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## Links with Africa

The Taoiseach's visit to South Africa and Tanzania last week has put a welcome spotlight on Ireland's political engagement with, and aid policies for, African states. Being there at this time brought him up to date with South Africa's forthcoming political transition, economic prospects, development programmes and relations with neighbouring states, including Zimbabwe. In Tanzania he heard in detail from President Jakaya Kikwete about the growing regional impact of the Kenyan crisis.

This is a special and significant part of Ireland's foreign policy. Services and merchandise trade with South Africa is running at nearly €1.3 billion per annum and the large business delegation accompanying him found plenty of promising outlets to develop it further. Mr Ahern put the development aid programme at the centre of his itinerary and discussions, emphasising its scale at €914 million a year and that it is on course to reach the United Nations target of 0.7 per cent of gross national product by 2012.

Not a great deal of it goes to South Africa; but Mr Ahern mightily pleased the Niall Mellon Township Trust in Cape Town by announcing a €5 million grant from Irish Aid for their work, which has so far involved 3,000 Irish building workers and craftspeople in completing some 7,000 houses in one of the city's poorest townships. This is a well-deserved tribute to one of the most imaginative voluntary aid projects initiated from Ireland. Its philosophy of direct provision has a real appeal because it involves people to people contact. This should be a central part of aid programmes where it is feasible, especially those run by non-governmental organisations.

That is not possible for most of the Irish Aid budget, which necessarily flows through international organisations or bilaterally from government to government in project-based programmes. This is a more complex area than direct provision. It requires long-term commitment separated from favourable trade deals or particular governing parties and individuals. Most of the Irish aid programme adheres to this model, being geared to the poorest African states and particularly their health, social and educational sectors.

Mr Ahern insisted that Ireland cannot abandon its aid programmes even where political corruption exists, despite the urgings of Goal chief executive John O'Shea. While he sympathised with direct aid programmes, he recognised it is necessary to ensure Irish money is well spent and ring-fenced rather than withdrawn. That is the better way to proceed. This is an important debate, which should raise public awareness about the extensive aid programme now under way.