
Public Opinion and Development Issues: a survey of Irish university student opinions*

Eileen Connolly, John Doyle and Fiona Dwyer*

Centre for International Studies, School of Law and Government, Dublin City University

Published as Eileen Connolly, John Doyle and Fiona Dwyer (2008) "Public Opinion and Development Issues: a survey of Irish university student opinions", *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, vol. 19, pp 209 – 226.

ABSTRACT

Surveys of Irish public opinion on international development assistance have shown high levels of support combined with relatively low levels of knowledge. This article discusses the finding of a survey of university students in Ireland in 2006-7. The results suggest that the attitudes of students in Ireland closely mirror that of the wider population. They are supportive of aid and think official aid from the government should be increased. Irish development NGOs are seen as the public face of development assistance and there is little recognition of Irish Aid – the state's official development agency. While there is awareness of the importance of structural issues such as trade access and debt relief, the spontaneous responses to what needs to be done to allow development still focus on aid and volunteering. Students are already persuaded that development is important and are motivated to donate or act, development education efforts however need to focus more on creating a better understanding of the causes of underdevelopment and the structural factors relating to interactions between wealthy and poor states.

INTRODUCTION

Ireland's official aid programme has grown significantly in recent years, and Ireland is now the sixth-largest donor per capita in the world.¹ This means that Ireland is now moving from being a small to a medium-size donor within the OECD.² With this growth in the aid programme there has been a concern both to make the public aware of this enhanced international role played by the Irish government and to ensure continued public support for its growing level of financial commitment to development. A survey of public opinion in 2002 confirmed broad support for the development programme in general and for the plans for significant increases in spending in particular, but it also indicated both a lack of detailed knowledge of development issues and a very low level of recognition of the role played by Irish Aid—the government's official aid agency. Since then there has been a renewed effort

* This research was supported by grant aid from the Development Education Unit of Irish Aid.

Authors' e-mail:

¹ See www.irishaid.gov.ie/article.asp?article=1009 (5 September 2008).

² OECD, *Ireland: DAC Peer Review*, (Paris, 2003) available at: <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/25/43/21651179.pdf>.

to address the problems identified in that survey, in the form of development education and a greater public profile for Irish Aid.

The government's concern that it has both recognition by and support from the public for its aid efforts can be placed in the context of wider debates on public opinion and foreign policy. Although it has been asserted internationally that the general public are largely uninterested in foreign policy,³ there is evidence in an Irish context that some inter-connections exist between public opinion and foreign policy outcomes, even if it has proved difficult to assess the precise nature of this relationship. An article by Doyle and Connolly on the 2002 general election in the Republic of Ireland, for example, found some limited use of foreign-policy themes in that particular election campaign, including Anglo-Irish relations and EU reform.⁴ As that election followed the Nice Treaty⁵ referendum, it was clear that those parties who had called for a No vote in the referendum used that fact in the election campaign, while those parties who had called for a Yes vote avoided the issue. Similarly, studies of Ireland's period on the UN Security Council and engagement with wider UN politics shows some evidence that the public discourse on 'neutrality', development and peacekeeping does help shape foreign-policy outputs.⁶ Given this evidence, it is likely that public attitudes to development aid and to Ireland's development role could be a factor in future political support for the aid programme, and this will become more crucial as the programme grows.

This paper analyses attitudes to development cooperation amongst university students in Ireland, given that they will go on to be a significant section of future public opinion. It also provides a baseline study of Irish university students' understanding of some key development issues that can assist the design of appropriate development education strategies for the third-level sector in Ireland. The paper initially examines previous Irish survey evidence on public opinion on development, contextualising it with some international opinion polls, before presenting its survey findings.

SURVEY EVIDENCE 2002–5

This analysis of prior public attitudes to development aid draws substantially on a 2002 poll conducted by MRBI for Irish Aid itself, but also looks at Eurobarometer surveys and other small polls of Irish public opinion. It also includes some additional survey evidence from the UK and the US for comparison.

Levels of support for official development assistance (ODA)

Support for official development assistance by the Irish public has been strong for many years—with positive responses in surveys about the provision of such assistance ranging from 89% to 97%.⁷ The level of knowledge behind such support is, however, limited—even

³ Joseph Nye, 'The American national interest and global public goods', *International Affairs* 78 (2) (2002), 233–45.

⁴ John Doyle and Eileen Connolly (2002) 'Foreign Policy and Domestic Politics: a study of the 2002 election in the Republic of Ireland', *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 13 (2002), 151–166.

⁵ The first defeated referendum of the EU 'Nice' Treaty was held on 9 June 2001, the second referendum, which was passed, was held on 19 October 2002.

