



DIRECTORS' **REPORT**

For the year ended 31 December 2023

Introduction

The shocking reality of war dominated 2023. The Ukraine/Russia war begun in 2022, continued throughout 2023 and continues today with no obvious end in sight. As stated previously, this is a proxy war involving two nuclear armed Superpowers of which the consequences have been devastating so far and the potential of which is catastrophic beyond belief. This was followed in October 23 by the outbreak of the horrific war in Gaza which continues with nearly forty thousand people killed, a large percentage of whom are children. It is almost unbearable to watch the continuing carnage and cruelty of these wars but what must it be like to dwell in their midst? Numerous other wars continue throughout the world, of course in Sudan, in the Congo and in Yemen to name but a few with the common denominator in all of them being the steady supply of weapons from countries in the Northern hemisphere. And the harsh and clear reality is that nobody benefits except power hungry governments and Arms companies. It is unthinkable that in the first quarter of the 21st century we are witnessing an ongoing genocide in Palestine while governments not only stand idly by but many actively support and enable it to happen. How morally bankrupt has a society become when it provides the weapons for genocide and then presides over the inevitable mass slaughter of innocent victims many of whom are women and children.

At very least, one would think that the current wars would be a siren call for countries and governments to tackle war, to deescalate and demilitarize but the very opposite is happening – countries are gearing up and preparing for more wars. And this includes the Irish Government which is now becoming a player in weapons production and is further shredding our neutrality by cosying up to NATO and unpicking the Triple Lock.

Afri Highlights 2023

- Participation in and protest at the Government's 'Consultative Forum on International Security' by Afri staff and Board Members.
- Second launch of 'A Force for Good?' consisting of an interview by UCC historian Donal O'Drisceoil with John Maguire in the Quay Coop in Cork.
- An anti-colonial tour of Carrickmacross led by Gareth Conlon of Síolta Chroí as part of our GCE work programme.
- A Walking Vigil for Palestine and support for/co-hosting of National Days of Solidarity with Palestine.
- The making and promotion of film on War in Ukraine entitled 'This Cannot Go on'.
- The Second visit of 'Brigid of Kildare' to the Department of Foreign Affairs to deliver the Downpatrick Declaration and a letter of protest regarding the militarisation of Irish foreign policy.
- 30th Féile Bríde gathering, entitled 'Darkness Dawning Light' - speakers included Máiréad Maguire, Adi Roche, Alma Clavin and Ruby Jo Cowdell, with wonderful music from Tommy Sands, Luka Bloom and Justine Nantale and her band.
- Successful series of signature events including 'Food for Thought' in ATU, Castlebar, Hedge School in Blanchardstown and Féile na Beatha in Carlow.

- Thirty fifth annual Famine Walk through the Doolough Valley in Mayo with walk leaders Senator Frances Black, Joseph Kabwe Kamfwa and Michael Doorly and music from Karan Casey and Niall Vallely.
- Publication of "Sowing Seeds of Peace: A Global Citizenship Education Resource on Hunger as a Consequence of War" – one of the few resources available to GCE practitioners on these themes.

1. Campaigns

1.1 Caidreamh Louie Bennett

In light of escalating wars, it was appropriate that the Afri year began with our now annual tribute to the anti-war activist, Trade Unionist and women's rights advocate Louie Bennett on her birth date, January 7th. The event took place at the bench in St Stephen's Green, which is now dedicated to Bennett and her colleague and companion Helen Chenevix. Its setting in the Green recalls Bennett's love of nature and her enjoyment of her garden. It is curved, reflecting her belief in encouraging conversation. In every area, in every dispute, she believed fundamentally in negotiation rather than violence. 'She might well remind us,' said the instigator of the annual commemoration, John Maguire, 'that Article 29 of our Constitution, with its commitment to peaceful conflict resolution, is headed 'Caidreamh Idirnáisiúnta', which translates as international fellowship or conversation.' The commemoration consisted of a talk by John Maguire, the laying of a wreath and music and song from Joe Black and the Ryder family.

Throughout the year, in Afri we continued to do what we could to oppose war and the war industry and this report outlines some of the events and activities that we undertook towards that end.

