



'Ah, Ireland, the caring nation': foreign aid and Irish state identity in the long 1970s

Title	'Ah, Ireland, the caring nation': foreign aid and Irish state identity in the long 1970s
Author(s)	O'Sullivan, Kevin
Publication Date	2013-05
Publisher	Cambridge University Press
Repository DOI	10.1017/S0021121400001607

**“Ah, Ireland, the caring nation”:
Foreign aid and Irish state identity in the long 1970s¹**

Kevin O’Sullivan

in: *Irish Historical Studies*, 38:151 (2013), pp. 476-491.

doi: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021121400001607>

On a plane leaving Baidoa refugee camp in Somalia in late 1992, an Arab doctor offered John O’Shea, head of the relief agency Goal, a glimpse of how the Irish were viewed in that civil war-ravaged state. ‘Ah, Ireland’, he remarked on learning of O’Shea’s country of origin, ‘the caring nation’.² He had reason to be complimentary. In addition to the aid agencies and aid workers involved in the on-going relief effort, Somalia had recently hosted two high-profile visitors from the Irish state. In August 1992 Minister for Foreign Affairs David Andrews spent three days in the country to view at first-hand its escalating civil war. He was followed less than two months later by President Mary Robinson, whose arrival at Baidoa on 2 October marked the beginning of a tour – the first by a Western head of state – of the feeding stations and refugee camps that provided succour to those displaced by the conflict.

But, this article asks, where did this ‘Ireland, the caring nation’ identity originate? And what role did aid play in its construction? The image Robinson and Andrews projected was nothing new. From the foundation of the state, successive Irish governments framed their country as anti-colonial, pro-justice and peace, and a supporter of political and economic independence. Yet the visits articulated those concerns through a relatively new foreign policy medium: as a particularly *Irish* contribution to the fields of aid and disaster relief. In so doing, they offered an important portrayal of Irish state identity at the beginning of the 1990s. (Although closely related to the concept of national identity, state identity refers specifically to the identity assumed by the state in the conduct of its international affairs.) They heightened the profile enjoyed by Irish aid agencies and prepared the ground for an Irish contingent to join the United Nations (U.N.) peacekeeping force in Somalia the following year. They focussed public and official attention on aid, prompting sizeable increases in government spending on official development assistance. And they underlined the link between development, justice and human rights that became central to the 1996 White Paper on Irish foreign policy, *Challenges and Opportunities Abroad*.³

This article traces the origins of the ‘Ireland, the caring nation’ image in the emergence and consolidation of the Irish official aid programme in the ‘long 1970s’ (between the social and political disturbances of 1968 and the rise to prominence of neo-liberal economic and political models in the West in the mid-1980s).⁴ It asks why missionaries, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and individuals like Robinson

¹ I wish to thank the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences for funding my current research.

² Quoted in Olivia O’Leary and Helen Burke, *Mary Robinson: the authorised biography* (London, 1998), p. 259.

³ Ireland. Department of Foreign Affairs, *Challenges and opportunities abroad: white paper on foreign policy* (Dublin, 1996).

⁴ The argument for focussing on this period as ‘the long 1970s’ is best articulated in Niall Ferguson, Charles S. Maier, Erez Manela and Daniel J. Sargent (eds), *The shock of the global: the 1970s in perspective* (London, 2010).

became such visible manifestations of what it meant to be Irish. Did that identity emerge primarily from within Irish society, or was it the result of other, outside pressures? How did it reflect, and affect, Ireland's standing in the international system? To answer these questions, the article is divided into four parts. It looks firstly at the theory of state identity: how it is constructed, and why it matters for understanding Ireland's place in the world. It then explores the role of foreign aid in that process in three, overlapping sections: as a reflection of the country's social and cultural priorities; as an expression of its values through the medium of foreign policy; and as a consequence of its diplomatic relationships. Because aid is, in essence, a global undertaking, and state identity a social construction, the link between aid and identity must be studied in a similar fashion. This article adopts a broadly comparative framework that draws on the experiences of small states like Finland, and more affluent aid advocates like Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden, to better explain the Irish experience of change. In so doing, it argues for a more holistic approach to the study of Irish foreign relations in the second half of the twentieth century: to take account of the blurred lines between domestic and international politics, and between policy interests and cultural values; and to appreciate the importance of global norms and their impact on the Irish state.

I

The concept of 'state identity' is best described in terms of three strands: domestic cultural and political values; foreign policy concerns; and the socialising effect of international diplomacy. At its most basic level, the nation is, as Benedict Anderson described it, 'an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign'.⁵ It is constructed as a communion of fellow-members who share fundamental values and traits. Religion, language, and ethnicity all matter, to varying degrees. So too do history and morality. But the unity implied by national identity – however contested – is also constructed in dialogue with other cultures. Contact between nations helps to establish areas of commonality in behaviour and values, and in so doing reinforces national identity through identification with a wider peer group.

Foreign policy – the second strand of state identity – embraces these values, or, at the very least, reflects the priorities that make up 'the nation'. Although realist scholars of diplomatic history emphasise the primacy of *realpolitik* and selfish state interests, in practice those interests can, and often do, include the articulation of social and cultural priorities.⁶ Foreign policy has always been based on what Christian Reus-Smit described as 'an enduring political reality: the inextricable connection between moral values, the identity of the state, and rightful state action'.⁷ As 'official' representatives of the nation-state, foreign policy-makers act as conduits of its values and help to articulate its identity on the world stage. In the process, the nation and national identity become just as important as diplomatic concerns in shaping the

⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (3rd ed., London, 2003), p. 6.