⁶ See John Doyle, 'Irish Diplomacy on the UN Security Council 2001–2: Foreign policy-making in the light of day', *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 15 (2004), 73–102; Eileen Connolly and John Doyle, 'The place of the United Nations in contemporary Irish foreign policy', in Michael Kennedy and Deirdre MacMahon (eds.), *Obligations and responsibilities: Ireland and the United Nations: 1955–2005* (Dublin, 2005), 362–83; Lorna Gold and Eileen Connolly, 'Development and the United Nations: achievements and challenges for the future', *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, 17 (2006) 61–75.

⁷ Advisory Committee for Development Co-operation (ACDC), *Attitudes of a national sample of Irish people in 1990* (Dublin, 1991); European Commission, *Eurobarometer no. 46: aid to Third World countries* (Brussels, 1997); Development Education for Youth (DEFY), *Development and justice issues: Irish attitudes* (Dublin, 2000); European Commission, *Eurobarometer no. 50.1: Europeans and development aid* (Brussels,

when the level of that knowledge is determined by self-assessment. In 2002 the majority of Irish people said that they had ‘some knowledge’ of development issues.⁸ Surveys also confirm that, though supportive, the majority of the population does not know exactly how development assistance is given, how much is given, or in what form it is given.⁹ With regard to knowledge of Ireland’s official agency through which development aid is administered, Irish Aid, almost two-thirds of the public had never heard of it in 2002.¹⁰

When asked in 2002 to spontaneously state how much financial assistance had been given by the Irish government to developing countries in 2001, the main point that emerged was that 48% of people had ‘absolutely no idea’. The other answers given were: €1–€50 million (27%); €51–€100 million (11%); €101–€500 million (5%); and €500 million+ (1%).¹¹ The actual figure for ODA in 2001 was €320 million. The fact that most people did not know the size of the aid budget is not significant, as they would have been just as unable to identify the size of a government budget in other policy areas. What is significant is that the overwhelming majority of those who expressed an opinion seriously underestimated government ODA.

In the same survey when people were told the actual levels of ODA and also that the government planned to increase the level of spending to €900 million in 2007, almost half the respondents said that the planned level was ‘about right’. An earlier survey in 2000 had asked a similar question (survey participants were told that in 1999 the government spent approximately a third of one per cent of GNI on developing countries) and then asked what people thought of this level of spending. The results showed that 69% thought that this was too low.¹² In contrast, in the 2002 survey only 15% thought spending was too low, and 22% of respondents thought development aid was too high (see Table 1). The 2005 *Eurobarometer* survey asked this question using % of GNI rather than monetary values, and in this case 30% of Irish respondents said Irish ODA was ‘too low’; 37% of Irish people thought that the levels of development spending were about right; 3% that spending was too high and 30% did not know. These findings are similar to the EU-25 average in the 2005 survey—where 30% said development spending was ‘*about right*’, 10% said it was *too big* and 26% did not respond.¹³ The percentage of respondents among the EU25 who said spending on aid was ‘too big’ was very influenced by the German figure, in that 22% of German respondents answered in this way despite the relatively low level of German ODA (at 0.28% of GNI). When the EU-25 figures are broken down by age, young people are more likely to think aid is too low. In the age cohort 15–24 years, 41% of people thought ODA was too low; 43% of those describing themselves as students said spending on aid was ‘too low’. Table 1 here please.

Only in the 2002 survey in Ireland was there a significant percentage of the public who thought aid levels were too high, and this is most likely a response to the way the information was presented to the respondents. This was the only survey to express the amount in cash terms. It is probable that rather than seeing a sharp fluctuation in opinion over this period, we are seeing different responses to ODA levels when expressed as cash amounts versus percentage of GNP. In UK surveys,¹⁴ in which respondents were also given

1999); MRBI/Ireland Aid (2002), *Attitudes towards development cooperation in Ireland* (Dublin, 2002); and European Commission, *Special Eurobarometer wave 62.2 TNS opinion and social attitudes towards development aid* (Brussels, 2005)

⁸ MRBI/Ireland Aid, *Attitudes towards development*.

⁹ MRBI/Ireland Aid, *Attitudes towards development*, 25.

¹⁰ When the survey was conducted the question asked was ‘have you heard of Ireland Aid, the Irish Government’s Official Development Programme? For consistency Irish Aid (the current name of the development programme) is used throughout this paper.

¹¹ MRBI/Ireland Aid, *Attitudes towards Development*, 22.

¹² DEFY *Development and Justice Issues*.

¹³ The statistics cited here are available at:

http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_222_sum_en.pdf (18 October 2008).

¹⁴ Department for International Development (DfID), *Public attitudes on development; beliefs and attitudes concerning poverty in developing countries* (London, 2003, 2004, 2005).

the percentages of development aid to GNI ratios and were then asked whether they thought it 'too high', 'too low' or 'about right', there is evidence for a much lower public support for increasing aid (Table 2) than was the case for the Irish survey data in which a similar question was used.

