

Public Consultation on the European Union

Submission from Concern Worldwide

November 2005



## Introduction

Concern welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the public consultation launched by the Forum on Europe. It recognises the significant role played by the Forum in facilitating the national debate on the future direction of the EU. The extent to which the Forum has been acknowledged and applauded as a model to promote active democratic engagement in the debate on Europe, is testament to the importance of its mandate and the necessity of its fulfilment.

The European Union, a unique model of cooperation between states, is at a critical juncture in its history. Since Ireland's 2004 EU presidency alone, it has seen unprecedented change in terms of its institutions and its constitution: EU enlargement, the appointment of the new Commission president, the negotiations of the future Financial Perspectives, Council agreement on the new Constitutional Treaty, two referenda failures and subsequent questioning on the future of Europe.

As it faces opportunities and challenges in equal measure, Europe needs leadership which has the courage to promote widespread debate on its future, and a strong civil society which can engage effectively in shaping this future.

The central tenet of this submission is that Ireland's distinct contribution to the debate on the future of Europe should have a strong and central emphasis on citizen engagement in shaping a positive role for Europe in the wider world. There is a particular role Ireland can play in promoting debate on European values and visions. In this context, the opportunity is to strengthen in that debate the centrality of overseas development in Europe's external relations.

Ireland can and should amplify the leadership role Europe can play through its engagement with developing countries, and with Africa in particular. It should identify core competencies, and elaborate strategies which enable this country to add value to the global efforts to end poverty. And it should amplify, in all these efforts, the leadership role Ireland can play in shaping a more 'responsible' Europe<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> See Annex 1, Annex 2

## The Context and Challenge

The debate on the future of Europe has many dimensions, both internal and external, and their relative priorities differ widely across the 25 member states. Delivery on the Lisbon Agenda is challenged by high unemployment and economic stagnation in the core euro economies. In the new member states, integration has been preceded by enormous efforts and real sacrifice. Indeed, the benefits of membership will take some time to be realised. Meanwhile, as Ireland enjoys the benefits of the 'celtic tiger', it struggles too with these changes and their consequences.

The transformation of Irish society over the past 20 years is staggering. Traditional values have been uprooted; established notions of 'Irishness' overturned; rural, urban and societal landscapes altered forever. We live in '*the most globalised country*' in the world<sup>2</sup>, a knowledge-based economy closely inter-related within the global 'community'. Our technological competences, our levels of education and our recent economic advancements are the envy of many. As a society we are becoming more internationally aware and racially mixed. While geographically on the periphery of Europe, our membership of the EU has been central to this transformation.

Ireland in turn can be central to future transformation in Europe. We now have the opportunity to shape a strong and distinct role for this country in the promotion of Union which puts Development at the heart of its external relations.

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<sup>2</sup> In 2004, for the 3<sup>rd</sup> consecutive year, Ireland was ranked by the 'Foreign Policy Globalisation Index' as 'the most global nation in the world'. This survey considers economic integration, technological connectivity, personal contact and political engagement. ([www.foreignpolicy.com](http://www.foreignpolicy.com))

## **A European Tradition of Development**

As the largest donor in the world, Europe has a significant role to play in overseas development. The legal bases, policy framework<sup>3</sup> and financial resources of the EU affect the lives of millions of people inside the Union but perhaps even greater numbers beyond its borders.

The historical links between Europe, Africa and other developing nations are as strong and as they are diverse, and our own development economically, politically and socially has been well informed by these ties. As well as being the main trading partner for many developing countries for example, Europe is also home to 30 million migrants from Africa, Asia and Latin America.

In terms of development assistance, the EU has played and continues to play a major role as the largest provider of official development assistance (ODA) in the world.<sup>4</sup> 2005 review of progress towards the Millennium Development Goals has reaffirmed the contributions, efforts and activities of the EU and its member states in support of these goals.<sup>5</sup> These commitments reflect something of both the history of conflict, out of which Europe emerged, and the shared values on which this community is based: democracy, equality, solidarity, social justice, human rights, tolerance and the international rule of law.

Distinct from any other international actor, Europe has moved towards political security through collective action, ever-closer cooperation, expansion of areas of self-interest and common policies towards economic prosperity, political growth and regional stability. In this context, it has a very particular role to play on the world stage.

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<sup>3</sup> 'The European Consensus on Development', 21st November 2005

[http://europa.eu.int/comm/development/body/development\\_policy\\_statement/docs/eu\\_dps\\_en.pdf#zoom=100](http://europa.eu.int/comm/development/body/development_policy_statement/docs/eu_dps_en.pdf#zoom=100)

<sup>4</sup> The EDF is the world's largest aid programme, to which EU member states make voluntary contributions. Under the ninth EDF (for the period 2001-2007) the EU will have a potential spending power of ca. €13.5 billion.

