



An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha
Department of Foreign Affairs

Review of Ireland's Mission Strategy for Vietnam and the Mekong Sub- Region 2017-2020

Executive summary

Evaluation and Audit Unit

2021

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Introduction

The 2017–2020 Vietnam and Mekong sub-region Mission Strategy sets out Ireland’s approach to its bilateral relationship with Vietnam and the Mekong sub-region. The Embassy implemented key Irish Foreign Policy priorities by serving its citizens (including during a global crisis), contributed to advancing Ireland’s economic, political and diplomatic interests and provided development assistance in Vietnam, Lao PDR, Cambodia and Myanmar. Total estimated programme expenditure was €39.1 million between 2017 and 2020, implemented through a mixture of grants to government, multilaterals, non-government organisations and civil society.

Purpose

This report is an independent, evidenced-based assessment of the Embassy’s Mission Strategy 2017–2020 under the criteria of effectiveness, coherence and lesson learning across the five outcome areas in their strategy. The review was commissioned to inform the design of the new mission strategy (2022–2027), contribute to organisational learning and serve as a mechanism of accountability.

Methodology

The hybrid remote review applied a mixed-methods approach, which included a review of documentation, 116 semi-structured discussions with 107 individuals (54.2% female, 45.8% male), five focus groups, and one site visit in January–February 2021. Partner sampling was purposive with a selection across key areas of engagement, representing approximately 74.5% of financial expenditure. Limitations¹ to the review include: restrictions associated with conducting the review remotely; limited community consultation; standard attribution and apportionment challenges; sampling; potential exclusion; and less access to government officials than would be the norm. At the time of writing, access to documentation was primarily 2016–2019 inclusive² with 11 partner reports (~20% of total) and two evaluations from 2020 available, limiting the inclusion of all results for 2020.

Figure 1: Summary of programme spend 2017–2020



¹ Further standard limitations include bias, breadth of the review, COVID-19 bias, exclusion, participation limitations and quality and availability of data.

² The rapid and unpredictable evolution of the COVID-19 response into a protracted relief and rehabilitation operation will almost certainly have imposed limitations on partner planning, data gathering and analysis. The majority of partner 2020 annual reports were due after the review was complete. 11 partner reports (~20%) and two evaluations from 2020 were available at the time of writing.

Overall

Overall, the Embassy made important contributions across a breadth of areas, both organisationally and within Vietnam and the Mekong sub-region in a dynamic and at times, challenging operating context. The Embassy was politically astute and innovative, building on foundations laid during 15 years of diplomatic presence in Vietnam. It was an exemplar in integrating and leveraging all aspects of the work of the Embassy to deliver a strategy that was relevant and responsive to Irish Foreign Policy priorities in the sub-region. Importantly, the Embassy had valuable lessons on modernising diplomacy that can help shape corporate policy and approaches. It is leading the way on two critical areas for modern diplomacy – embedding an integrated approach and the provision of development assistance in a lower-middle income country (LMIC). These are critical elements that have relevance across several Irish missions.

The implementation of the mission strategy provided support to a broad range of partners on poverty reduction with a strong focus on ethnic minorities, demining, mine risk education and nutrition. It contributed to capacity-building and strengthening of strategic linkages between Ireland and Vietnam through the IDEAS programme. Nevertheless, the review identified opportunities for streamlining and focusing its efforts. The success of the Embassy's work was hampered by the breadth of its engagement³, systems challenges, a crowded bilateral space and more recently, COVID-19. Looking forward, there is potential for streamlining its broad portfolio of activities and bringing focus and depth to its investments in line with Ireland's comparative advantages and opportunities. The Embassy is well positioned to continue being an exemplar of *Global Ireland* (Gol 2015) and the strategies that are designed to enable this.