⁶ For an introduction to international relations theory, see John Baylis, Patricia Owens and Steve Smith (eds), *The globalization of world politics: an introduction to international relations* (5th ed., Oxford, 2010).

⁷ Christian Reus-Smit, *The moral purpose of the state: culture, social identity, and institutional rationality in international relations* (Princeton, 1999), p. 155.

state's approach to international affairs – they are, in effect, what William Wallace described as 'necessary myths which underpin foreign policy'.⁸

Yet on its own this relationship between 'the nation' and foreign policy is not sufficient to understand the complex processes involved in the construction of state identity. The third strand returns to Anderson's description, and particularly his emphasis on commonality. Foreign policy reflects the priorities of the nation, but state identity is also shaped by interactions with other international actors. David Lumsdaine's comparison of international relations with human action is instructive. In that analogy, states act in 'a mixture of self-interest, idealism, and pointless destructiveness', each of which is present 'in civil society and politics and in international affairs as well as in the life of the individual'.⁹ The consequences of this reading of international relations are significant. Identity formation is not a static process. The priorities and interests that helped to shape it from within influence, and are in turn influenced by, interactions with other states and norms of behaviour generated by the international community.

Foreign aid played an important part in this narrative, in its emergence as one of the dominant norms of post-war international society. Although concepts of charity and emergency relief have a long and varied tradition, the practice of official aid – the direct transfer, on a highly concessional basis, of public resources from governments in the industrialised world to their counterparts in the developing world – is a relatively new one.¹⁰ It was created in the aftermath of the Second World War, in response to the emergence of new global political and economic systems: the escalating Cold War; the growing importance of the U.N.; decolonisation; the Bretton Woods economic system and the new roles played within it by the International Monetary Fund (I.M.F.) and the World Bank. For the United States and the Soviet Union, aid carried the potential to extend political and ideological influence. For states like Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands, aid contributed to their vision of an international system based on co-operation and adherence to international law. For the developing world it had an additional purpose. Aid allowed governments (in theory at least) to pursue their economic and political development free from dependence on former colonial masters and – in the case of assistance from the U.N. or politically neutral states – free from the ideological constraints of the Cold War. The rise of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to global prominence from the late 1960s added a further layer to this relationship, establishing a direct link between individuals in the West and their counterparts in the developing world that lay outside the reach of official aid (even if an increasingly large share of NGOs' funding came from official sources).

⁸ William Wallace, 'Foreign policy and national identity in the United Kingdom' in *International Affairs*, lxvii, no. 1 (1991), p. 66.

⁹ David H. Lumsdaine, *Moral vision in international politics: the foreign aid regime, 1949-1989* (Princeton, 1993), p. 9. See also Jeffrey W. Legro, *Rethinking the world: great power strategies and international order* (London, 2005); and Alexander Wendt, 'Collective identity formation and the international state' in *American Political Science Review*, lxxxviii, no. 2 (1994), pp 384-96.

¹⁰ For an introduction to the history of foreign aid, see Carol Lancaster, *Foreign aid: diplomacy, development, domestic politics* (London, 2007), pp 1-61; and Heide-Irene Schmidt and Helge Pharo (eds), special edition of *Contemporary European History*, xii, no. 4 (2003). For a history of development NGOs, see Ian Smillie, *The alms bazaar: altruism under fire – non-profit organisations and international development* (London, 1995); Brian H. Smith, *More than altruism: the politics of private foreign aid* (Princeton, 1990); and Terje Tvedt, *Angels of mercy or development diplomats? NGOs and foreign aid* (Oxford, 1998).

In Ireland, the translation of charity and relief into modern forms of aid began with the country's Christian missionaries, whose work in providing education and health facilities to communities in Africa, Asia and Latin America fostered a growing sense of obligation among the Irish public towards the developing world.¹¹ The Biafran humanitarian crisis in the late 1960s – the first global 'famine-as-media-event', in which hundreds of Irish missionaries were involved in the provision of relief – transformed that sense of responsibility into action.¹² It gave Ireland its first major NGO, Concern (formed in 1968), which was joined in the aid field in 1973 by Trócaire – the official development agency of the Irish Catholic hierarchy – and in 1977 by Goal, established by the journalist John O'Shea. (Gorta, formed in 1965 under the aegis of the Department of Agriculture, remained a semi-state actor until 1998.) Biafra also began to extricate the Irish government from its disinterested attitude to aid. In 1974, prompted by the responsibilities of European Community (E.C.) membership, the Fine Gael/Labour coalition government introduced Ireland's first official aid programme. By the end of the decade it had expanded its reach to include long-term bilateral aid agreements with four African countries (Lesotho, Sudan, Tanzania and Zambia), and considerable funding channelled through the E.C., the U.N. and other multilateral organisations.

Yet popular focus remained trained on the non-governmental sector. While the official aid programme stagnated in the face of economic recession, and suffered dramatically in government cutbacks in the latter half of the 1980s, the Irish public continued to provide considerable support through the country's NGOs. In 1986 contributions to those organisations amounted to 0.13 per cent of Irish G.N.P., a figure remarked upon positively by Ireland's peers at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (O.E.C.D.) influential Development Assistance Committee (D.A.C.) as being 'well above any other DAC country and a level of effort more than half that of the official aid programme'.¹³ The best example of that support came in the middle of the decade, in the midst of crippling recession, when the country responded generously to televised images of famine in Ethiopia and Sudan. In July 1985 the Irish public donated £7.5 million to the media fundraising event Live Aid, one of the highest per capita amounts in the world.¹⁴ Yet it took until the 1990s, and the shift in foreign policy ushered in by changing international priorities and Robinson's visits to Somalia and later Rwanda (1994 and 1996) for the Irish government to begin to match its rhetorical support for aid and the NGOs' level of commitment with practical action. An increased aid budget and an expansion in the geographical and practical focus of the programme followed. By the middle of the decade aid had become one of the most visible elements of Irish foreign policy – behind Anglo-Irish, Irish-American and Irish-European relations in the government's

¹¹ For a more detailed introduction to the Irish aid sector, see Helen O'Neill, 'Ireland's foreign aid in 1998' in *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, x (1999), pp 289-306; and Kevin O'Sullivan, 'Biafra to Lomé: The evolution of Irish government policy on official development assistance, 1969-75' in *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, xviii (2007), pp. 91-107.