<sup>5</sup> [http://europa.eu.int/comm/development/body/communications/docs/eu\\_mdg\\_report.pdf#zoom=125](http://europa.eu.int/comm/development/body/communications/docs/eu_mdg_report.pdf#zoom=125)

Europe has given expression to its core values through a Constitution, and is giving meaning to these values through significant institutional reform. Whether ratified or not, the Constitutional Treaty and its provisions will be at the heart of the debate on Europe in the coming years. Europe's foreign, security and defence policies will also continue apace. As this happens, ensuring strong political priority is given to European Development Cooperation will become ever more challenging. How security and development policies evolve is of crucial significance, particularly for Africa. Europe is the world's biggest donor and is Africa's biggest donor and trading partner.

The terrorist attacks in Madrid last year brought the security agenda and its relative priorities more sharply into focus. It prompted a clear commitment on the part of the EU to work together to eliminate the root causes of terrorism. Poverty and injustice are two of most pervasive and challenging among these root causes.

An honest political commitment to countering terrorism can only be effective alongside a substantive political commitment to countering poverty and injustice. EU foreign policy must be in the first instance values-based, and in the final analysis strategic and effective.

## **An Irish Tradition of Development**

In the national context, Ireland has a strong tradition in overseas development. The government's Development Cooperation Ireland, missionaries and NGOs, figures like Mary Robinson, Bob Geldof and Bono as well as the Irish people have given Ireland a high profile as 'a caring country'.

This year, the immense and ongoing generosity of Irish people has been all too evident to agencies like Concern. From the enormous outpouring of generosity and action following the Tsunami in January, to the 20,000 people who came onto the streets of Dublin in June calling on the government to MakePovertyHistory, the urge that exists in Irish society to help those less fortunate and to do more than 'write the cheque' is all too evident.

This strong tradition of helping the developing world is coupled with the fact that Ireland has committed itself to the Millennium Development Goals. In fact, Ireland's Presidency of the EU last year was marked by significant achievements, not least its commitment at the September UN Summit to reaching the UN target of 0.7% ODA by 2012, three years ahead of the European target of 2015.

While aid agencies are often seen as the 'face' of Ireland's development efforts, the government's programme under Development Cooperation Ireland also has a strong reputation internationally. Moreover, the future of this programme is now being shaped through the Whitepaper process. From this will emerge a clear articulation of key priorities on which Ireland will focus its development efforts. Concern strongly supports the indications that HIV/AIDS, humanitarian assistance, hunger, good governance and engagement of the private sector should be at the heart of these priorities.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.un.org/webcast/summit2005/statements/ire050914eng.pdf>

## Concern, an Irish NGO, a European NGO

Just as Ireland's membership of the EU has shaped and reshaped our lives over the past 32 years, it has also played a formative role in the work of Concern. Our mission is *to enable absolutely poor people to achieve major improvements in their lifestyles which are sustainable without ongoing support from Concern. To this end we will work with the poor themselves and with local and international partners who share our vision to create just and peaceful societies where the poor can exercise their fundamental rights.*<sup>7</sup> Deriving from this mission is a responsibility to advocate for the strongest possible national and international commitment to poverty eradication.

At both national and European level, we have advocated on a range of areas including the Constitutional Treaty, the Development Policy Statement, the Financial Perspectives and the budget. This policy work is ongoing and over the last 12 months, we have extended our efforts to promote the wider debate on Europe through a 'Visions Series' in the European Voice (Annex 1), a number of websites with both policy analysis and public forum (Annex 2), a 'Start of Term' Visions pack (Annex 3) and a series of Roundtables which have taken place in Brussels.

Paradoxically, in a year of internal dissonance on many institutional issues, the Union has been strong and united in the area of development. Its commitments agreed at the June GAERC in advance of the UN Summit are worthy of particular note.<sup>8</sup> When the assessment is made of 2005's global commitments to 'making poverty history', the untold story will be the strong promises made by Europe, promises which now must be honored. Ensuring the rhetoric and reality match each other will continue to drive the work of Concern on its European agenda.

Looking to 2006, the organization will increase its focus on the national debate and would welcome the opportunity to work with the Forum more extensively in the future.

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<sup>7</sup> Concern Mission Statement, [www.concern.net](http://www.concern.net)

<sup>8</sup> [http://europa-eu-un.org/articles/en/article\\_4929\\_en.htm](http://europa-eu-un.org/articles/en/article_4929_en.htm)

## Unity in Diversity

In seeking to promote a wider and deeper debate about the future of Europe and our role as Irish citizens in that future, we should look to those areas which unite us, where we recognize an important and complementary role for our country and for Europe. Development is one of those areas, and the current debate is a seminal opportunity to amplify the role we can play as Ireland and as Europe in building a country and Union which plays a responsible role on the world stage.