Policy vision and framework

Pursuit of the objectives of Ireland's Mission Strategy in Vietnam and Mekong sub-region was clearly underpinned by Ireland's Foreign Policies *The Global Island* (Gol 2015a); Ireland's international development policy, *One World One Future* (Gol 2013) and more recently *A Better World* (Gol 2019) and *Ireland's Asia Pacific Strategy* (Gol 2020). Throughout 2017–2020, the Embassy supported Irish citizens and advanced Ireland's values, political, diplomatic and economic interests. They promoted multilateralism and international normative frameworks, working in a challenging international environment that was disrupted in 2020 by COVID-19. In their political work and development programming, they supported civil society groups, advocated for fundamental human rights, and targeted the furthest behind. While several activities were funded to specifically advance gender equality, delivering on the mission strategy commitments relating to this and strengthening transformative programming may be advanced in line with the ambition of *A Better World* (Gol 2019).

Relationships and cooperation

The Embassy's diplomatic approach, strong relationships, economic promotion and investments, contributed to people-to-people connections and cooperation in line with Ireland's foreign policy interests. This contributed to the effective delivery of core mission strategy outcome areas. The Embassy played a key role in cooperation with State Agencies to facilitate economic promotion, access commercial opportunities, navigate challenges, and share understanding of political, commercial and economic developments. Nevertheless, there is some scope for closer cooperation to capitalise on this. The Embassy had strong, collaborative political, economic, security and development cooperation relationships with the EU, partner governments and development partners. They used their diplomatic

³ For example, number of partners, areas of focus and geographic reach.

leverage to engage effectively in development programming across the region, support multilateralism and help promote international norms, thus furthering Ireland's reputation and global interests. Even though this is an area for further strengthening, it has demonstrated a commitment beyond just a transactional relationship and has provided an entry point for discussion on issues that matter to partner governments.

Prosperity

Building on the success of the EU Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA), the Embassy advanced Ireland's economic interests through securing market access for Irish food. They supported Irish State Agencies to establish a local presence and undertake work in Vietnam to promote Irish exports. The Embassy were innovative in linking economic and development agendas that supported people to people connections, technical exchanges and institutional development that supported mutual interests. They promoted Ireland's international education sectors, supported innovative economic engagement, and deepening research linkages in the *Asia Pacific Strategy* (Gol 2020), *A Better World* (Gol 2019), and *Irish Educated, Globally Connected* (DES 2016).

People, culture and promotion

The Embassy engaged effectively with Irish emigrants and the diaspora, as well as promoting Irish culture, arts and creative industries through Embassy events. They improved visa systems and worked closely with EU and others to support the COVID-19 response for joint facilitation of returning EU citizens. A lack of physical presence in the sub-region was challenging in relation to consular assistance, with a strong reliance on the UK Embassies in Cambodia and Lao PDR to liaise locally on behalf of Irish citizens. The Embassy successfully grew their Facebook and Twitter follower numbers having strengthened their approach as a result of a 2017 review and capitalising on the Embassy's success of the pilot commercial attaché scheme.

Innovation, research and effectiveness

The Embassy's approach to research, evidence and learning on a number of initiatives resulted in residual outcomes beyond the lifetime of the mission strategy. Building on results from the previous strategy, the Embassy's IDEAS and VIBE initiatives resulted in technical exchanges, institutional linkages and in one instance, was a catalyst for further funding for a collaborative research project. While curtailed by COVID-19, some of the micro-projects and investments produced mixed results that may not be seen immediately. The Embassy should continue to capitalise on its comparative advantage and seek opportunities for local, innovative solutions. This can be done by funding approaches or by considering funding higher social value linkage products such as shared research initiatives led by Vietnamese or regional academic thought leaders in partnership with Irish HEIs.

