

'People are living on nothing so we have to respond to that'

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"I AM amazed at the profile Malawi is getting. Maybe it is the Madonna effect," Liam MacGabhann says, as he reflects on the southern African country that was the centre of an international controversy last year when the pop singer adopted a Malawian child.

MacGabhann will be hoping to establish a deeper connection with one of the world's poorest countries when he arrives in the capital Lilongwe at the start of October as Ireland's first Ambassador to Malawi.

The Irish diplomat, who has two grown-up children, has spent the last three years as the number two in the Irish embassy in Beijing.

His main objective in his new posting will be to oversee a dramatic increase in Ireland's financial commitment to Malawi, which will rise from 2.5m in 2007 to about 30m in 2009.

The increased funding is due to the government's target of allocating 0.7% of GNP to development by 2012, helped along by last year's 'White Paper on Overseas Aid' with its strong focus on Africa. Malawi is now one of Ireland's priority countries for development assistance.

"This is a huge commitment by the Irish government to Malawi," MacGabhann says. "The hope is that one day they will not need aid, but that is some time off." He will be joined by Vincent O'Neill, a development specialist with Irish Aid in Dublin.

O'Neill will be accompanied by his family, including his 12-year-old twin daughters, and he describes the posting as a "big adventure". A qualified doctor, he previously worked in Sierra Leone and Uganda.

A property in Lilongwe has already been leased for the new embassy, which will also employ some Malawian staff. MacGabhann and O'Neill will spend the next twelve months determining their spending priorities for the following five years.

Despite the work of agencies like Goal, Concern and Trocaire, Ireland has little profile in Malawi according to Ephrain Munthali, the Lilongwe-based Bureau Chief of the Nation newspaper group. "Few people would know about Ireland so the embassy will bring a direct presence as you'll be participating, instead of being like Big Brother and just looking in," he says.

The Irish diplomats will have close co-operation with the Malawian government – not surprising, as development aid from all sources will account for over 40% of the national budget in 2007. Irish aid money will be targeted at increasing food security and helping the fight against Aids. Given the lack of democratic maturity in a country which only emerged from a thirty-year

dictatorship in 1994, priority will also be given to enhancing the quality of government and civil society. "There are immediate humanitarian needs, people are living on absolutely nothing so we will have to respond to that. There are no easy solutions," O'Neill says.

A former British colony, Malawi became independent in 1964 but endured three decades of dictatorship. Democracy was established in 1994 but national institutions and public administration remain weak. It is one of the 10 poorest countries in the world.

Just over half of the 12 million population live in poverty. Life expectancy is 39 years. Infant mortality is 110 for every 1000 births. Access to health services is very poor. One Concern malnutrition programme at Chiwanba in central Malawi is located at a health centre with two nurses but no doctors. The centre should be catering for 10,000 people but in fact deals with 66,000 . . . many of whom walk up to 15km for treatment.

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