1.2 Statement and Film on the War in Ukraine

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-4uY_HMXGvs

The following is an excerpt from a statement issued by Afri in response to the ongoing brutal war in Ukraine – this was also the text of a film which we produced with the title 'This Cannot Go on'.

As the war in Ukraine entered its second year, growing more vicious and destructive with each passing day, it remained increasingly clear that it is a war in which there are no winners (except the weapons industry) and in which hundreds of thousands of lives are being lost and destroyed. In addition, millions have been displaced or forced to flee as refugees with seemingly, no end in sight.

Moreover, the war in Ukraine adds a singular threat which was not present in previous wars and around which there exists a disturbing level of complacency.

This threat was recently articulated by Rafael Grosse, head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the UN's Nuclear watchdog. He issued an urgent warning after another interruption to the power supply of Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant: 'This cannot go on,' he told the board of governors of the IAEA. He went on to say that he is 'astonished by the complacency' regarding this peril and warned the IAEA to guard against it.

The war in Ukraine is also a confrontation between two regional and geopolitical power blocs, Russia and NATO, with thousands of nuclear weapons in their arsenals. This presents a very real danger that what is already a horrific war involving highly destructive 'conventional' arms will escalate into an increasingly uncontrollable war involving nuclear weapons, which are no respecter of borders or seas.

So, let the talking begin in an effort to bring this horrendous war to an end. The lesson of the Good Friday agreement is that talking succeeds where war fails. Perhaps we can have the equivalent of a Good Friday Agreement to end the slaughter and to end the suffering of those caught up in this vicious conflict?

1.3 Hiroshima Film

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q-aBNBQkvi0>

To emphasise the nuclear threat which the war in Ukraine, in particular, represents we made a short film on Hiroshima. The film was made at the CND-organised commemoration of the 76th anniversary of the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima.

Likewise, we participated in and co-hosted many of the National Days of Action for Palestine. Perhaps the only glimmer of light around this horrific war is the continuing support for Palestine in Ireland shown by the tens of thousands of people who consistently come onto the streets to express their solidarity with Gaza and their rejection of the Israeli genocide.

1.4 Brigid's Second visit to Foreign Affairs

To mark the first public holiday in honour of St. Brigid, members of Afri and StoP accompanied by 'Brigid' delivered a St. Brigid Peace Cross and a copy of the Downpatrick Declaration to Minister Micheál Martin at the Department of Foreign Affairs.

Afri and StoP welcomed the new public holiday commemorating St. Brigid but stated that it must be used to support her message of peace and social justice in a world divided and endangered by war, conflict and militarism. In a statement, we expressed our hope that the presentations to the Minister on St. Brigid's Day, would contribute towards greater understanding, a lessening of tensions, and a re-commitment by Ireland to neutrality, the pursuit of disarmament and the promotion of peace.

1.5 Cork Launch of ‘A Force for Good?’

<https://www.afri.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Irish-Neutrality-WEB.pdf>

Having been launched in Dáil Eireann earlier, ‘A Force for Good?’ had a second launch in Cork in October 23 and consisted of an interview with John Maguire followed by Questions and Answers exploring the themes of the book. The book is an important contribution to the discussion on Irish neutrality and its role as the bedrock of Irish foreign and defence policy. The following is an excerpt from the Press Release for both launches:

Even today – especially today – as war rages in so many areas around the world and as two nuclear armed ‘superpowers’ actively engage in a proxy war, the world urgently needs voices calling for, and countries working towards, de-escalation, demilitarization and disarmament.

Ireland, recently described by the Economist magazine as ‘having a good claim to be the world’s most diplomatically powerful country’, is ideally placed – historically and geographically – to be that voice. But instead of seizing this opportunity the Government is increasingly abandoning our neutrality and throwing in its lot with some of the world’s most aggressive military powers.

