both dynamic and effective in encouraging new perspectives on global issues among the public.

## Trends and Perspectives

### *a membership organisation of global development workers*

*I am too close to the recent and current history of Comhlámh to offer any definitive judgments or assessments. In this section, I will instead sketch out some personal perspectives on current trends and future directions.*

The election of Mary Robinson as President in November 1990 was of enormous symbolic value. In her election campaign, she had emphasised the importance of grassroots movements and empowerment of the voluntary sector and was identified with many of the important movements for social change. She had been a supporter of Campaign Aid and had highlighted international development issues in her election campaign.

On 5 December 1990, shortly after her election, President Robinson held the first of her now traditional International Volunteers' Day parties for newly returned development workers. The preparation of this party is only one of the areas of cooperation between the President and Comhlámh. This position was underlined in 1992 when she agreed to become Comhlámh's Patron. Speaking at Comhlámh's 1994 Annual General Meeting, the President described overseas development workers as her 'listening posts in the World'.

The Presidential election was of more than just symbolic importance, however. President Robinson's interest in international development and her thoughtful interventions on global issues led to a renewed interest in development issues among the public and the politicians.

The Programme for Government of the Fianna Fail/ Labour Coalition (January 1993) set the stage for a major increase in Ireland's involvement

with overseas development. The programme made a commitment to increasing Overseas Development Assistance by 0.05% per annum and to increasing the numbers of APSO-sponsored volunteers overseas from 700 to 2,000 by 1997. Although the target for APSO numbers target was questioned by both APSO staff and Comhlámh, the commitment to the ODA increase actually exceeded the Campaign Aid demand (0.045% of GNP per annum). Although Irish Aid remains small by international standards, the dramatic rate of growth has run against the trend of most Northern countries, particularly in the context of rapidly growing GNP. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

The importance of overseas development was further reinforced by the appointment of active Ministers of State for Development Cooperation Tom Kitt (1993-4) and Joan Burton (1995- ). Joan Burton had been involved in both Comhlámh and Campaign Aid in the late 1980s and in the Anti-Apartheid Movement for longer. Through a combination of a number of progressive ministers and effective lobby groups, Ireland came to be seen in European and international circles as being a relatively active and progressive voice on a range of international issues from debt to East Timor.

Ireland's greater involvement with development issues brought with it a more complex development scene in Ireland. The Irish Aid Advisory Committee, established with a broader mandate than the AC-DC, and the National Committee for Development Education gave an official context to an increased debate on development issues.

With far more overseas development workers returning to Ireland, the demand for Comhlámh services and the potential membership base increased dramatically. Between September 1994 and September 1995, for example, 1,500 copies of Comhlámh's returned development workers' handbook were distributed. In the same period, 226 people attended reorientation events, as against less than 50 per year throughout the 1980s.

#### **Development work**

The increase in aid and in numbers of overseas development workers also led to an increased questioning by Comhlámh members of the effectiveness of aid in supporting the development needs of 'recipient' communities. It is

interesting to note that discussions on the quality and impact of overseas development work had been central to the early work of Comhlámh, often leading to friction with the non-governmental development agencies. In the mid-1980s, on the other hand, the campaign to increase Official Development Assistance (ODA) was given priority in the short term over quality of aid, although this decision was controversial within Comhlámh.

The Government target of trebling APSO-supported numbers in five years was also questioned. While this allowed for some very valuable projects to go ahead, it also led to a feeling that the Government was either naive in seeing Irish volunteers as universally appropriate to the needs of host communities or cynical in using overseas development to reduce Irish dole queues, without considering the impact of poorly thought-out projects or inadequately prepared development workers.

There was a need to respond to the growing questioning of traditional forms of aid coming from Southern communities. This questioning was reaching Ireland both through international organisations like Africa Rights and through the Irish development workers who questioned their role in the field. This questioning of aid was not confined to Comhlámh, but Comhlámh members were able to speak from experience and without a vested interest.

#### **Reappraisal**

The changing context within which Comhlámh is working also has implications for Comhlámh's role in development education and action. Many of the ideas and issues promoted by Comhlámh members have now been taken up by other groups, often involving people whose first training and experience was in Comhlámh.

In the context of this more complex development sector in Ireland and worldwide, the years 1993 to 1996 have seen a major reappraisal of how Comhlámh works and where it is going. The main thrust of this process has been to increase members' sense of ownership of the organisation and to define Comhlámh's philosophy and particular contribution more precisely. This process has been slow and partly gradual because of the complex process of changing an organisation's direction without losing the momentum

of everyday work and partly because of the need to involve large numbers of members in the discussion.