Table 2 here.

In contrast to Ireland and the UK, the American public has often been perceived to be sceptical of aid provision and more focused on domestic concerns. In 2001 84% of those polled believed that 'taking care of problems at home is more important than giving aid to foreign countries'.¹⁵ While the size of the US economy means it is a large donor in cash terms, when aid is calculated as a percentage of GNI the US aid budget is among the lowest, at only 0.16% of GNI compared to the OECD average country level of 0.28% and an EU-15 average of 0.40% (2007 figures).¹⁶ Here the survey evidence is more complicated, and in sharp contrast to Ireland the US public grossly overestimates the levels of development aid given by the US government.

A US Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) survey in 2001 asked respondents to estimate what percentage of the federal budget was spent on development aid—the median estimate was 20% and the mean estimate was even higher at 24%. Moreover, the high figures were evident in all socio-demographic groups. Even those with post-graduate education levels stated that they believed that 8% of the federal budget was spent on aid.¹⁷ US aid as a percentage of the federal budget was actually well below 1% at this time and remains so now.¹⁸ In the same survey, when asked what the appropriate level of aid was, the median answer was 10% and the mean answer was 14%. Only 12% of the population surveyed said that the percentage spent on aid should be 1% or less. When the respondents were told to 'imagine that you found out that the US spends 1% of the Federal budget on foreign aid', only 13% of the population said that this would be too much, compared to the 61% who had initially said that the US spends too much on aid, while 37% of respondents said that spending 1% of the federal budget on aid was too little.¹⁹

Does aid make a difference?

In the 2002 MRBI survey in Ireland, when participants were asked if aid made a difference to people in developing countries, 47% said it makes a real difference, 43% replied 'a little bit' or 'not at all'. In the 2005 *Eurobarometer* survey, 62% of respondents answered 'yes' to a question asking if aid had a positive impact, 15% said 'no' and 23% responded 'don't know'. The EU average for a 'yes' response in this survey was 51%.

On the issue of using development aid to encourage political change in developing countries, the Irish public seems to show some awareness of the difficulties in adopting this approach. In the 2005 *Eurobarometer* survey, respondents were asked whether 'the level of aid has to be linked to the efforts these countries make to encourage and sustain democracy'; 60% of Irish people agreed with this statement, which is hardly surprising given that one assumes very few of the respondents were against democracy. However, this figure is considerably lower than the EU average of 74%. The Irish 'don't know' level is particularly high at 35%—indicating perhaps an awareness that the process of using aid to support democratisation is a complex one, rather than a simple requirement of making the implementation of democracy a 'condition' of aid.

The British public has less confidence than the Irish that national aid helps people in developing countries. When asked in 2005, 'Does aid from Britain make a difference to

¹⁵ Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA), Americans on foreign aid and world hunger: a study of US public attitudes (Maryland, 2001), available at: <http://www.pipa.org/> (15 August 2008).

¹⁶ Adapted from European Commission, *Special Eurobarometer wave 62.2*.

¹⁷ PIPA, *Americans on foreign aid*, 7.

¹⁸ US budget data are available at: <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/usbudget/fy01/hist.html>; US ODA data are available on the OECD DAC website, at:

http://www.oecd.org/departement/0,3355,en_2649_34447_1_1_1_1_1,00.html (10 September 2008).

¹⁹ PIPA, *Americans on foreign aid*, 7.

improving the lives of people in developing countries?', only 48% of people said that it does, while 49% said that it does not. This seems to indicate that the British population is more sceptical of its government's aid policy than are people in Ireland, where 62% of people thought aid made a difference.²⁰ Americans are even more sceptical of the effectiveness of aid: 90% of people in the US believe that the money does not go to the people who need it the most; 77% (and 49% strongly) believe that the money goes to governments with poor human-rights records and who are undemocratic and that up to 50% of aid ends up in the hands of corrupt officials.²¹

Sources of information

In all the surveys of Irish public opinion, television emerges as the dominant source of information; 87% of respondents said so in 1995, 74% in 1999, 76% in 2000 and 88% in 2002. The next most significant source is newspapers, followed by the radio. The internet was still a minor source of information on development issues in 2002 (just 3%), but evidence from Britain shows that internet use to obtain information on developing countries is increasing—up to 11% there in 2005, from 3% in 2003.²² This is in spite of the fact that Fransman and Solignac Lecomte argue that the public are distrustful of the media as a source of information: 'For most people the media provide the primary source of information about developing countries, although there is some evidence of scepticism about its nature'.²³ In Ireland, however, surveys suggest that the majority of people believe that the media gives a fair picture of what is happening in developing countries, with over 70% supporting this view in 1999–2000²⁴. The 2002 survey asked—'How reliable is the information you get on developing countries from the media?' Again the answers are positive: 'very reliable' 4%, 'fairly reliable' 60%, 'not very reliable' 11%, 'not at all reliable' 2%; the 'don't know' response was 6%.²⁵