‘A Force for Good?’ is a collection of essays by people who have long and deep experience of working for peace and against militarism at every level from academic to activist, on this island and in the wider world. Contributors include Nobel Peace Prize winner Máiréad Maguire; UCC Emeritus Professor John Maguire; Dr Karen Devine of DCU; Dr Iain Atack, formerly of TCD; Carol Fox of the Peace and Neutrality Alliance; and Tarak Kauff, former paratrooper with the US Army and now active member of Veterans for Peace. The Introduction is written by Afri Coordinator, Joe Murray.

As our planet teeters on a precipice, with less than a decade left before catastrophic climate disaster, with the war industry being one of the primary contributors to global warming, what does the Irish government do? It sets out to calculatedly and deliberately develop a weapons industry and becomes ever more involved in aggressive military operations. To illustrate the twisted logic at play in current government policies, a recent seminar hosted by the Department of Defence, to encourage Irish companies and Third Level Institutions to become involved in military research and development was grotesquely entitled ‘Building the Ecosystem’!

How can our Government and Establishment plan to celebrate the Irish peace process and the 25th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, when they’ve abandoned the very values of patient, peaceful conflict resolutions which underpinned that process, flowing from Article 29 of Bunreacht na hÉireann?

1.6 Financial Justice Ireland Walking Tour

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tF8A-iethHQ>

We were invited to join Financial Justice Ireland (FJI) in their walking tour of the Financial services sector on the quays on Culture Night in September. Joe spoke at the ‘Famine Memorial’ comparing the Laissez faire economics of the 1840s with neo liberal economics today, saying that the working out of both are the same: accumulation of wealth among a small minority and the impoverishment and marginalisation of the majority. Other speakers included Labour historian Mags O’Brien who, in the shelter of the statue to James Connolly at Liberty Hall, spoke about the extremes of wealth and poverty in Dublin in Connolly’s time, in what was then the second city of the British Empire. Hilary Darcy of FJI outlined the tax incentives used to induce multinational Corporations to set up in Ireland and how this resulted in their owning vast amounts of property around the city. And Aisling Hedderman of Community Action Tenants Union spoke about the impact of large corporations setting up in the inner city and the consequences for people living in the area in terms of housing, services and disruption to the community.

Afri also participated in a study course in UCD under the title: Be the Change. Around 30 students took part and Afri was joined by Nomhle from the Movement for Asylum Seekers in Ireland and Fiadh from Community Action Tenants Union.

1.7 Consultative Forums and publication of Report

<https://www.afri.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/StoP-Report-Forum-on-International-Security-Final.pdf>

In June 2023, a so called ‘Consultative Forum on International Security’ set up by the government took place in three centres around the country. Afri representatives attended two of the three events but we also protested outside the Dublin event regarding the almost complete exclusion of voices supporting Irish neutrality. A report was also published by StoP with significant input by Afri Board members.

This detailed report looked at the 4 days of the Forum in detail. Afri made the following submission the Forum:

Ireland should be a voice for Demilitarisation, De-escalation and Disarmament not a cog in the wheel of the war machine.

Why does the Irish Government not trust the Irish people? Why, in referendum after referendum did they lie to the people, denying on every occasion that each new EU Treaty resulted in our deeper involvement in NATO-led EU militarisation? Given our colonial history and the fact that we are still emerging from decades of war and conflict on our own island, why is the promotion of war more important to many of our politicians than the pursuit of peace?

This Consultative Forum is another example of the degree to which the Government refuses to trust the people or indeed honour the Constitution's commitment to the pacific settlement of International disputes. Why were we not given a Citizen's assembly, as promised by the Tánaiste?

Neutrality has formed a solid bedrock of Irish foreign and defence policy since the second world war. But it was perhaps never more impactful than during Frank Aiken's tenure as Ireland's Minister for External Affairs and his promotion of progressive policies within the UN regarding the rights of small nations and the urgent need for disarmament. These eventually led to the adoption of the non-proliferation treaty in 1970. The enduring relevance of Aiken's ideas, even in relation to the current crisis in Ukraine continues today: decades ago, he proposed a 'safety zone' in Europe to head off potential superpower conflict. He was also

Frank Aiken was renowned in the UN for never caving in to pressure from the 'Big powers' the US, the Soviet Union or Britain, the kind of backbone conspicuously absent from our current crop of politicians. He created a template for Irish Foreign Policy and remained an inspiration for many years afterwards. The practical result has been that Ireland was not a participant in the war industry, and pursued an entirely non-aggressive foreign policy. Irish Defence Forces were used overseas exclusively for peacekeeping duties, serving with great distinction and often at great cost in some of the most intractable areas of conflict around the world.