¹² See Kevin O'Sullivan, *Ireland, Africa and the end of empire* (Manchester, 2012); and Enda Staunton, 'The Case of Biafra: Ireland and the Nigerian Civil War', *Irish Historical Studies*, xxxi, no. 124 (1999), pp. 513-35.

¹³ 'Development Assistance Committee Aid Review 1986/87: Report by the Secretariat and questions on the Development Assistance Efforts and Policies of Ireland', undated [distributed to committee members on 1 Aug. 1986] (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Archives, Paris, Development Co-operation Division (hereafter O.E.C.D. DCD), DAC/AR(86)2/10).

¹⁴ Figure for Live Aid from Garret FitzGerald, 'Ireland's development policy: aid and trade' in *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, lxxvii, no. 307 (1988), p. 333.

priorities, but equal to peacekeeping in the articulation of the state's more idealistic interests.

II

There were important lessons at each stage of that narrative for the link between aid and state identity. Of the countries the Irish government viewed as its peers – Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden – each was a major contributor in the field of foreign aid, and each viewed aid as a projection of their domestic ideals on to the international stage. Olav Stokke's influential 1989 study of the determinants of aid policy made the relationship explicit: Canadian, Danish, Dutch, Norwegian and Swedish aid policies, he concluded, were shaped by 'the predominant socio-political values of the societies concerned – in the first place those linked with the welfare state'.¹⁵ Ireland was no different. Its Christian heritage, its history, and its complex post-colonial identity all shaped domestic attitudes to the developing world, with an obvious knock-on effect on the official aid programme.

The country's strong tradition of missionary activity (Catholic and Protestant) was to the forefront. Submitting their government's application for membership of the D.A.C. in 1985, Irish officials emphasised the 'long history of service in developing countries by Irish missionaries' as a significant factor in shaping its approach to foreign aid.¹⁶ The progression, they argued, was obvious: 'With the passage of time, these missionaries became increasingly involved in development work; and this, in turn, resulted in increasingly strong and increasingly sympathetic interest in developing countries on the part of the Irish public.'¹⁷ There is much to be said for this assertion. From the early twentieth century, the Irish public's vision of the developing world was dominated by images from missionary magazines and the – often deeply personal – recollections of relatives, neighbours and friends who lived and worked in far-flung mission stations across Africa, Asia and Latin America. The missionary influence was equally visible in the non-governmental aid sector: the four major indigenous aid agencies (Concern, Goal, Gorta and Trócaire) collaborated with a variety of missionary organisations, while Christian Aid Ireland, a subsidiary of the British NGO of the same name, had close links with the Protestant Church Missionary Society.

In that sense, Ireland was little different from its counterparts elsewhere in the West. Quaker inspiration for Britain's early NGO culture, for example, was visible in its involvement in Oxfam. In Finland and Sweden, the work of Lutheran missionaries provided a path to countries like Ethiopia, Pakistan and South West Africa, which official aid quickly followed. The same religious influence was apparent in the NGO sector in Canada, the Netherlands and West Germany. But in Ireland, the extent to which missionary Catholicism became a specifically 'Irish' activity in the early twentieth century made aid, missionary endeavour and 'Irishness' coterminous in the minds of the Irish public to an extent not visible among its contemporaries. The missionaries' work, and that of the aid agencies that followed in their footsteps,

¹⁵ Olav Stokke, 'The determinants of aid policies: some propositions emerging from a comparative analysis' in Olav Stokke (ed.), *Western middle powers and global poverty: the determinants of the aid policies of Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden* (Uppsala, 1989), p. 279.

¹⁶ Document prepared by the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), 'Ireland's Application to Join the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)', 7 Nov. 1985 (O.E.C.D. DCD F 207908).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

became an extension of Irish values of Christianity, justice and peace, and their expression on the world stage.

The churches' influence – particularly that of the Catholic Church – also extended to what Jerome Connolly described as the 'bundle of values, perceptions and inclinations' they established for the Irish state.¹⁸ The language and value structures borrowed from international Christian discourse provided a strong foundation for the Irish aid community, again echoing trends visible elsewhere in the West. In Western Europe, Caritas Internationalis and Coopération Internationale pour le Développement et la Solidarité on the Catholic side, and Nordchurchaid and Christian Aid among the Protestant confessions, made a practical link between Christian teaching and emergency relief, aid and justice for development. In Ireland Trócaire's support for global justice and trade reform came from a similar theological base. In its approach to global economic reform, for example, the organisation drew a direct link between *Justice in the World* – a 1971 document issued by the international Synod of Catholic Bishops which called for the rich to change their lifestyles for the benefit of the less well off – and 'the same basic message' being proclaimed by the Group of 77 developing countries in their calls for a New International Economic Order.¹⁹ Announcing the results of its 1980 Lenten fund-raising campaign, Trócaire Chairman Bishop Eamonn Casey told a press conference that the Catholic Church's commitment 'demands of all of us an active expression which goes beyond charity and the transfer of resources and which emphasises solidarity'.²⁰