Development programming

The Embassy built on the positive legacy of past strategies and in-country presence achieving important outcomes throughout the course of the mission strategy in the areas of civil society support, ethnic minorities, nutrition and UXO. With modest resources, they reinforced good practice and accountability by funding interventions to promote resilience to economic, social and environmental stresses and shocks, supported by inclusive economic growth and accountable institutions. They promoted resilience by working to improve sustainable livelihoods, nutrition and participation in democratic institutions. They demonstrated adaptive management that reached the most vulnerable rapidly during as the COVID-19 pandemic in the sub-region and severe flooding and landslides in

central Vietnam. With the exception of a small number of programmes, the effects of COVID-19 were highly disruptive to the implementation of partners' planned activities. The Embassy adopted a dual approach to respond to the COVID-19 crisis. In Vietnam, the Embassy renegotiated a significant number of its partnerships to ensure that resources were reallocated to respond to urgent needs that arose from the COVID-19 crisis⁴. Overall, the Embassy supported a wide range of partnerships that were largely strategic and delivered through a range of modalities that consistently targeted the furthest behind. Several of the sectors in which the Embassy operated were highly political and the Embassy sensitively navigated challenges as well as possible within the constraints of the environment. While some interventions achieved better success than others, the Embassy made good contributions beyond the financial grant alone.

While the Embassy does the most with its modest resources, it was hampered by a crowded⁵ bilateral space, breadth of activities and lack of physical presence in the sub-region. Partners in the sub-region noted there were deeper mutual benefits to be gained from the development programme such as stronger government relationships, advocacy, influence, and policy exchange. Exogenous factors such as the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, level of integrated systems coherence and under-resourcing at HQ impeded effectiveness. Myanmar in particular lacked the synergy of political and development cooperation work, with the two functions separated between Hanoi and Bangkok. Substantial inequalities still remain across the region for which the Embassy can continue to respond.

Insights from peer foreign ministries

The mission strategy was initially intended to have a 'sunset clause' on its development programme in Vietnam. A key question in this review examined lessons other peer ministries learned in their reduction of ODA and move towards deepened economic partnerships. Insights from peer missions indicated the mutually beneficial relationship ODA brought to their engagement in Vietnam and the sub-region as well as the benefits of working in niche areas that gave them stronger visibility. Essentially, ODA enhanced relationships and catalysed opportunities that would not be there otherwise. Overall, it was highlighted that if the development cooperation programme was withdrawn too early and without careful consideration, it could lead to a loss of opportunity, visibility and valuable relationships. Should a reduction of ODA occur, a strategy and a broader discussion of the role of ODA when moving from traditional aid to a transformation and economic partnership is needed at senior management level ahead of any major change in programming in Vietnam.

Defining and measuring performance

Attribution and capturing results: There was a significant amount of valuable work carried out by the Embassy that added value to the entire strategy, reinforcing its development programming and in particular, capturing results across the breadth of its activities. This was one of Ireland's first such strategies that captured this breadth. There was some potential identified for strengthening the utility of the framework to enable an adaptive management and results based management approach by the Embassy.

⁴ In Cambodia and Lao PDR, the Embassy entered into three new partnerships with UNICEF Lao PDR, UNICEF Cambodia and the Pasteur Institute. Up to 85% of partners requested funding be repurposed or reported delays to planned interventions.

⁵ The OECD DAC (2020) Peer Review of Ireland noted the crowded bilateral space Ireland entered in Vietnam from 2005. In 2019, Ireland was the 12th of 28 highest ODA donor to Vietnam of OECD DAC donors (OECD Stat). In 2019, Ireland was the 63rd highest recipient country of Vietnam exports to the world (IMF 2021). Interviewees during the course of the review noted the "crowded bilateral space that is also highly competitive" Ireland is operating in Vietnam.