Despite the fact that it has been such a positive force in the world and the fact that it is supported by the vast majority of Irish people, Irish governments have consistently sought to undermine, dilute and debase our neutrality, most markedly in recent years. Afri has been persistently among the groups that raised a red flag regarding the military implications of successive EU treaties. We were invariably accused of scaremongering, only to be told later that in those self-same treaties we had agreed to the latest step towards militarisation. We have also vociferously opposed the use of Shannon as a US war-port and supported the courageous people who have taken non-violent direct action to expose our government's complicity in war crimes.

Our planet is teetering on a precipice, with less than a decade left to avoid catastrophic climate change. The war industry is one of the primary contributors to global warming through its massive consumption of fossil fuels and its pounding of our planet with indescribably destructive weapons systems. Yet, in this context, and in the midst of a homelessness, housing and health crisis, what does our government do? It hosts a seminar, addressed by Minister Simon Coveney, to encourage Irish companies and Third Level Colleges to become involved in the war industry; it proposes the greatest ever increase in military expenditure; and – already involved in Battle Groups and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), a Taoiseach from Aiken's own Fianna Fáil party openly contemplates formally joining NATO. And this happens while the Green Party is a partner in Government!

More than ever, as war rages in so many areas around the world and as two nuclear armed ‘superpowers’ actively engage in a proxy war, the world urgently needs voices calling for, and countries working towards, de-escalation, demilitarisation and disarmament. Ireland, geographically and historically, is ideally placed to be such a voice as it has been for many generations. We could and should deploy the ‘soft power’ acquired largely through our neutrality, giving us a diplomatic voice which has rightly been called the envy of the world. Our governments, against our wishes, have opted instead to become a cog in the gears of the war machine; what an arrogant, foolish and shameful betrayal of past, present and future generations.

Afri’s ‘Just a Second’ programme for secondary schools and third-level Institutes addresses the twofold immorality of the war industry, which not only kills and destroys people and planet but also diverts scarce resources from their real needs for food, clean water, housing, health care and education. In a significant and highly symbolic project some years ago, Afri supported 26 anti-poverty projects around the world with the equivalent of ‘just a second’ of the mind-numbing annual cost of the global arms trade.

But why do our Government and military personnel feel the urge to join forces with the former colonial powers in their projects – a movement that was underway long before Russia’s brutal invasion of Ukraine? We need to challenge the Chief-of Staff and his colleagues to justify their reasons for deflecting Ireland from the path of peacekeeping and into the arms of the war industry. We also challenge the Government to undertake the long-promised and much needed real debate on Irish neutrality which successive governments have assiduously avoided.

Despite the constant hallowing out and demeaning of neutrality, we, representing the majority, will continue to defend this proud and practical policy and to demand that the militaristically minded minority respect the will of the people on this critically important issue.

We owe it to our children to challenge the mindless addiction to war and violence, which wreaks havoc on human beings as well as on the animal and natural world and even threatens the annihilation of our very planet home, itself.

The **Solar Lights Campaign** continues with our partners in Kenya and the **Afri Calendar** focussed on different aspects of our work.

2. Global Citizenship Education

2.1 Féile Bríde

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XtoQEWXGUSM>

Again in the context of the first public holiday for Brigid, Afri hosted its 30th Féile Bríde gathering, entitled ‘Darkness Dawning Light’. Speakers included Máiréad Maguire, Adi