Role of NGOs

When the Irish public is asked to identify how aid from Ireland is given to developing countries, the majority of respondents name development NGOs as the main source; 66% believe that development aid is given through NGOs ('Third World charities') compared to just 32% who identify the Irish government as a source of aid.²⁶ The three main organisations that are spontaneously mentioned in the 2002 survey data are Trócaire, Concern and the Red Cross. In the 2000 survey those spontaneously mentioned are Trócaire, Concern and GOAL.²⁷

Development NGOs have a high profile in Ireland especially in times of humanitarian crises. Compared to NGOs in other countries with which Ireland is often compared, such as the Scandinavian countries, Irish NGOs also raise a high percentage of their income directly from the public—giving them a very direct relationship with a large section of the population. Irish Aid grants to the Irish NGOs are only about 40% of the funds raised by NGOs themselves, and this can be contrasted, for example, with the degree of dependence on official aid of NGOs in Sweden, where some of the large religious and trade-union based NGOs receive between 89% and 98% of their expenditure from government. In the

²⁰ European Commission, *Special Eurobarometer*, 115.

²¹ PIPA, *Americans on foreign aid*, 24.

²² DfID, *Public attitudes on development*.

²³ Jude Fransman and Henri Bernard Solignac Lecomte, *Mobilising public opinion against global poverty, Policy Insights, no.2*, OECD Development Centre (Paris, 2004), 1. Available online at: <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/33/41/31484642.pdf> (10 September 2008).

²⁴ Ida McDonnell and Liam Wegimont, *Trends in Irish youth opinion on development and justice issues* (Dublin, 2000) and DEFY, *Development and justice*.

²⁵ MRBI/Ireland Aid *Attitudes towards development*, 13.

²⁶ MRBI/Ireland Aid, *Attitudes towards development*, 20. (Multiple answers were allowed in this question).

²⁷ DEFY, *Development and justice issues*.

Netherlands and Denmark, government contributions have also greatly exceeded NGOs' own fundraising. Dutch NGOs are now being asked to raise 25% of their income from non-state sources in a new funding scheme, while Danish NGOs must raise 10%; in both cases many of the larger NGOs fear that they cannot meet these targets.²⁸ The major Irish development NGOs, therefore, have a quite high degree of financial independence from government compared to many of their European counterparts. This degree of public support for NGOs was confirmed in the 2002 survey in Ireland, in which 80% of people said they had contributed to 'charities' or fund-raising appeals for developing countries.

PUBLIC AWARENESS OF THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

In September 2000 heads of state and government, meeting at the UN millennium summit in New York, took what was probably the highest profile initiative in the development arena in recent years in adopting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Given the importance of this initiative, there have been a number of international polls on the MDGs, with the purpose of judging their impact on the general public of the donor states in particular. Ireland, along with many other states, has made the goals a priority in development planning, and Irish Aid asserts that the 'Millennium Development Goals, and the specific targets set to enable their achievement to be measured, provide the context in which Irish Aid priority sectors are decided'.²⁹ Given the centrality of the MDGs to Irish government policy, public perception of them is important.

The actual goals originated in a 1996 OECD report,³⁰ but came to public prominence when the 'Millennium Summit', adopted a declaration committing the member states of the UN to their achievement by 2015.³¹ While they have been criticised for their limited vision, the success of the MDGs has been their capacity to re-engage the governments of the Global North on issues of development in eight key areas, including poverty, education and maternal health, and to offer a simple message to the public, to mobilise support thereby ensuring government action.³² The UN also set a deadline of 2015 for achieving basic targets—for example, halving the number of people living in hunger and poverty. In this regard, the strength of the United Nations is clear, as even though there was nothing new in the MDGs, they could now be presented as a legitimate, universal set of principles around which pressure for reform could be built. So, although opinion polls show a low level of awareness of the actual 'goals' themselves,³³ there is very strong support for the policy principles contained within them. McDonnell and Solignac Lecomte suggest that because the campaigning has focused on the broad issues and not the 'goals' per se, the impact of the profile given to the MDGs by the UN is most visible in the high levels of support for increased aid, fair trade and debt cancellation within the EU and Canada.³⁴ In this regard McDonnell and Solignac Lecomte say that

awareness raising and communications about the MDGs in the industrialised countries are crucial in order to remind and hold national governments

²⁸ All figures from Eileen Connolly, *Engagement with civil society for poverty reduction* (Dublin, 2007). Available on-line at: <http://www.abdci.gov.ie/Uploads/ab%20civ%20soc%20web.pdf> (10 September 2008).

²⁹ See <http://www.irishaid.gov.ie/challenges.asp> (4 September 2008).

³⁰ OECD DAC *Shaping the twenty-first century: the contribution of development cooperation* (Paris, 1996).