Governance, structures and systems

Effective management, oversight of funding and good decision-making on key strategic issues was evident despite constraints at times in both HQ and at mission level. A combination of good management systems, communication, realistic objective setting and implementation of the Standard Approach to Grants Management helped to mitigate risk. The integrated way in which the Embassy worked enabled them to develop synergies across outcome areas aligned to the strategy, although efficiencies in allocation of tasks was at times not always achieved. Choice of investments in the sub-region (est. 28.5% of total spend) was directed at well-established INGOs and multilateral programmes. However, the combination of high administrative demands and the number of designated partners may have impacted the ability of the Embassy to engage, where relevant, in opportunities for participating in technical, advocacy and policy forums. Challenges around integrated knowledge management systems impacted all aspects of the Embassy's work and as the Department's intranet-based work expands, these inefficiencies (and their associated costs) are increasing. In addition, there were a number of unintended consequences including reduced access to policy and technical support for the development cooperation programme staff.

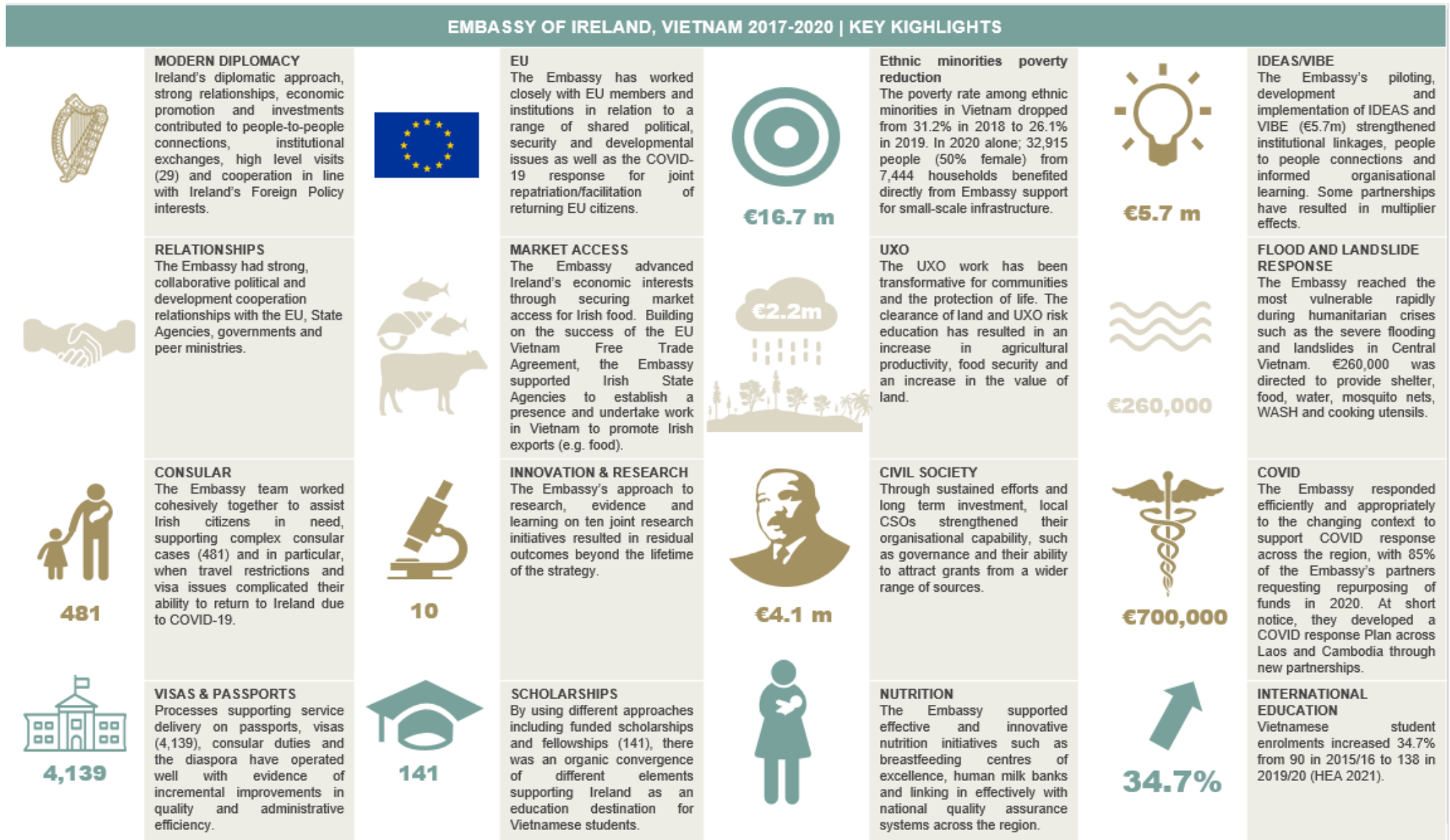
Resourcing

Implementing the mission strategy calls for operational systems, management resources, and staffing levels that are commensurate with the ambition of the strategy. Currently, these resources are fully committed and at times, over-stretched. It was evident that approaches, activities and resourcing at HQ level influenced the ability of the Embassy to implement their strategy effectively, such as turnover of HQ staff, under-staffing in key support units and transaction costs associated with overlapping requests that might be streamlined. The new mission strategy should therefore be developed jointly with a review of HQ, HR, and knowledge management needs. Access to knowledge management systems that are nimble, useful, effective, and industry tested would vastly assist in efficiency and rapidly inform data driven programming.

Conclusion

The Embassy is well placed to continue adapting to the context, balancing its resources to outputs and continuing to orient itself towards a politically informed future. Taking on board the recommendations from this report and continuing its astute approach, the Embassy should be in a position to pivot more towards *A Better World* (Gol 2019) and *Ireland's Asia Pacific Strategy* (Gol, 2020) as long as they are sufficiently resourced at all times, supported by HQ and with knowledge management systems supported and strengthened.

Figure 2: Embassy of Ireland, Vietnam 2017— 2020- Key highlights



Recommendations and issues for consideration

Issues for consideration and recommendations focus on supporting delivery of the new mission strategy and are broadly related to enhancing strategic focus, articulating a regional approach and supporting organisational learning.