But this embrace of Christian teaching was not limited to Trócaire alone. In its early years, Concern enjoyed a close relationship with the Holy Ghost missionary order, and its members sometimes described their voluntary activities as a form of new spirituality.²¹ Framing Gorta's approach in 1982, that organisation's Chief Executive Ronald Smiley reminded the public that 'if we remember we are Christian, we would recognise that it is our duty and privilege to be able to go and help those in the Third World'.²²

To view aid solely as an extension of the country's Christian traditions, however, would ignore the other, equally influential, factors that shaped Irish attitudes to aid and the developing world. History was to the forefront. Irish missionary activity in the field of aid and development was often presented as part of a longer narrative that linked work in the education and health sectors in independent Africa and Asia with Ireland's own experience of state building in the twentieth century. This emphasis on an exaggerated – if not entirely imagined – 'shared' experience made its way easily into Irish interpretations of the developing world. In the 1960s it was visible in Irish attitudes to decolonisation and to peacekeeping – the Irish government, for example, believed that it had been asked to participate in the U.N. peacekeeping force in the Congo in 1960 because of its own anti-colonial traditions.²³ The approach to foreign aid followed a similar pattern. Outlining his government's new aid programme in 1974, Minister for Foreign Affairs Garret FitzGerald argued that, '[a]s a country which has itself experienced colonial exploitation in Europe, and

¹⁸ Jerome Connolly, 'The Irish churches and foreign policy' in *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, lxxvii, no. 305 (1988), p. 58.

¹⁹ *One World*, Winter 1975-76.

²⁰ *Irish Independent*, 31 Jul. 1980.

²¹ Interview with John O'Loughlin Kennedy and Kay Kennedy of Blackrock, Co. Dublin, 23 Nov. 2009.

²² *Irish Times*, 28 Aug. 1982.

²³ Department of External Affairs memorandum for the government, 'Request for Irish assistance for UN military force in the Congo', 18 Jul. 1960 (N.A.I. DFA 305/384/2 Pt I).

which is today still lagging behind its neighbours in living standards because of this past history, we must be more sympathetic than most to these legitimate demands'.²⁴

One aspect of Ireland's history, above all, underlined the link between aid, identity and the country's past: the legacy of the Famine. The name chosen by the Irish government for the semi-state development agency, Gorta ('Famine'), was an obvious reference to past traditions. At the organisation's launch in November 1965, Minister for Agriculture Charles Haughey commented that Ireland's 'experience places us in a position better than most in the modern world, to appreciate the plight and problems of the underdeveloped countries'.²⁵

Whether real or exaggerated – and Cormac Ó Gráda makes a compelling case for the latter – the 'famine memory' image proved enduring.²⁶ Launching a plea for assistance for Biafran refugees in Dublin on 26 June 1968, the Limerick-born Bishop of Owerri, Joseph Whelan, spoke of the similarities between the Irish and Biafran peoples, giving his speech a telling title: 'The Great Hunger'.²⁷ He was not alone in making that connection. An *Irish Press* editorial six weeks later referenced Cecil Woodham-Smith's popular 1962 history of the same name: a phrase, it argued, that '[i]n the circumstances of today ... has a worldwide application'.²⁸ Images of famine and drought in the Horn of Africa in the mid-1980s provoked a similar reaction. In its immediate response to Michael Buerk's emotional television report from Korem refugee camp in Ethiopia, broadcast by the BBC on 23 October 1984 and a catalyst for the massive international aid effort that followed, the *Irish Press* remarked on the 'reminders of another famine [that] still haunt the memory'.²⁹ The same newspaper implored the Irish people to 'act in the name of Christian charity and of common humanity as a country that has itself known the horror of famine'.³⁰ But the use of the Famine image was not limited to NGOs. In November 1984 Minister of State in charge of development aid Jim O'Keeffe spent five days in Ethiopia as part of the Irish presidency of the E.C., visiting relief centres in Tigray and Wollo, and gathering information on the worsening situation. On his return, the minister helped to shape a massively increased Community food aid contribution, agreed at a meeting at Dublin Castle on 4 December. O'Keeffe later reflected that 'Famine memory' in his childhood home of Skibbereen had contributed to his own personal response to events in Africa.³¹

References to Famine memory were closely bound up in another facet of Irish state identity: what Stephen Howe described as the power of 'subjective belief' in Ireland as a 'Third World' country.³² It produced a complex response to aid. Tensions remained between those who argued that Ireland was 'now a rich country and should pay accordingly', and those who preferred to emphasise the country's own

²⁴ *Irish Times*, 18 Apr. 1974.

²⁵ 'Address by the Minister for Agriculture and Fisheries, Mr Charles J. Haughey, at the inauguration of Gorta, the Freedom from Hunger Council of Ireland, at the Shelbourne Hotel, Dublin, on Monday, 8th November, 1965' (N.A.I. DFA 2001/43/1156).

²⁶ Cormac Ó Gráda, *Ireland's Great Famine: interdisciplinary perspectives* (Dublin, 2006), p. 229.

²⁷ Bishop Joseph Whelan, 'The Great Hunger: Biafra and Ireland', 26 June 1968 (Holy Ghost Provincialite Archives, Dublin, Biafra Papers, Box 1: Bishop Whelan Papers).

²⁸ *Irish Press*, 8 Aug. 1968.

²⁹ *Irish Press*, 25 Oct. 1984.

³⁰ *Irish Press*, 26 Oct. 1984.