³¹ For the text of the declaration, see <http://www.un.org/millennium/declaration/ares552e.htm>; for information on the goals, see <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/> (4 September 2008).

³² For a supportive but critical review, see Lorna Gold, *More than a numbers game? Ensuring that the Millennium Development Goals address structural injustice* (Maynooth, 2005).

³³ Ida Mc Donnell and Henri-Bernard Solignac Lecomte, *Policy insights no.13: MDGs, taxpayers and aid effectiveness* (Paris, 2005).

³⁴ Poll figures taken from European Commission, *Special Eurobarometer* and Focus Canada Environics Research Group, *Canadian attitudes toward development assistance* (Ottawa, 2004).

accountable to their aid, trade and debt commitments, which are found in the MDGs.³⁵

Awareness of the MDGs among the Irish public is very low (see Table 3). Only 14% of people say that they have heard of the MDGs, although this is marginally higher than the EU-25 average of 12%. Sweden has the highest level of awareness at 27%, and France and Malta have the lowest at 4%.

Table 3 here please.

Where there have been large-scale awareness-raising campaigns—by government in the case of Sweden or by civil society in the case of Italy and Austria—there has been a visibly significant impact in the levels of awareness of the MDGs in those countries compared to others. Italy and Austria rank second and third in awareness of the MDGs—at 18% and 19%, respectively—after their high-profile campaigns. This is significant from the perspective of development education. Sweden might be expected to have relatively high public awareness as it is one of the few countries to have met the UN target 0.7% of GNP for ODA (indeed it exceeds it, spending 1% of GNP on aid.) Austria and Italy, however, would not be regarded as high-profile donor states and their level of ODA spending is much lower—at 0.52 and 0.29% of GNP, respectively. Italy in particular is fourth-lowest among the EU-15 in spending on ODA, but public awareness of the MDGs was relatively high there. On the other hand, the Netherlands spent 0.82% of GNP on ODA in 2005—making it the fourth-highest donor, while public awareness there was only just higher than the EU average.³⁶ When the MDGs are explained to survey respondents there remains a great deal of scepticism about the goals in most countries, and many people do not think that they will be achieved by 2015. In this regard, public opinion also reflects specialist assessments of the possibility of achieving the MDGs.

In Ireland, the poll results on MDGs stand out for three main reasons. First, Ireland records the largest percentages of ‘don’t know’ answers for each goal across the EU. Second, the goal that receives the highest ‘will be achieved’ response in Ireland is the target for increasing aid. The EU average response for the target on aid being achieved is 59%, whereas in Ireland the figure is 65%. This probably reflects the high profile debate in Ireland on the UN aid target of 0.7% of GNP, and the sense among the general public that once the government missed its original target but then re-committed to a 2012 deadline, it was likely that it would meet that revised target. Third, the Irish figures tend to be much more optimistic about the goals being achieved than the EU-25 average figures.³⁷

The Irish figure for achieving the target on fairer trade (51% of respondents believe that it will be achieved) stands out as being far higher than the EU-25 average of 41%. Optimism about achieving the goals on education is also higher in Ireland, at 48% against the EU average of 41%. The biggest difference between Irish people and the EU-25 average is for succeeding on Goal 1—poverty eradication. The Irish figure is 43% whereas the EU-25 is a whole 17 percentage points lower, showing that Irish people are much more optimistic when it comes to –achieving the target of halving the number of people living in poverty. However, Irish people are more pessimistic than the EU average when it comes to eradication of disease. The EU-25 average is 43%, whereas in Ireland it is eight percentage points lower at 35%.

When provided with a range of actions which governments might take to achieve the MDGs, respondents in Ireland produced a pattern that was close to average EU figures (See Fig. 1). There are, however, a couple of exceptions to this. ‘Reducing the possibility of armed conflict’ was the most popular selection in the majority of countries, with the exceptions of

³⁵ Ida McDonnell, *An international perspective on communication strategies for the Millennium Development Goals* (Paris, 2003), 9. Available at: <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/19/8/33904346.pdf> (10 September 2008).

³⁶ All aid statistics cited here are taken from the OECD DAC website, available at: http://www.oecd.org/department/0,3355,en_2649_34447_1_1_1_1_1,00.html (10 September 2008).

³⁷ European Commission, *Special Eurobarometer*.

Ireland, Finland, Netherlands, Slovenia and Cyprus who all chose providing training and expertise as the most important action for governments to take in an effort to achieve the MDGs.

Fig. 1 here please.

These figures are interesting when compared to the 2002 survey responses. When respondents are asked spontaneously how Ireland should help developing countries, they focus almost exclusively on aid. However, when provided with a list of choices that include issues such as debt relief, fair trade, conflict resolution, etc., as they were in the 2005 survey—but not in 2002—these issues are quite significant, with debt cancellation and fair access to OECD markets scoring more highly among the Irish respondents than the provision of aid.