1. **Integrated approach, relationships and cooperation:** The Embassy should continue its strong relationships, cooperation and integrated approach that advances its political, technical and public diplomacy strengths and reinforces all aspects of their work. The integrated approach should be maintained and the Embassy should continue to capitalise on synergies between outcome areas while considering a strategic focus. (Owner: Embassy; long term).
2. **Establishing a more focused set of strategic priorities:** The Embassy might consider refining its efforts on a smaller number of specific⁶ areas aligned with Ireland's foreign policy interests, capitalising on Ireland's strategic advantages and in-country market demands, where feasible in the next mission strategy. This could include a reduction of the number of partners or consideration of consortia management approaches that reduces administrative burden while strengthening upstream advocacy and policy engagement activities in relevant sectors. (Owner: Embassy; medium-long term).
3. **Development programming, synergies and research:** The Embassy should continue its strategy of mixed modalities across interventions. Their focus on innovation, educational, technical exchange and institutional linkages that promote synergies between its development programme as well as the promotion of Ireland as an education destination is well placed for future facing work. With the high value placed on education, there is ongoing demand for technical exchange and international education. Building on previous linkages, the Embassy could consider funding high social value shared research initiatives led by Vietnamese or regional academic thought leaders in partnership with Irish HEIs. (Owner: Embassy; medium-long term).
4. **Defining and measuring performance:** The Embassy may benefit from strengthening the utility of their PMF and an expanded approach to results measurement that includes the strategic and portfolio levels. Effort put into developing the PMF needs to be proportionate to its use. Going forward, recognising that there will still be requirements for corporate reporting, an adaptive management approach is needed that can help inform allocation of resources and staff time on an ongoing basis. They may consider how success is measured being realistic about what is possible to achieve with the resources the Embassy has, and ensuring the tool enables the Embassy to adapt what they are doing in a timely manner. (Owner: Embassy/DCAD; short term).
5. **A Better World:** Moving forward, the Embassy might reflect on the implementation of its gender commitments and include these approaches as feasible in their next strategy. Internal ways of working and interventions should promote gender responsive programming that directly advances gender equality and transformational change, whilst ensuring institutional capacity and access to such resources. While the Embassy cannot and should not "do everything", in considering coherence and prioritisation with *A Better World*, it could consider mutual interests, windows of opportunities and areas in which it has already built modest successes. It may also consider using