The current planning process within Comhlámh can be traced back to a review carried out for the Executive in late 1993. This review was originally designed to help resolve apparent conflicts of priorities within the organisation between and among Executive and staff. These problems had been seen variously as personality clashes, conflicting management styles or a difference of priorities between development education and services for returned development workers.

The review concluded that the underlying dilemma for Comhlámh was one common to most voluntary organisations which receive significant amounts of outside funding and employ staff. The externally funded projects, particularly the European-funded projects, were not seen as the responsibility of the members or the Executive. This led to disempowerment of members, since most of the staff time and funding in Comhlámh were devoted to projects which, while they were enormously important to the development education community, were remote from members. The staff on these projects appeared to answer ultimately to the funders, rather than the Executive.

The review also pointed to the need for more professional management structures, including staff appraisal and reporting systems, for better liaison between staff, Executive and members and for a clearer definition of what Comhlámh stands for.

#### **Identity and membership**

The 1994 AGM endorsed this general approach. A priorities session at the AGM, when asked the question "what areas of Comhlámh work need the most attention with a view to change?" identified Comhlámh identity and membership involvement clearly ahead of all other concerns.

These two concerns became the central focus for a process of planning and discussion in Comhlámh over the following two years. The planning process was the key to making Comhlámh more cohesive and accessible for its members and more coherent and focused in pursuing its aims.

In order to be effective and to avoid clashing with other organisations or duplicating their work, Comhlámh must identify what particular strengths we can bring to any activity. This often involves finding not only what we have in common with other groups but also how we are different. This is not to claim to be *better* but to find out what our special contribution can be.

*Comhlámh 2001 the Framework Plan for 1996-2001*, which was discussed throughout 1996 and adopted in September at the AGM is intended as a guide to setting Comhlámh's overall direction and priorities. As such, it is not designed to prescribe the activities of members' groups but to encourage them to see their work as part of an integrated organisation with a shared identity and vision.

Comhlámh 2001 takes as its starting point Comhlámh's identity. The thinking is that, in an increasingly developed and sophisticated sector, Comhlámh needs to define clearly what its distinctive contribution can be.

*Comhlámh 2001* defines our identity as follows:

*Comhlámh is a membership organization of global development workers. Our constituency is made up of people committed to working for development from an integrated analysis and with a global orientation, be it overseas in countries of the South, or from Ireland in solidarity with peoples and communities in the South, or in communities here in Ireland.*

*In terms of its particular contribution to this work, Comhlámh:*

- *is an organization of volunteer members, which means that the organization is membership based and run. Our activities are based on the commitment, values and ideas of volunteer members. We are committed to a culture of participation and empowerment both within our membership and in society generally;*
- *is informed by the experience of Irish development workers worldwide which is constantly renewed. This*



*experience is one of the main points of contact between society and cultures in Ireland and those of the Majority World;*

- *is not involved in delivering aid overseas, allowing some critical distance in the debate on development work;*
- *has members throughout Ireland;*
- *approaches development and social justice in an integrated way, linking issues in Ireland and in the South.*

### **Practical changes**

The Executive also made a number of changes in practice. There has been a shift to supporting members' work rather than autonomous projects. With the completion of the Environment project and the Twinning Project in 1993, and the increasing independence of the NODE project, Comhlámh's involvement with this type of large-scale project has largely ended. While the Action Network received significant European funding in 1995 for a campaign on Images of the Majority World, this money was used to back up membership activity with resources and staff support. Exploration of future major funding around the theme of aid and development work has also concentrated on facilitating membership activity.

### **New initiatives**

One of the most successful initiatives of the 1990s was the Comhlámh Action Network, which was based in Cork but aimed to mobilise supporters country-wide to promote social and economic human rights world-wide. The group was formed in 1990 after a visit by Mary Mangan to a conference on campaigning in France. It used a combination of lobbying and post-card campaigns to promote its aims and involve supporters. The first two campaigns were against aspects of European trade police:

- "Stop the Stitch-Up" campaigned against the Multi-Fibre Agreement which restricted clothes imports to Europe; and
- "Too Close To The Bone" opposed European beef-dumping which was damaging agriculture in Africa.

Both were part of international campaigns, and, while the campaigns' own influence is hard to measure, the worst aspects of each issue were resolved more or less satisfactorily. In 1994-5, the campaign took on the issue of images of the Majority World used by development agencies and the media in a campaign which was far more effective than at first thought possible. One of the key activists in the Action Network, Eilish Dillon, became Chairperson of Comhlámh from 1994 to 1996.