The MDGs have not significantly impacted on the general public in Ireland. There is a relatively low awareness of them as a concept/brand. However, the 2005 EU survey, while using a different question than used in surveys carried out previously, is showing for the first time a significant percentage of the Irish public who see Ireland's contribution to 'development' as requiring more than financial or food aid and sending Irish people overseas. Awareness of structural issues of trade access, debt cancellation and conflict resolution are now also featuring among responses by the Irish public, along with aid and technical assistance.

DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVES AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN IRELAND

The discussion above provides a context within which to judge university student views. The survey on which this present article is based was conducted during the academic year 2006–7. The questionnaire was designed to replicate as many as possible of the Irish Aid/MRBI questions of 2002, in order to allow some direct comparisons with the most recent in-depth analysis of wider public opinion in Ireland. Surveys were conducted in a classroom setting across a range of academic departments and disciplines in all of the universities in the Republic of Ireland. A total of 900 useable surveys were taken, proportionally across the universities, across science, arts, social science and business disciplines and with a gender balance.

Impressions of poverty in developing countries

The survey opened by trying to ascertain respondents' spontaneous impressions about developing countries by asking what description or words come to mind when they hear the term 'developing countries'. The five most popular responses were:

- Poverty (mentioned by 62% of respondents)
- Third World (mentioned by 22% of respondents)
- Famine/hunger (mentioned by 20% of respondents)
- Africa (mentioned by 20% of respondents)
- Health/disease/AIDS (mentioned by 15% of respondents)

In contrast to the similar question in the 2002 survey of the wider public, this question to students produced a much stronger focus on poverty (62% v. 37%), a lower focus on famine (20% v. 34%), fewer mentions of 'Africa' (20% v. 39%) and a similar proportion saying Third World (22% v. 21%). The focus on poverty could be interpreted as a slightly more nuanced understanding than responses that simply say 'Africa' or 'famine'; however, one likely explanation is that it could be a response to the high profile 'Make Poverty History' campaign in the previous year.

Levels and sources of information

When asked ‘How much do you know about developing countries?’, 79% of students said ‘something’, 12% responded ‘a lot’ and 7% said ‘nothing’. These are almost identical responses to those of the wider public in the 2002 Irish Aid survey. When asked where their information came from, the most popular source cited by students was TV (83% of respondents), followed by newspapers (68%), charities/NGOs (52%), school/education (50%) and the internet (27%). The internet features quite strongly for the students, compared to a mere 3% in 2002 for the general public. This likely reflects the growth in internet usage over that time, and possibly the greater degree to which students use the internet as a research tool. While more passive media still overwhelmingly dominate students’ sources of knowledge, the development NGOs themselves also feature strongly as a source of information.

When asked about their perceptions of the reliability of information sources, development NGOs and the education sector are clearly seen by students as more reliable than the media or government. Only 5% of respondents find the media ‘very reliable’ and 57% say it is ‘reliable’, with almost one-third saying the media are ‘not very reliable’, despite holding a dominant position as a source of information. The government has a similar profile among our student respondents, but charities/NGOs have a much more positive profile, with 26% regarding them as ‘very reliable’ and a further 54% saying they are ‘reliable’. Finally, 65% say that school/education is ‘reliable’ and 26% see it as ‘very reliable’, perhaps indicating a very accepting attitude by university students of information from within the education system.

When respondents were asked whether information from any of the sources had prompted them to take any action in helping developing countries, 33% of respondents said that they had been prompted into action; but there was wide variation in what had prompted them to act, with over half responding to ‘charities’, 40% responding to school sources and only 7% responding to information from government.

Table here

Perceptions of poverty in developing countries

Respondents were asked whether ‘the standard of living is better or worse in developing countries than it was five years ago’. The majority of our sample (58%) believe that the standard of living is ‘more or less the same’ as it was five years ago. Almost a quarter (23%) believes that the standard of living is better; 7% believe that the standard of living is worse and 8% do not know whether it is better or worse. Respondents were then given fourteen different reasons (Table 4) why developing countries are poor and they had to say how important these reasons were.

Table 4 here please.

With the exception of the racist option— ‘People in developing countries are too easygoing and/or lazy and incompetent’—the respondents regarded most of the factors as important, indicating perhaps a tendency to simply ‘tick’ most boxes; but there were significant differences in how they ranked issues. The ‘easy going/lazy option’ had in fact been selected as important or very important by 38% of people in the 2002 poll, but it was so regarded by only 6% of respondents in this poll. Issues to do with population growth and natural disasters ranked low in ‘very important’ scoring among students, as did issues around human rights and climate to some extent and the status of women to a very strong extent.