Roche, Alma Clavin and Ruby Jo Cowdell, with wonderful music from Tommy Sands, Luka Bloom and Justine Nantale and her band. In a ceremony in Kildare town Square, Adi Roche was presented with Brigid's flame in recognition of her extraordinary work for peace and with the victims of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. An excerpt from the publicity material for the Féile reads as follows: The festival of Brigid, on the threshold of Spring is an opportunity for reflection and renewal and for care of our precious planet which has enough for everyone's need but is scarred by inequality, exploitation and war. Whilst many leaders in Ireland and worldwide seem to have abandoned the pursuit of peace for the drumbeats of war, we will continue to sound the siren of peace and refuse to accept the twisted logic of violence. As the cost of war and weaponry has surpassed €2 trillion for the first time and as the Irish government actively promotes a weapons industry, we will keep stressing the urgent need to disarm for development; for welfare not warfare; for housing and health care rather than arms fairs. How can we tolerate the obscenity of millions living in poverty while governments waste billions on weapons of death? Brigid's gesture of giving away her father's sword to a poor man looking for food remains more relevant than ever today.

2.2 Féile na Beatha

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J77MquFtNBk&t=3s>

The third year of Féile na Beatha was successful and well attended. The key note speaker at the Famine Walk that is central to the Féile, was Juliana Sassi from Brazil who spoke about the millions of people living in poverty in Brazil while food is exported to Europe and China, similar to the situation in Ireland during An Gorta Mór. She said that participating in the Famine Walk was a reminder that it is not enough just to speak about injustices but that we must also take action for change. Denise Lyons who spoke on behalf of our partner South East Technological University said that 'standing in the Famine Graveyard, reminds us that we are walking in the steps of those who have gone before us. But we want to take new steps into the future, moving from hurt to healing to sustainability...we want to create a better world for people who are coming behind us'. Meanwhile, Stephanie McDermott of Carlow County Development Partnership compared Ireland's experience of forced migration with similar factors forcing people from their homes today.

This year's public meeting element of Féile na Beatha took place in Carlow College. In the context of Covid 19, the keynote speaker was Dr Ida Milne, Lecturer in European History in Carlow College who spoke about epidemics and pandemics and how such occurrences expose the cracks in the system that might have been previously obscured. Included in this was the way in which An Gorta Mór glaringly exposed the cracks in Britain's colonial rule in Ireland. Fr. Owen Lambert, who lived through the great hunger in Ethiopia in the 1980s spoke about the similarities with An Gorta Mór including the use of mass famine graves and the setting up of camps for the starving similar to the workhouses in Ireland. He spoke about presiding at the burial of 100 people on one single morning, who had died the previous night in one such camp. We also had poetry from Una O'Grady and music by Joe Black and Colm

O'Brudair. And having been on display the previous year in SETU, Jim Donnelly's extraordinary exhibition entitled 'The Displaced' was on display this time in Carlow College for the duration of the Féile.

2.3 WWGS/ Anti-Colonial Tour in Monaghan.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YVOvxuCPFFk&t=37s>

GCE work was very successful again in 2023. Among the highlights was our partnership with Síolta Chroí and our work in Monaghan schools. Our facilitator, Gareth Conlon worked with three schools in the county, Patrician High, Largy and Inver College. The work in each of the schools began by exploring GCE themes in the classroom including eco-system regeneration. The work with Inver was particularly successful including an innovative and imaginative event called the Anti Colonial Tour, which started in the Workhouse in Carrickmacross and looked at the exploitation it represents. The bus tour with Inver students then moved on to a Landlord's estate, owned by an absentee British Landlord and to a hotel being used as a DP centre, whose owner has made more money than anyone else since DP started. This was a powerful exercise in conscientization, looking at the local landscape to see the marks of colonialism, past and present. Many people are horrified by how people were treated in Workhouses during An Gorta Mór, so it is important to see how DP centres are playing a similar role today. The final stage was a visit to an open gypsum mine pit run by a French Multinational Corporation in the area. The land recently split open around the pit, causing major disruption including people who had lived in the region for generations having to up and leave.

Other highlights of our WWGS included workshops lead by Katie Martin in Mount Temple and the production of the resource entitled 'Sowing Seeds of Peace'. This was described by Ciara Regan of Development Education.ie as 'a fantastic, important and timely resource.' She went on to say 'well done to Larysa, Katie and Annabel on such an important piece of work that carries some incredibly powerful messages which I believe' educators will find very useful, particularly in the current context.