⁶ The OECD DAC (2020) Peer Review noted Ireland could also draw on the experience of other DAC members. One such example is New Zealand which, outside the Pacific, focuses on niche areas rather than trying to work in areas already covered by other donors, thus supporting division of labour. See (OECD, 2015[21]) at <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264235588-en>.

the lens of 'furthest behind' in its prioritisation across its development programming. (Owner: Embassy; short-medium term.).

6. **Regional programming:** Working thematically and regionally had multiple benefits, however, effectiveness could be enhanced by a physical presence. A strong case exists from a consular, diplomatic, political and risk perspective for the Embassy to deepen their footprint and strengthen effectiveness in the sub-region beyond Vietnam. However, this would require a shift in resources, (financial, systems, human) and consideration of a physical presence (e.g. locally engaged node) in order to maximise opportunities, ability to monitor and engage in political/advocacy/coordination mechanisms. Deepening the regional footprint would need to be carefully articulated, considered and strategised with a clearly defined purpose and goals, drawing upon the lessons of other donors who have taken similar regional approaches. The question of regional positioning will need to be reflected at senior management level (Owner: Global Programmes [lead]; Embassy/Asia Pacific Unit; SMG; PDG; short-medium term).
7. **The current Myanmar governance arrangement** has constrained effectiveness and is further hampered by the split reporting lines, lack of physical presence and current political destabilisation in Myanmar. The governance arrangement for Myanmar should be reassessed by HQ senior management in consultation with key stakeholders. At the time of writing, this issue was due to be considered, and the decision made should ensure that resources are assigned as appropriate in Bangkok/Myanmar/Hanoi with the ability to manage the level of engagement (political and development) in Myanmar. (Owner: Global Programmes [lead]; PDG; Embassies Bangkok and Hanoi; Asia Pacific Unit; short-medium term).
8. **Managing risk:** The Embassy should maintain a healthy risk appetite, continue to assess and calculate risk in such projects, and take the opportunity to make strategic contributions where appropriate. (Owner: Embassy/DCAD [Leads]; medium term).
9. **Resourcing:** The Embassy might review the relationship between its breadth of activity, and balance its resources, including staffing structure, roles and competencies, operational needs extending to the physical space, office IT systems, and knowledge management systems. The OECD DAC Review of Ireland (2020) emphasised the need to match resourcing with ambition of Ireland's priorities. Matching resources at both HQ and mission level in any future facing work is essential. HQ and the Embassy should continue to ensure staff capacity and skills are supported to deliver on priorities at both HQ and the Embassy. (Owner: Embassy/DCAD; HR, medium term).
10. **Evolution of development cooperation programming considerations:** Insights from peer missions indicated the mutually beneficial relationship ODA brought to their engagement in Vietnam and the sub-region. As ODA spend enhanced relationships and catalysed opportunities that would not be there otherwise, a broader discussion of the role of ODA when moving from traditional aid to transformation and economic promotion is needed at senior management level. This may potentially include a strategy for doing so ahead of any major change in programming in Vietnam in particular. (Owner: PDG/EMG [lead] Embassy/Asia Pacific Unit/Global Programmes; short-medium term).
11. **The Embassy should continue its approach to innovation, evidence and learning, which has broader knowledge exchange potential organisationally.** Greater efforts should be considered

to facilitate systemic organisational learning for colleagues that currently do not have access to the intranet⁷. This could include facilitation by HQ of multiple time zones when delivering training, recording events as well as consideration of shared knowledge management solutions (Owner: Embassy [lead]; DCAD Policy Unit; ICT; short term).

⁷ This includes sharing learning between Vietnam and other missions