Education ranked most strongly, reflecting not only a student view of the world but also responses in *Eurobarometer* and MRBI surveys of the general population. Structural issues also feature quite strongly in student perceptions of what influences poverty, with ‘developed countries taking advantage’ and ‘debt’ being prioritised as important by over 80% of respondents. Natural disasters and population growth ranked quite lowly in comparison, and were regarded as much less significant by students than by respondents in the 2002 poll of the general public. Some negative images of developing countries were ranked as quite

important, with some students blaming governments, corruption and disease. The following question was then presented: 'There are now a number of judgement statements concerning poverty in developing countries. Can you say whether you totally agree, agree, disagree, totally disagree or you do not know.'

Again, the results show (see Table 5) that the majority of university students believe that a lack of education and training is the most important reason why people in developing countries are poor. Support for development also manifests itself: 90% of students believe that developing countries need support from developed countries, with the same percentage believing that the North–South gap is too large. There is 79% support for abolishing debt, but also a clear majority who blame governments in developing states for poverty. Opinion is very evenly divided on the link between Northern wealth and Southern poverty, and divided to some extent on the connection between poverty and global terrorism (where a majority disagrees with the view that there is a connection).

Table 5 here please.

Ireland and development cooperation

Respondents were asked to give spontaneous answers to the question 'To the best of your knowledge, how is development aid from Ireland given to developing countries?' The majority, almost half, of our student respondents said that development aid is given through charities/NGOs (46%). Other popular answers were government aid (37%); material aid (clothes and food) (11%) and 'I don't know' (21%). This indicates a far higher level of awareness of official aid among university students than among the participants in the 2002 MRBI survey, and suggests that even if Irish Aid is not known as a 'brand', there is a relatively high awareness in this segment of society that the government does provide official aid.

Respondents were then asked to give spontaneous answers to the question 'What concerns, if any, do you have about the way in which aid is given to developing countries?' Nearly 50% of respondents, who expressed a concern, were worried that aid does not reach the intended people. This was by far the students' biggest single concern. Other concerns expressed were very diverse but included clusters around aid being ineffective and lack of knowledge about what effect it had.

When asked whether aid makes a real difference to the lives of people in developing countries, the vast majority of our respondents, 63%, believe that aid makes 'a little bit' of difference to people in developing countries, while almost a quarter, 24%, believe that it makes 'quite a lot of difference'; and only 5% believe that aid does not make any difference to the lives of people in developing countries. These figures indicate a more sceptical response among students than that expressed by the wider public in 2002, when 47% said that aid makes a 'real' difference and 43% said it made 'a little bit' of difference. Rewording the question here to try and get a greater sense of what might have been meant by 'real difference' has seen a much larger number of respondents opt for the 'little bit' option over 'quite a lot'. Respondents were asked to name some organisations that are involved in providing aid to developing countries. The top seven organisations (by percentage of respondents listing them) can be seen in the Table 6.

Table 6 here please.

Even though there was much greater awareness government aid in this survey of university students, compared with the 2002 survey of the general public, this did not lead our respondents to mention Irish Aid or even the government when asked to list organisations involved in providing aid. Respondents were then explicitly asked 'Have you heard of Irish Aid, formerly Development Cooperation Ireland (DCI), the Irish government's official development programme?' Almost three-quarters of the respondents (72%) said they had not heard of Irish Aid.

The respondents were then given a list of eight possible priorities for the Irish government's aid programme, and they were asked to select their top three priorities from the list below. The results are as follows (in order of ranking):

- Help improve social services (58%)
- Promote long-term sustainable development (58%)
- Reduce poverty (49%)
- Promote human rights (35%)
- Provide emergency assistance (27%)
- Promote economic growth (26%)
- Promote democracy (20%)
- Protect the environment (5%)
- Other (less than 1%)
- Don't know (less than 1%)

The results are quite striking, in that the categories with a social development focus—social services/sustainable development/anti-poverty—were clearly ahead of all others. Emergency assistance featured quite low in the ranking given its public profile, and democracy promotion was only prioritised by one in five and economic growth by one in four of the student respondents.

The respondents were told 'The Irish government has pledged to increase its provision of aid to 0.7% of GNP'. They were then asked whether they thought that this was 'too much', 'too little' or 'just right': 3% said 'too much', 64% 'too little' and 39% said 'just right', which suggests a very strong level of support among university students for even further increases in aid beyond the promised 0.7% of GNP. Respondents were then asked whether they knew how much the government had given in 2005 in the form of financial assistance to developing countries. They were given six choices, one of which was 'no idea'. The results are as follows:

- Less than €10 million (14%)
- €11–50 million (33%)
- €51–100 million (13%)
- €101–500 million (10%)
- €500+ million (2%)
- No idea (27%)

This reflects the lack of knowledge that was also evident in the 2002 public survey and, as stated above, the public could probably not estimate any government budget accurately. However, as was the case with the general public, only 12% of our student respondents believe that the Irish government gave over €100 million in aid in 2005. Almost half of all respondents thought the government gave less than €50 million—in a year when the ODA budget was actually €545 million. This response seems to confirm the view that Irish respondents, when presented with the question of appropriate levels of aid in terms of a percentage of GNP, are very strongly supportive of a higher percentage being delivered. However, they combine this with a perception that the aid given by Ireland in cash terms is very low indeed. This is in keeping with earlier surveys and in strong contrast to the findings from the USA, where the opposite perceptions exist.