2.4 35th Famine Walk

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OkT6-6KAxGA&t=1s>

The 35th Famine Walk took place via the Doolough Valley in County Mayo on Saturday, May 20th 2023.

Renowned singer turned Independent Senator Frances Black, was among the walk leaders. Frances is the founder of the RISE Foundation and also the Chairperson and a founder member of the recently launched Irish Anti-Apartheid Campaign for Palestine. Other walk leaders included educationalist and activist Michael Doorly of Concern and Joseph Kabwe

Kamfwa, an agriculturist from Lusaka in Zambia. Music was provided by the folk and traditional music legend Karan Casey.

The walk is about remembering those who suffered, died or were forced to emigrate during An Gorta Mór and those who suffer the same injustices today. This year's walk was an expression of solidarity with all who suffer as a result of violence and hunger and a call for an end to the scourge of war and to pursue a path of peace.

It echoed the voice of the UN's nuclear watchdog in relation to the war in Ukraine, a country that hosts four nuclear power plants, saying: 'each day we are rolling a dice and if we allow this to continue...then one day our luck will run out'. To underscore this warning, the Doomsday Clock, created by scientists to symbolise the urgent danger to human civilization, and our proximity to midnight, in other words, our destruction, is now at 90 seconds, the closest it's ever been'.

2.5 Food for Thought – Free Mayo

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vdvkZJ-V-k8&t=80s>

Our annual Food for Thought – Féile an Fhómhar - event organised in partnership with students and lecturers in the Department of Environmental Humanities and Social Sciences in ATU Mayo took place in November. It brought together students and community members to dialogue together about how to bring about personal and social change. This interactive event involved discussion, dialogue, music and workshops and was described as 'a cornucopia of empowerment' by one of the students who took part.

Speaking about the event, one of our key partners in ATU, Mariéad Cluskey said: the purpose of the Food for Thought event is to 'interrupt the system' of busy student life; to call a halt to the busyness; to stop and think and reflect; to create a space for dialogue and the asking of questions; and to really listen to people. It's a day when students are given permission to stop and when they are invited to think about what is happening in their lives and in the world and what are the causes of what is happening. Students spoke afterwards about how they appreciated the open space to speak freely. One student said she felt inspired and that she had been part of a great team. Another said it is cool to see people really listening to each other.

Samuel, a keynote speaker and Direct Provision resident said that many in DP are traumatised like he himself is following attacks on the church where he was a pastor. He said many are fleeing war, have seen horrific things like, for example their wives being raped in their presence. And when they flee and look for asylum the first thing they want is to be believed and to be accepted and to be reassured.

2.6 Hedge School

The Hedge School was called ‘Resilience in a time of crisis’ and focussed on themes including sustainable development; climate change; war; human rights; poverty and the cost of living crisis. As usual, it was a very successful, well attended and dynamic event with great participation and ownership demonstrated by both students and staff.

As is evident from the above, this was another busy year featuring a wide range of events and activities all geared towards tackling war, climate change, forced migration and hunger. We look forward to continuing the work in the year and years ahead.

Acknowledgments

- It is difficult to find the appropriate words to express our sincere thanks to Larysa for her great contribution to Afri during 2023. The quality of Larysa’s work is reflected in many areas including in the accounts prepared for this AGM. Her work covers many key areas in Afri including reports/applications and financial matters. Larysa’s contribution to Afri cannot be overstated, and, as stated in previous years, we consider ourselves lucky to have her in a key role in Afri.
- Thanks to our Chair, Emer for having previously agreed to continue in her role for ‘extra time’ while we found a replacement. We hope she will enjoy her role as an ordinary Board member after this year’s AGM.
- Thanks to all Board members for their availability, when called upon, especially in relation to the appointment of our new Coordinator – a process that began in the time under review.
- Thanks to RoJ for filming so many of our events and activities so excellently, and for helping in many other ways.
- Thanks to Ruairí McKiernan whose contribution was invaluable, especially in relation to our online events and communication support.
- We thank Gareth Conlon, Nicola Winters and Katie Martin for their excellent work on our Global Citizenship Education programme.

Accounts:

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Joe Murray
Afri Co-ordinator