³¹ Interview with Jim O'Keeffe of Bandon, Co. Cork, 1 Dec. 2009.

³² Stephen Howe, *Ireland and empire: colonial legacies in Irish history and culture* (Oxford, 2000), p. 155.

under-development within the industrialised world.³³ Some, like Raymond Crotty and Eoin O'Malley, referred to Ireland's economic shortcomings by linking them directly to the country's colonial heritage and the structural inheritances of British rule.³⁴ Others argued that Irish economic under-development and rising levels of unemployment meant that primacy should be given to charity that began at home. A survey carried out by the state-funded Advisory Council on Development Co-operation (A.C.D.C.) in 1980 found that most respondents perceived Ireland as 'a relatively "poor" country': 'This image finds support in the picture of Ireland as an industrially backward country with high unemployment, high emigration which dominated our economic/social/cultural thoughts since the beginning of this State.'³⁵

Yet the same individuals who supported moves to restrict access for developing world producers to European markets and defined theirs as an under-developed country provided huge moral and monetary support to appeals for refugees in South-East Asia, oppressed populations in Latin America, and victims of famine and war in Ethiopia and Sudan, and professed themselves in favour of increasing government aid.³⁶ While Trócaire struggled to persuade the Irish public of the case for global economic reform, 'ordinary' Irish women and men viewed charity as separate from competition from developing world producers in industries such as agriculture and textiles. They emphasised instead the relevance of the Irish experience to conditions in the developing world, and argued that Ireland's recent (and, some argued, continuing) economic under-development offered an important example to the developing world. At the U.N. Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) at Manila in May 1979, Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs David Andrews presented Irish support for global economic reform as part of this narrative of common experience. Ireland, he told the conference, knew 'only too well from our own relatively recent development the problems faced by developing economies largely reliant upon the export of primary commodities'.³⁷

This often confusing, and sometimes contradictory, approach – preaching common experience while simultaneously denying the developing world access to the same markets relied on by Irish producers – was far from unique. Finland, like Ireland, was a relative latecomer to the provision of foreign aid and a supporter of developing world calls for economic reform, though its peripheral position in the global economic system limited its support for large-scale change. In common with Ireland, too, the principles of Finnish foreign policy – the pursuit of justice, faith in international institutions, and respect for the right to political and economic independence – translated easily into popular attitudes to foreign aid. And the Finnish and Irish governments were often accused of using rhetorical support for economic

³³ Confederation of Non-governmental Organisations for Overseas Development, *The case against the 1980 Irish government aid cuts* (Dublin, 1980), p. 2.

³⁴ Raymond Crotty, *Ireland in crisis: a study in capitalist colonial undevelopment* (Dingle, 1986); Eoin O'Malley, 'Reflections on Ireland's economic identity' in *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, lxxv, no. 300 (1986), pp. 477-86.

³⁵ Advisory Council on Development Co-operation (ACDC), *Development co-operation education: report and recommendations by the Advisory Council on Development Co-operation* (Dublin, 1982), p. 24.

³⁶ See *Ibid.*, p. 24; and ACDC, *Aid to Third World countries: attitudes of a national sample of Irish people* (Dublin, 1985), p. 8.

³⁷ DFA press release, 'Text of address delivered by the Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs, Mr David Andrews, T.D., to the General Debate at UNCTAD V, in Manila, May 10th 1979' (N.A.I. DFA 2009/120/725).

reform to hide deficiencies in their absolute contributions to official aid.³⁸ The consequences of this approach were also common to both states: whatever their practical shortcomings, a positive attitude to aid and a (self-proclaimed) ‘special’ understanding of the developing world remained an important part of state identity.

III

The link between domestic values and foreign policy was long established in the Irish approach to international affairs. Irish support for the League of Nations, the U.N., and international peacekeeping were all presented as an extension of the state’s commitment to justice, human rights, and the peaceful resolution of conflict. These values remained prominent in the 1970s and 1980s. Among the three core elements of foreign policy identified by Minister for Foreign Affairs Patrick Hillery in 1972 was a ‘due regard for certain values, attitudes and concerns which are basic to our society and culture, and by which our people would wish us to act’.³⁹ Sixteen years later Minister of State in charge of development aid Seán Calleary named ‘the values of Western liberal democracy and respect for human rights’ as one of eleven guiding principles of Irish foreign policy.⁴⁰

In that context, the mix of Christianity, missionary links, historical conditioning, and common experience (real or imagined) that shaped popular attitudes to aid in Ireland provided a rich seam for policy-makers. The official aid programme – framed on its creation as the Irish people’s ‘direct concern’ and a reflection of the country’s values – readily embraced the principles of justice and rights, and a concern for political freedom.⁴¹ It also put into practice a particularly ‘Irish’ approach to aid. Describing the motivations behind the programme in 1983, Taoiseach Garret FitzGerald commented that ‘Ireland could never hope to be a major donor of capital aid’ – instead he emphasised what the country did have ‘in abundance[:] ... the skills and expertise which we have built up in the course of our own development’.⁴² Tracing its lineage from the first Christian missionaries, through the lay Catholic voluntary organisation *Viatores Christi* (established in the early 1960s), to the globetrotting exploits of Bob Geldof and Mary Robinson, this emphasis on individual voluntary service strengthened the bond between the missionary and volunteer ethic, aid and Irish state identity. O’Keeffe’s description of volunteerism on his return from visiting Irish bilateral and NGO projects in Africa in January 1982 was typical: ‘It is the embodiment of the idealism of young Irish people’.⁴³

The official approach to disaster relief was equally shaped by national values and traditions. In the course of his first official duties as president of the E.C. – a meeting of South-East Asian foreign ministers in Bali on 1 July 1979 – Minister for Foreign Affairs Michael O’Kennedy outlined the Irish government’s response to the on-going refugee crisis in the region (prompted by the collapse of the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia) in familiar terms. He reminded his audience of his country’s Famine, its diaspora, and, in an obvious reference to the refugee situation, the

³⁸ Kimmo Kiljunen, ‘Finnish development cooperation: policy and performance’ in Olav Stokke (ed.), *European development assistance: policies and performance* (Oslo, 1984), p. 174-5.