Other new initiatives in the early 1990s were the growth of Environment and Development Group and the Human Rights Group, both linking issues in Ireland and overseas through courses, resources and action.

This increased responsibility of members also requires increased coordination and communications between members' groups, Executive and staff. Considerable effort has been devoted to improving and formalising these processes, with new liaison structures, a members' newsletter, and general members' meetings in Dublin on the Cork model.

Overall, the re-emphasis on membership-led, as opposed to professionally facilitated, activities brings Comhlámh back to its original roots as a membership organisation of returned development workers. Now, however, Comhlámh's membership is more varied, reflecting the changes in the nature of development work. Although the majority of our members have worked overseas, the variety of this work and other contacts which Irish people make with the South has grown over the years. One new Comhlámh group, Cairde Rwanda, is made up almost entirely of members who have worked on short-term emergency projects. Many others go abroad now for short periods, on solidarity or fact-finding missions or on consultancies. Others become involved in global solidarity work in Ireland without going abroad, keeping in contact with the South through speaker tours, educational work and campaigns. The common thread in this variety is commitment to voluntary activism to achieve global justice. In this context, the long-running Comhlámh debate about whether or not Comhlámh should be exclusively for RDWs has been laid to rest. The organisation now describes itself, in Comhlámh 2001, as "a membership organisation of global development workers", noting that not all would have worked overseas.

### **Some personal perspectives**

The future direction of Comhlámh cannot be plotted out precisely because of the nature of the organisation. Comhlámh is defined by its membership, so activities will always change as members' interests and concerns change.

In spite of the regular turnover of members, groups and projects, however, there are some definite points of continuity in Comhlámh's history. The original objectives adopted in 1975 and largely unaltered since then, still underlie our main areas of current activity. Although Comhlámh's work is now supported by a professional staff, Comhlámh remains an organisation based on voluntary effort.

Whatever the future holds, we will be building on the strengths outlined above. I believe that there is a vital need for a volunteer - based development organisation, linking concerns in Ireland with those of people in the South.

In my view there are some areas which need attention if we are to continue to have a serious impact.

- We need to strengthen contacts with people and organisations in the South working for change. Our views on global development can not be based on our own experiences and analysis alone.
- We need to work more closely and on a more equal level with people from Southern Countries living in Ireland, whether as immigrants, as refugees or as students.
- We need to ground ourselves better in Irish 'Civil Society', whether community groups, trade unions or other alignments.
- We need to use new communications links with the South to learn, analyze and discuss global power structures and Ireland and Europe's role in this.

- We need to find new ways of communicating our ideas, through media like local radio and the internet as well as through more traditional outlets.
- And we need to continue to do all of our work with a sense of fun and openness to new members and activists.

All of this might seem overwhelming, but in the light of what Comhlámh members have achieved over the past 21 years, it is relatively modest. It is also essential if we are to play any role in contributing to a just and sustainable global development. Whatever course we take, I confidently expect to be invited to Comhlámh 50th Anniversary in 2025. See you there!

## ANNEX

### comhlámh chairpersons and coordinators, 1975-1997

Year	Chairperson	Admin/Coordinator
1975-76	Frank McCarthy	
1976-77	Carmel Colclough	
1978-79	Gerry McDonnell	
1979-80	Des Doherty	Margaret O'Grady
1980-81	Ray Cleary	Alison Stancliffe
1981-82	P.J. Howell	" "
1982-83	P.J. Howell	Dave O'Brien
1983-84	Ed du Vivier	Mary Jennings
1984-85	MaireCrisNiChionna	" "
1985-86	MaireCrisNiChionna	" "
1986-87	Ita Sheehy	" "
1987-88	Ita Sheehy	" "
1988-89	Margaret Grogan	Marius Schoon
1989-90	Margaret Grogan	" "
1990-91	Anne Dolan	Marc Proshasson
1991-92	Anne Dolan	" "
1992-93	Colm Ryder	" "
1993-94	Colm Ryder	" "
1994-95	Eilish Dillon	Robin Hanan
1995-96	Eilish Dillon	" "
1996-97	Oisín Coghlan	" "

## BRINGING IT ALL BACK HOME

Comhlámh was set up in 1975 by Irish overseas development workers, who had returned to Ireland, in order to put to use their overseas experience for education and action on global development, and to provide support to newly returned development workers.

Over the last twenty-one years, Comhlámh has been one of the most vibrant voluntary organisations in Ireland, with members involved in a mind-boggling array of imaginative initiatives to promote greater global justice, including promoting African Arts in schools, promoting fair trade coffee and running a candidate for the Seanad.

This history records some of the highlights of these 21 years of global solidarity.

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