Development is one area of Europe's external relations, around which citizens unite. It is an area where both ambition and action have the clear support of its large and diverse populations. It is also considered one of the elements which has contributed to the success of the European Union itself...*the Union has crafted a common approach to the rest of the world. This approach has been build very much on what one could call soft power – development aid, strong support for multilateral engagement and an increasing commitment to peace-keeping and support for humanitarian tasks. This presence of Europe in the world, has I believe, acted as a stabilising force in many regions and created awareness in other parts of the world of the usefulness of the European model.*<sup>9</sup>

As Europe grows, and develops its 'hard security' competencies, this must not in our view detract from, or undermine those core competencies we have developed over many years. In particular, Europe's development policy and its implementation must continue to be rooted in shared positive values.

Development is something Irish citizens see as central to their own identity. But more than that, it is something Irish citizens believe Europe should lead on. Fighting poverty and social exclusion is the action that most Irish people feel the European Union should prioritise.<sup>10</sup> This is coupled with a recent and sharp increase in the proportion of European citizens, who believe it is important to help people in developing countries.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> An Taoiseach speaking at *The Future of Europe – Uniting Vision, Values and Citizens* CFJ Conference, Croke Park, 27<sup>th</sup> September 2005

<sup>10</sup> Eurobarometer 63.4 Public Opinion in the European Union, Spring 2005

<sup>11</sup> [http://europa.eu.int/comm/public\\_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs\\_222\\_en.pdf](http://europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_222_en.pdf)

## **Civil Society Engagement – A major challenge**

During this ‘period of reflection’, there has been a lot of discussion about the importance of engaging citizens in the debate on Europe. The results of the July 2005 Eurobarometer highlight *just how necessary it is to bring European citizens and the European institutions closer together*.<sup>12</sup> In an enlarged EU with a growing number of civil society groups and organizations, this is a challenge, and one which should be set against another reality.

The experience of Concern and of many others within the NGO sector is that, contrary to the rhetoric, the *space* for civil society engagement is actually contracting. The practical difficulties in accessing support from and engagement with EU institutions run contrary to stated objectives of citizen engagement. In Ireland, the ‘barriers to entry’ are particularly high for small NGOs. Looking more broadly across the EU, civil society in New Member States is faced with significant difficulties in its engagement with European institutions.

Speaking from Concern’s own experience, the barriers are all too clear. The EC has in the past been a funder ‘of first resort’ for this organisation. Today, due to a vast array of difficulties, complexities and inefficiencies, Europe is now a funder ‘of last resort’. In terms of policy engagement, only a small number of NGOs in Ireland have the capacity to involve themselves meaningfully in the debates which shape European policy. As one organization which does, it is also clear that promoting interest in the European agenda amongst NGOs is very difficult. All too often, the development agenda of the Union is seen as too complex, too distant and even irrelevant. The irony is that the policies of the EU fundamentally shape our day to day work. Perhaps more ironic is the fact that this very engagement could serve to strengthen support for the European project in all its dimensions.

Civil society capacity must grow. National governments and European institutions have a central role in this regard. Resources and support must be available to help organizations get involved and grow their expertise. Concern believes that new impetus must be given to strengthen civil society and build capacity so that true engagement, debate and dialogue on Europe is possible.

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<sup>12</sup> Eurobarometer 63 [http://europa.eu.int/comm/public\\_opinion/archives/eb/eb63/eb63.4\\_en\\_first.pdf](http://europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb63/eb63.4_en_first.pdf)

## Conclusion

As we deal the challenges of economic success and seek to retain our traditional values in this changing society, there is no greater contribution Ireland can make to Europe's future than to draw from our traditions, mobilise our public intent and harness our political capacity to set development as the area of highest priority for our country and for the EU. We should not under-estimate the capacity of Ireland to play a key role in shaping the EU's policies on development on the back of our own proud record and firm commitments in this area.<sup>13</sup>

If we are to play this role, and at the same time increase understanding and support for the European project, we need a strong, vibrant and engaged civil society. We need public interest, policy expertise, creative communication strategies and increased capacity in all of these areas.

As a nation, we are increasingly confident, informed and outward looking. There has never been a better time to promote public debate and focus political priority on the challenge of poverty eradication and our role as Irish and European citizens in meeting that challenge.

“The fact that we have people out on the street in Dublin today, demanding that we show leadership on this issue, is an encouraging signal that Europe is indeed big enough to look outwards, even during a period of introspection.”

Jose Manuel Barosso,  
President of the European Commission  
addressing the Forum on Europe 30<sup>th</sup> June 2005

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<sup>13</sup> Minister Dermot Ahern, National Forum on Europe, 20<sup>th</sup> October 2005