³⁹ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, cclx, 386 (18 Apr. 1972).

⁴⁰ *Dáil Éireann debates*, ccclxxxii, 931 (17 June 1988).

⁴¹ Minister for Finance Richie Ryan in *Irish Times*, 27 Apr. 1974.

⁴² *One World*, Jul. 1983.

⁴³ *Concern News*, Spring 1982.

contribution they had made ‘to the development of many countries’.⁴⁴ Yet the minister’s interest in the crisis, and that of his officials, also exhibited the kind of enlightened self-interest so commonly accorded a primary role in Irish foreign policy. O’Kennedy’s presence in Bali was driven by a desire to ‘do something more to help in the effort to channel international relief to those who really need it’, but also by the region’s importance to the Community.⁴⁵ As early as December 1978, the Department of Foreign Affairs recognised that a donation to the U.N. Refugee Agency ‘would be evidence of our concern about the refugee problem in South-East Asia ... [and] ... a practical gesture towards the government of Thailand, with which country we are anxious to develop good relations, *inter alia* in the context of EEC-ASEAN co-operation’.⁴⁶

These attitudes were repeated in the official Irish response to the crisis in the Horn of Africa in the mid-1980s. Almost half of the government’s total famine relief fund spent in 1984 was used to support Irish NGOs in Ethiopia, including airlifts by Goal and the Irish Red Cross, and a shipment of 1,500 tonnes of emergency supplies organised in co-operation with Concern. But it was at the E.C., during the state’s third presidency of the Community in the second half of the year, that Irish diplomatic efforts were most visible. At a Council of Ministers meeting in September 1984 O’Keeffe argued for an increase in resources to be devoted to emergency relief. The following month FitzGerald led calls for all E.C. governments to agree to a ‘far more ambitious aid plan’ for the Horn of Africa, and was rewarded on 28 October when the Community announced a further £25 million in disaster relief for Ethiopia.⁴⁷ In December O’Keeffe’s report on his short visit to Ethiopia contributed to the E.C.’s decision to massively increase its supply of food aid at a meeting in Dublin Castle.

Disaster relief was exactly the kind of issue on which Irish officials could assert influence at the E.C.: largely uncontroversial, based loosely on issues of justice and rights, and without any large financial commitment on the part of the state itself. It allowed the Irish government to adopt a role befitting the progressive European identity projected by its officials in Brussels and beyond. But it also cultivated a particularly ‘Irish’ identity. In the early 1960s, Irish contributions to U.N. peacekeeping operations emphasised the state’s commitment to international peace and stability and its anti-imperialism. Foreign aid, as it gained in importance among the international community, replicated that approach at a variety of international fora, from the UNCTAD to the E.C.

That identity was most visible in negotiations for successive Lomé trade agreements between the E.C. and the developing world in 1975, 1979 and 1984, during which the Irish government – as president of the Community on each occasion – presented itself as a ‘bridge’ between the West and the developing world. In 1975 it helped to cement a progressive role for the state – what Ben Tonra termed the ‘Ireland as global citizen’ element of its identity – while simultaneously underlining its credentials as a new member state (Ireland as ‘European republic’).⁴⁸ The negotiations for its successor that began three years later and were completed with the

⁴⁴ ‘Mr Michael O’Kennedy, T.D., Minister of [*sic*] Foreign Affairs of Ireland, President of the Council of Ministers of the European Communities: Address to the ASEAN foreign ministers, Bali, 1 July, 1979’ (N.A.I. DFA 2009/120/1190).

⁴⁵ Draft note by Dorr, ‘Aid to Cambodia’, 8 Nov. 1979 (N.A.I. DFA 2009/120/1649).

⁴⁶ Lyons to Murnaghan, 19 Dec. 1978 (N.A.I. DFA 2008/79/2877).

⁴⁷ *Irish Independent*, 27 Oct. 1984.

⁴⁸ Ben Tonra, *Global citizen and European republic: Irish foreign policy in transition* (Manchester, 2006). For a description of the Irish role in the negotiations for Lomé I, see O’Sullivan, ‘Biafra to Lomé’, pp 104-105.

signing of the renewed convention at Lomé in November 1979, extended that policy, based on the pursuit of what opposition Labour T.D. Ruairi Quinn called ‘self interest’ with ‘a moral dimension’.⁴⁹ By its own admission, the Irish government was little affected by the on-the-ground operation of Lomé provisions such as the stabilisation of export earnings and the European Development Fund.⁵⁰ Yet it was happy to bask in the image of the country as the ‘moral conscience’ of the E.C., with a special understanding of the aims and requirements of the developing world states.⁵¹ O’Kennedy again led the way. Towards the beginning of the negotiating process, in November 1978, he told the Dáil of the ‘special’ role his government held, as ‘a country which has experienced something of the same thing and a country which has a special obligation to listen to both sides of the case’.⁵²

The Irish approach to the Lomé II negotiations was important in another sense to understanding the state’s identity. The very definition of Ireland as the E.C.’s ‘moral conscience’, while it re-asserted the ‘special’ link between the country and the developing world, placed it firmly among a European milieu. It allowed Irish officials to pursue a progressive approach to aid and global economic reform, while remaining committed to the responsibilities thrust upon it as a member state and, in the last six months of 1979, as President of the E.C.