The Millennium Development Goals

Respondents were next asked, without any information being provided, whether they had heard of the Millennium Development Goals: 22% said yes and 72% no (with 6% unsure), again showing that the MDGs are still relatively unknown. These percentages are, however, higher than for the general public in the 2002 survey, when only 14% had heard of the

MDGs and 86% had not. Nevertheless, despite the relatively low levels of awareness among the Irish general public, when compared to the EU general public, only Sweden had a higher percentage of awareness (27%).

The respondents to the student survey were then told what the MDGs were and were given a brief outline of their priorities. They were then given six choices of response, ranging from 'certain to' to 'certain not to', for the question 'Thinking about all of these together, how likely, if at all, would you say the world's governments are to reach these goals?' Based on their answers, it appears that our respondents are not very optimistic about the MDGs being attained. Only 18% believe that 'they' (the World's governments) are 'very likely to' or 'fairly likely to' achieve the goals, and over half (53%) believe that they are 'not very likely to'. We reworded this question from that used in previous studies to try and get a greater degree of information. It is striking how negative the students' responses were in comparison to the quite optimistic results obtained from the wider public in Ireland in 2002.

Personal Contributions

Respondents were asked 'Have you made a personal contribution (money, time or service) to development aid in the last 12 months?' and 61% said yes. They were then asked 'How do you think you can help people in poorer countries, if at all?' They were given a list of nine possible answers (see Table 7).

Table 7 here please.

The answers to this question were interesting in that the range of issues selected suggests a more active view of students' own citizenship and engagement with development than was evident in other questions in which they were asked what 'Ireland' could do to help developing countries. In particular, the fact that buying fair-trade goods came even higher than giving a donation suggests some knowledge of the importance of trade issues; whereas when asked the open-ended question at the beginning of the survey, about how to help developing countries, most respondents focused only on aid and sending personnel. In addition, putting pressure on politicians or organising fundraising (as a higher level of commitment than donating) was selected by more than a third of respondents.

The final question asked was 'In which ways, if any, do you think you as an individual can most effectively contribute to reducing poverty in developing countries?'. Respondents were asked to rank three choices in order. Their rankings are presented in Table 8.

Table 8 here please.

While contributing to 'charity' was ranked first or second by 63% of respondents is not too surprising, the fact that paying taxes is associated with development assistance by 28% of people in their first three priorities, and actually received more first preferences than buying fair trade, is perhaps unexpected.

CONCLUSION

These survey findings are interesting in a number of respects—students in Irish universities have a very strong commitment to development, believe it is important to them personally and think the government should further increase official aid beyond the promised 0.7% of GNP. The very significant increase in 'poverty' as a word that comes to mind when students hear the term 'developing countries', compared to the level of response it elicited in the 2002 survey of the general public, suggests that the high-profile 'make poverty history' campaign and associated media coverage had a direct impact. More generally, this suggests that campaigning and development education work can have an impact and that the nature of media coverage is crucial in framing students understanding of development.

Irish development NGOs have a high public recognition factor and are seen as both important and reliable sources of information. They are also identified as being the most

influential in mobilising students to action. There was a much greater awareness of government aid in a general sense among university students than was evident in the 2002 survey of the wider public, but the relatively low level of awareness of Irish Aid as an organisation is repeated in the present study.

Students' self-perception is that they know very little about development. When asked to respond to open ended questions, the most common responses on what Ireland can do focus on very traditional views of giving financial aid, volunteering, etc. However, when presented with lists of other issues, students show an awareness of the importance of trade access, debt reduction and conflict resolution for development. Students have some awareness of these issues and know they are important, but there is little evidence of any integrated view of development issues, or any sense of structuring or ranking different explanations of underdevelopment.

Development education work in the university sector, therefore, does not really need to work to engage students' interest in development issues, or to persuade them that it is important. They show high levels of support already. There is a need, however, for more work around causes of underdevelopment and in addressing how the interactions between the global north and the global south go beyond aid and include issues such as trade access, debt relief and conflict resolution. This type of work is not easy to do in publicity campaigns based on posters, leaflets, etc., which can mobilise around a particular theme, but may lack depth. Engaging students on the more complex issues around causes of underdevelopment is probably better done in a formal setting, allowing more time for a greater levels of critical discussion.