



Irish aid agencies feel the pinch from funding cuts



Paul Colgan

International aid is being cut everywhere – what does this mean for the world's poor and the Irish charities trying to help them?

“Quiet deaths” – that’s the phrase used by Ciara Begley.

She paints a bleak picture of the impact of malnutrition from her experience in Liberia, where she works as country director for the charity Concern Worldwide.

“We can’t be everywhere,” she says.

“And out there in a rural community, if you are a young adolescent girl with a child that is malnourished, a lot of the time that child just dies quietly in that community.”

Begley arrived in the West African country six years ago and has seen the number of people working for the charity there fall by more than half in that time, from 106 to 51.

Even more troubling for her has been the effective ending of nutritional treatments in Liberia since September 2025.

“There has never been a nationwide stock-out like this for over a year and it’s happening because Unicef is getting squeezed and cut,” she says, referring to the United Nations (UN) agency for children.

The stock she is referring to falls into three categories: the key one is Plumpy’nut – a high-energy peanut butter-like paste that quickly builds up malnourished children and prevents starvation. The other two are milk formulas

given to acutely malnourished infants.

“You are trying to refer children for treatment but there’s not much facilities can do,” she says.

“It’s grim and really difficult for our staff; they are working to help them use local ingredients to help cases that need medical treatment. It’s not fair on anyone, but it is what we need to do.”

Nutritional programmes such as these have failed due to massive cuts in humanitarian aid from the prosperous “global north”, in particular the United States.

Last year, under instruction from the Trump White House, the United States Agency for International Development (USAid) – the US government’s international aid agency – was closed and the budget for foreign aid slashed dramatically.

The Irish Government said last week it is estimated that up to 700,000 people around the world have died as a result of cuts to international aid by the Trump administration.

This past week brought more challenging news for the aid sector.

Ireland’s draft of the EU budget for 2028 to 2034 included a 17 per cent cut from the Global Europe fund compared to the original proposal. The fund cov-

ers all the EU’s spend on international development and co-operation.

Defending the change, the Taoiseach said the proposed funding would still be higher than the existing seven-year commitment and the humanitarian budget of €25 billion would be retained.

But when the US has pulled back so severely from funding aid programmes, it was seen as another blow among the groups dependent on such money.

“Just look at Concern last year,” says Concern’s chief executive Dominic Crowley.

“We had to close three country programmes – in Lebanon, Rwanda and North Korea – and we have a very reduced presence everywhere else.

“We went from having 3,000 staff to just over 2,000 and there was a 17 per cent headcount cut here in Dublin. We’ve never seen that sort of cut in the history of aid going back to the 1980s and we are not alone.”

Crowley points to scores of conflicts around the world, with aid workers being killed in Gaza and working in underground bunkers in Ukraine. This, combined with the reduction in aid contributions from the big four donor countries – the United States, the UK, France and Germany – has made it the most chal-

lenging period in the charity's history.

In Africa, the immediate effect on ordinary people has been profound, says Crowley. In Somalia, which teeters on the edge of famine, Concern was forced to close half of its feeding centres and clinics.

In Darfur and Kordofan in Sudan, at one stage it had to shutter all its operations. An injection of funding from the Irish Government has since allowed it to reopen about a third of them.

Concern's Somalia country director Richard Nunn says international support in 2022 and 2023 helped ensure that the country avoided famine – but that level of backing is no longer available.

"It's not as serious yet as it was two-and-a-half years ago, but depending on the rains and El Niño, we could be looking at a really dire situation," he says.

"In just the first year of the funding cuts from the US you had around 300 health facilities which closed. NGOs around the country have closed offices and stopped operations. People who need that support can't find them in their communities – they have to travel – or they can't find them at all."

Nunn's staff numbers have fallen from 170 to 100, and the charity has reduced its geographic footprint. While Concern's programmes in Somalia were not directly exposed to cuts by the US government, other donors have also pulled back, he says.

"Our facilities and clinics are more and more crowded, and we have fewer staff to support those people," he says.

Nunn says supplies of emergency food to treat malnutrition have been promised until the end of the year but there is "no visibility" into next year.

"We have found other sources – private foundations in the US are providing some targeted, select support to Concern – but other organisations are having difficulties," says Nunn.

"Private foundations are new for Concern. It's not bad [the funding] – it's much more than token. But it's telling that that is now having to come from the private sector".

All of the big Irish aid organisations say at the same time as funding is being reduced, their workers are facing ever more threats in the field.

"When I started off you were always

relatively safe on the front lines, that's not so much the case any more," says Colin Lee, Goal's director of global programmes and operations.

In addition to a rising number of workers being held against their will, the use of military drones has changed the landscape dramatically in certain countries, says Lee.

"Sudan has been a real test case over the last three-and-a-half years with the use of drone technology. We've had health facilities targeted specifically."

The battle for Brussels

While aid workers grapple with funding cuts and new threats to their safety, their charities spent much of the past week making their case in Brussels.

As the Irish Government prepared to formally present its revised draft budget plan at this week's EU summit, charity leaders met EU commissioners and their officials.

Among them was Trócaire's chief executive Seán Farrell, who met the EU commissioner responsible for global humanitarian policy, Hadja Lahbib.

"We have seen a move to the political right in many European countries," he says.

"And part of the narrative around many of these political parties was focused on migration. They have dismantled some aid programmes."

Farrell says humanitarian funding has also been cut by governments to pay for increased defence spending, including countries bordering Ukraine and Russia that have raided this source to bolster their militaries.

They believe a budget that compounds this trend would be very unwelcome.

"There is no question that the Global Europe funding envelope is being reduced more than others," he says.

Farrell contends that even deeper cuts to European funding could be on the table as the negotiations around the next seven-year EU budget continue into next year.

"At a time when you look at humanitarian aid globally, with the US having gutted USAid and other European states pulling back, if we take very harsh cuts on the European aid budget the very poorest will pay the highest price," he says.

"We will be giving up on the idea that

we can eradicate extreme poverty."

Some voices within the charity sector hope humanitarian funding may be close to bottoming out, with the prospect of some improvement in the years ahead.

"After a pretty horrific 2025, things have stabilised slightly," says Colin Lee.

"We are very good at whinging and telling you bad news stories – but there have been a number of good news stories."

"US funding is coming back in mechanisms we wouldn't have seen before, like through UN OCHA," he adds, referring to Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, a UN agency that helps humanitarian organisations assisting people caught up in crises.

Lee says the shock of the cutbacks has forced charities and organisations to work together like never before with a move to "less competition, more collaboration".

"We are not going back to the old model of what was there. The last 18 months has been an opportunity to get our heads around where this is going," he says.

In Liberia, Ciara Begley sees some reasons for optimism; the African country's government has adopted a more serious-minded approach to funding nutrition and has increased its budget for next year.

"Just because it is submitted doesn't mean it gets approved, but it's a ray of hope," she says.

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■ Above: Concern's Somalia country director Richard Nunn (centre). The charity's workforce in the country has fallen from 170 to 100 amid cuts to international aid. Below: Ciara Begley, Concern's country director in Liberia, with farmer Ibrahim S Browne (red shirt), Concern programme manager Isaac Bartune (centre) and Joe Gartor of Liberian NGO SHED