There was little unique, of course, in this link between foreign aid and state identity. Scandinavian support for aid was presented in terms of ‘a general humanitarian tradition ... [and] ... the extension of principles of human rights and social justice to the world at large’.⁵³ Dutch aid policy owed much to a combination of ‘sombre pragmatism’ and an ‘international-idealistic tradition’ (and, of course, the memory of empire).⁵⁴ Canadian aid was also sometimes presented as a ‘vocation’ and the result of the country’s position as ‘a prosperous middle power with no colonial past’.⁵⁵ In each case, the values of states with strong social welfare systems were reflected in their generous attitudes to development assistance.⁵⁶

But attitudes to aid were also closely related to a broader commitment among these states – and Ireland – to the pursuit of international peace and stability. Stokke’s 1989 study found that Canadian, Danish, Dutch, Norwegian and Swedish aid policies readily combined ‘altruistic motives’ with ‘motives related to foreign policy interests’.⁵⁷ Such interests, he concluded, tended ‘to be formulated in general terms – pursuance of peace and international stability – and belong, by and large, to the category of the international common good’.⁵⁸ It was no coincidence that these states tended to view aid and peacekeeping as twin elements of foreign policies that

⁴⁹ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, cccxvi, 1067 (6 Dec. 1979).

⁵⁰ See, for example, the note by Prionsias Gallagher, ‘Reflections on the Lomé Convention’, 23 June 1977 (N.A.I. DFA 2008/79/2902).

⁵¹ Ghanaian Ambassador to the E.C., K. B. Asante in *Irish Press*, 25 Nov. 1978.

⁵² Michael O’Kennedy in *Dáil Éireann deb.*, cccxlv, 1790 (9 Nov. 1983).

⁵³ Just Faaland and Ole David Koht Norbye, ‘Interests of Scandinavian countries in Third World development’ in Robert Cassen, Richard Jolly, John Sewell and Robert Wood (eds), *Rich country interests and Third World development* (London, 1982), p. 283.

⁵⁴ Esther Helena Arens, ‘Multilateral institution-building and national interest: Dutch development policy in the 1960s’ in *Contemporary European History*, xii, no. 4 (2003), p. 458.

⁵⁵ Alain Noël, Jean-Philippe Thérien and Sébastien Dallaire, ‘Divided Over Internationalism: The Canadian Public and Development Assistance’ in *Canadian Public Policy/Analyse de Politiques*, xxx, no. 1 (2004), p. 31.

⁵⁶ Alain Noël and Jean-Philippe Thérien, ‘From domestic to international justice: the welfare state and foreign aid’ in *International Organization*, xlix, no. 3 (1995), p. 542.

⁵⁷ Stokke, ‘The determinants of aid policies’, p. 278.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

emphasised what David Lumsdaine described as ‘the belief that long-term peace and prosperity was possible only in a generous and just international order where all could prosper’.⁵⁹

IV

The emphasis on the ‘international common good’ and the importance accorded to the expression of domestic values embodied in this approach to foreign policy leads to another important factor in the construction of state identity: the socialising effect of inter-state relations. The preceding sections have highlighted the extent to which Irish government attitudes to foreign aid were shaped by a set of ‘Irish’ values and interpretations of Ireland’s role as a post-colonial, European state. Yet these attitudes, and the manner in which they helped to construct a particularly Irish identity on the world stage, could not be described in isolation from the circumstances in which they were articulated and presented.

At the domestic level in Ireland, the influence of international trends was openly visible. Interest in foreign aid owed much to the country’s Christian missionaries, but the latter took their cue from changes in the institutional churches in the 1950s and 1960s. The Irish NGO system emerged at the same time, and in much the same circumstances, as was the case elsewhere in the West. In the realm of foreign policy, too, the rising importance of aid as a tool of international relations after the Second World War elevated its significance for successive Irish governments.

Globalisation, and particularly the rise of global ideas and values, played an important role in this process. The prominence of international values challenged realist interpretations of diplomatic history, raising questions about the depiction of states as selfish actors, interested only in the pursuit of power. The experience of small states in particular testified to the growing relevance of ‘social’ – particularly constructivist – descriptions of international relations. In that reading, states were not free to unilaterally pursue their goals in self-interested terms; rather, they were constrained by the structures of international society in which they operated. The result, Alexander Wendt argued, was that policies were formed by interaction – states did ‘not have a “portfolio” of interests that they carry around independent of social context; instead they define their interests in the process of defining situations.’⁶⁰ International organisations like the U.N., the E.C., the I.M.F. or the World Bank were important in shaping this process, framing regulations for inter-state relations and boundaries of acceptable behaviour. So too was the influence of the major powers, though as states they were also subject to the norms of behaviour – notably human rights – established by the international community.⁶¹ Since states did not always know what they wanted, they developed behavioural patterns based on interactions with other states and through international organisations.

International norms certainly played a significant role in shaping the Irish approach. It was no coincidence that the creation of the official aid programme in 1974 followed immediately on its obligations to the E.C. and the need to catch up with its counterparts in the Community. Aid in turn became a measure of Irish state identity *within* the E.C., and helped it – through its chairmanship of successive Lomé

⁵⁹ Lumsdaine, *Moral vision*, p. 3.

⁶⁰ Alexander Wendt, ‘Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics’ in *International Organization*, xlvii, no. 2 (1992), p. 398.

