

IRELAND COUNTRY PAPER

MINISTER VARADKAR'S ADDRESS: 20TH NOVEMBER 2014

**WORLD HEALTH ORGANISATION/ FOOD AND AGRICULTURAL
ORGANISATION**

**THE SECOND INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON NUTRITION
(ICN2)**

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

I am delighted to be here today to speak on behalf of the Government of Ireland.

Ireland aligns itself with the Statement made on behalf of the EU and its Member States.

At the outset I welcome the Rome Declaration on Nutrition and the ICN2 Framework for Action and the excellent work of WHO and FAO.

We welcome the universal nature of the Declaration and the acknowledgment of the inter-linkages between the different forms of malnutrition – under- nutrition, over- nutrition and the micronutrient deficiencies arising from each.

In Ireland, our own history has ensured that we will always speak out for the poor and oppressed, the malnourished and the starving.

In the 19th century, during the Great Irish Famine, one million people died over a five year period, and another million were forced to emigrate.

The life expectancy of children dropped dramatically. As our great poet Seamus Heaney has written, we were ‘a people starving from birth’, and ‘Hope rotted like a marrow’.

But out of such despair, came another legacy. One where we became champions of the poor and the starving - drawing from the pain of our history the idealism to insist on a better way.

Our prime minister, Enda Kenny, referred to this two years ago at a National Famine Commemoration event when he said that ‘The legacy of the famine is that we bear witness. When we see human suffering we don’t linger behind the scenes... we make them our personal business, because they run so deep in the Irish heart, the Irish experience, the Irish psyche’.

It is why the Irish people donated more per capita than any other country in the world during the Ethiopian aid campaigns of the 1980s, and in many campaigns since.

We continue to bear witness to the horrors of world hunger and malnutrition, because by doing so we honour our own past, and the many who have fallen.

This was recognised by Hilary Clinton, when she was US Secretary of State. In a major speech in 2010 she recognised that ‘The Irish people and the Irish Government knows what hunger means from their own history, and, as a result, they have been really the world’s leader in working to harness public and private resources in the fight against hunger, and now under-nutrition’. She recognised that we had applied the lessons of our own past to assume a heavier burden of responsibility on the world stage. As she noted: ‘today, a people who once knew the pain of an empty stomach now feed those who hunger abroad.’

I am very proud that in Ireland some of our most talented young people are helping to lead the fight against food shortages and food wastages.

In the current issue of 'Time' magazine seven 'Next Generation Leaders' are named, and one of them is a 24-year old Dublin woman, Iseult Ward, who set up FoodCloud – a non-profit company that connects businesses that have surplus food with the people who need it the most. Her vision is helping to ensure that food is not wasted while people go hungry. As she says herself, 'We want to fill people, not landfills.'

It was a great honour to have Pope Francis in attendance at this conference. During the worst days of the Great Irish Famine his predecessor bravely intervened to help save lives. In 1847 Pope Pius the 9th took the unprecedented step of issuing a papal encyclical to the international Catholic community, appealing for support for the victims of the Famine. As a result, money was sent from congregations all around the world, and without this intervention the death rate would have been so much higher.

As Pope Francis has indicated, malnutrition in any form is closely associated with socio economic development and only by tackling basic issues of poverty and human dignity will we make a lasting impression on global nutrition.

Ireland supports the WHO dietary recommendations for optimal health and I welcome the recent WHO European Region Food and Nutrition Action Plan.

Both the Action Plan and the ICN2 recommend that countries put in place a national nutrition action plan and we are committed to doing this.

Young people are the key to economic and social development, so protecting the health of our young people is a major priority. In Ireland, we are working hard on tackling the obesity problem in children, where 1 in 4 children are overweight or obese by 3 years of age. Globally it is estimated 43 million children are overweight or obese by age 5 and this will impact on their quality of life and future health outcomes.

We have prioritised ensuring good nutrition for all in both our domestic policies and through our international development cooperation programme and I'd like to share some specific experiences with you.

Healthy Ireland Initiative

The responsibility for improving the health of our nations lies with us all.

We have recently undertaken a new public health initiative called *Healthy Ireland - A Framework for Improved Health and Wellbeing*.

This Framework has at its core a whole-of-government/ whole of society approach to deal with the health and nutrition challenges of the coming decade.

In Ireland we are seeing the benefit of multi-stakeholder approaches to addressing nutrition issues. One example is a partnership between private sector food processors, retailers, government agencies and national universities to tackle the issue of high salt intake. This collaboration has seen a number of staple foods being reformulated into healthier food products.

Developing sustainable food production for healthier diets.

The provision of adequate food and nutrition for the global population requires sustainable intensification of food production.

We must produce more high quality and nutrient rich food while recognising that the resources to produce this food are limited.

In Ireland we are playing our part by continuing to develop our agri-food sector in a sustainable manner through ‘Origin Green’ which is the sustainable production of high quality, safe food which is of high nutritional value. This will assist us and other countries in meeting ever-growing global food and nutrition security needs.

Tackling Global Hunger- the Scaling Up Nutrition Movement.

Tackling global hunger and particularly addressing malnutrition is at the heart of Ireland's international development and foreign policies. It is a key priority for the work of our bilateral aid programme, Irish Aid.

Globally a quarter of our children suffer from chronic under-nutrition and therefore are unlikely to develop to their full potential. The countries and children affected are inevitably the poor and the marginalised. Through the Scaling Up Nutrition Movement, or SUN, Ireland supports high burden countries to develop and implement national nutrition strategies.

The SUN Movement brings together civil society, business, provincial and national government, and science to implement national plans. It encourages collaboration across government to improve nutrition goals through action in health, education, agriculture, social protection, water and sanitation and gender empowerment among others.

Conclusion

Ireland has changed hugely over the past fifty years and our success has been built on our human capital. Central to realising the potential of human capital is good nutrition.

We welcome ICN2 and its call to raise the profile of nutrition within relevant national strategies, policies, action plans and programmes and align national resources accordingly. And we stand ready to broker connections to share our experience, our expertise and our resources to assist countries committed to improving nutrition and to learn from the experience of others.