⁶¹ For a discussion of the rise of human rights in international discourse, see Samuel Moyn, *The last utopia: human rights in history* (London, 2010).

agreements, for example – to highlight its credentials both as a ‘bridge’ to the developing world and as a responsible European citizen. In the same vein, the Irish attitude to aid also became a badge of modernity and statehood. As foreign aid became an accepted element of international relations and of the foreign policy of industrialised states, Ireland, in common with Finland, developed a comprehensive aid programme in order to feel that it was a member of the same peer group as those states that it used to define its identity – at the E.C., at the U.N., and in the D.A.C.⁶² Both states were also willing – if largely unsuccessful – participants in the race to reach the 0.7 per cent of G.N.P. target for aid set by the U.N., the fetishisation of which itself attested to the strength of international norms and peer pressure in defining state behaviour. The D.A.C. members’ reaction to Ireland’s application for membership in November 1985 was a prime example of this ‘socialising’ effect of international relations. While the former expressed ‘no great enthusiasm’ in welcoming a state with an under-performing aid programme, ‘the reaction is that DAC membership may contribute to an improved [Irish] aid programme’.⁶³ The lesson was simple: states, like individuals, are susceptible to the vagaries of peer pressure; what others think matters.

The final, though no less important, consequence of this view of the international system is that rather than defining their interests solely in terms of their own, self-contained set of goals, states often came to identify themselves in terms of their wider peer group. From 1977, the Irish government participated in periodic meetings of a ‘like-minded’ discussion group on foreign aid, formed of what its officials described as states who shared ‘a basic moral commitment to Third World development and, as a corollary, a positive approach to the creation of a more just and equitable world economic order ... In this respect, there can be little doubt that Ireland’s credentials are very good and the invitation to participate in these meetings is an acknowledgement of this.’⁶⁴ Within the E.C., Irish policy-makers often aligned themselves with more ‘progressive’ member states like Denmark and the Netherlands, who shared a similar outlook towards the developing world. By the mid-1980s, this alignment helped to reinforce the view of Ireland from within the Community as ‘strongly pro-development’ and ‘sympathetic to the cares and concerns of developing countries’.⁶⁵ The international system therefore became a society in a very real sense, dividing Irish interests into groupings and alignments. In the process, the state not only had its identity shaped by interaction, but also brought its own values and priorities to bear on international discussion.

V

The ‘Ireland, the caring nation’ image relayed by O’Shea and projected by NGOs and official policy-makers throughout the ‘long 1970s’ was not without its problems. Too often it went unchallenged, with little thought given to its reception in the developing world. It was left to the embryonic development education sector – led by the Development Education Commission and individual NGOs, and aided by the official aid programme – to encourage a more questioning attitude to aid. What role did Irish aid (official and non-governmental) actually play in the development of poor

⁶² See also Lumsdaine, *Moral vision*, pp 25-6, 66-7.

⁶³ Führer to secretary-general, D.A.C., 6 Nov. 1985 (O.E.C.D. DCD F 207908).

⁶⁴ ‘Question of Irish attendance at an Informal Meeting on International Development Cooperation to be held in Copenhagen on 31st August 1977’ (N.A.I. DFA 2008/79/2893).

⁶⁵ ACDC, *The development co-operation policies of the European Community and the contribution of Ireland to those policies* (Dublin, 1988), pp 19-20.

communities in Africa, Asia and Latin America? Was their contribution always positive? Were Irish intentions really so different from its counterparts elsewhere in the West?

In the construction of state identity, however, the answers to those questions – and anecdotal evidence suggests that the Irish were, in fact, received differently in the field to their counterparts from Britain, France or the United States – took second place.⁶⁶ To echo Stephen Howe, ‘the perception of Ireland as a post-colonial, even Third World state’ proved more influential than the actual picture of Irish involvement in the developing world.⁶⁷ The country’s Christian heritage, its history of missionary activity, its strong anti-colonialism, and memories of famine generated a particularly ‘Irish’ attitude to aid among the Irish public. This in turn provided a strong cultural basis from which policy-makers shaped the official Irish response.

The resultant policies emphasised the idealistic side of Irish state identity, finding space for history, Christian values, voluntary idealism and Famine memory amid the machinations of international diplomacy. But the Irish approach to foreign aid was not built on idealism alone. Successive governments showed an awareness of aid’s potential to carve out a role that they could not achieve in areas of more direct interest to the Cold War powers. The pursuit of peace, justice and international stability was as fundamental in Irish attitudes to aid as it was to the state’s approach to peacekeeping, nuclear disarmament, or its support for the institutions of the U.N. Through Irish involvement in the negotiations for successive Lomé conventions, aid reinforced the state’s identity as a progressive, but committed, European state. As foreign aid became an established norm of international relations, the official aid programme also became a badge of belonging, helping to identify Ireland as a modern, industrialised state.

The extent to which this confluence of domestic values, foreign policy principles, and the weight of international norms shaped Irish state identity has important implications for understanding Ireland’s world role in the second half of the twentieth century. It underlines the importance of global patterns of social and cultural interchange and the need to describe changes within Irish society resolutely within that context. For diplomatic historians, it reinforces the need to look beyond the corridors of Iveagh House, Brussels and New York, to see foreign policy as a much more complex and dynamic process, made at a variety of levels and for a variety of motivations. In addition to direct diplomatic pressure, or quiet words between diplomats, the rise of foreign aid as an international norm underlined the importance of a different source of influence: the power of peer pressure, and the gentle nudge in the right direction.

⁶⁶ This observation is based on a number of interviews conducted by the author with former DFA officials, aid workers, and representatives from the NGO sector.

⁶⁷ Howe, *Ireland and empire*, p. 155.