Good morning. It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the very first Engineering in Development and Humanitarian Aid conference here at the LIT campus in Thurles. I would like to take this opportunity to welcome Arthur Hendrick of the Rapid Response Corps of Irish Aid and Michelle Farrington of Red R who has travelled from London to speak here today and Adam Younis of MSF (Medicins Sans Frontiers) who has travelled from Scotland to share his experience. Our first presentation today will be from Mike Williams who has written a paper specifically for today’s conference and will share his substantial experience of the humanitarian aid sector, a sincere thank you to Mike and we all look forward to hearing his presentation.

I would like specifically to acknowledge the work of Peter Tiernan, Branch Secretary of Engineers Ireland. Engineers Ireland are co sponsoring this conference and have been very supportive in the promotion of today’s event. LIT has a long and mutually beneficial relationship with Engineers Ireland and it is wonderful to see so many of its members in the audience today. Collaboration between industry and academia is something that LIT actively encourages and I hope this conference is just the beginning of truly integrated thinking in the area of Engineering in Development and Humanitarian Aid.

Ireland’s reputation across the globe in the area of international development and humanitarian assistance is remarkable. This small nation has a history and reputation as a country that has cared for the very poorest of our world over many years through the work of our missionaries, our aid agencies and our government programme. Historically, publicly and politically, our partnership with the developing world runs deep. This partnership reflects the best of what we are as a nation and translates values such as human dignity, equality and partnership into practical action, improving the lives of millions of people across the developing world.
The world’s humanitarian needs are growing at a faster pace than ever before. The challenges facing the international humanitarian community are increasing daily, the frequency and severity of natural disasters mean ever greater numbers of people are in need of humanitarian assistance. Aid agencies and systems are stretched to the limit and budget cuts have exposed the need for more innovation and efficiency.

And yet the system remains largely unregulated. Research has shown that more than 500 aid agencies participated in the relief work in Sri Lanka alone after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, most operated in an efficient and effective manner but some, who had been hastily established to respond to the disaster, did not have experience in recovery and reconstruction after such a large-scale disaster. Lack of coordination proved a real challenge and resulted in a lack of effectiveness of the overall aid effort. For humanitarian aid to be effective it is essential that NGO’s, and private consultant companies who operate in the sector be staffed with qualified, experienced and committed individuals with a real understanding of the issues on the ground be it in Sri Lanka, Pakistan or New Zealand.

For some time now LIT has been involved in the development of a Masters programme in Humanitarian Assistance. In early 2011 a multidisciplinary team of academics at LIT sat down to analyse the humanitarian assistance sector. They identified a range of phases in responding to, and minimising vulnerability in crisis hit areas, each phase requiring a different but interconnected set of skills and capabilities on the part of NGOs and professionals in the field. Given the skills in LIT and other available masters programmes it was agreed by the team to concentrate the programme on the relief and reconstruction phases in humanitarian action, while also developing an appreciation on the part of students of response and development priorities, both before and after relief and reconstruction work. While much of the early consultation with NGOs focused on humanitarian emergencies in less developed countries it soon became apparent that the skills and challenges associated with this were equally applicable in even the most developed countries. Recent events in New Zealand, Japan and the Mississippi Basin of the USA highlight the vulnerabilities of these communities to natural and manmade disaster. The LIT Masters in Humanitarian Assistance will equip students will the skills necessary to work in this context.
Integrity will be key to the success of the programme. Credibility with NGOs will need to be established in terms of the values, the content and the delivery of the programme. Students will need to be recruited nationally and internationally and have confidence in the learning experience at masters level and finally but most importantly the success of the programme will ultimately be judged on the capacity of graduates to contribute effectively in post emergency relief and reconstruction.

The programme therefore must be built on sound development principles of equality, transparency, a result-oriented approach and responsibility.

Over the years Ireland’s work in overseas development and humanitarian assistance has contributed to this country’s credibility, influence and leverage on the world stage. In setting out a new vision for Ireland and re-imaging our role in the world, it is strategically important to set development and humanitarian assistance at the heart of that vision.

The Programme for Government 2011 recognised the increasing need for skilled individuals to work in the humanitarian sector and has committed to the provision and coordination of funding for humanitarian work. The Irish government has even identified Shannon airport as a potential international hub for the storage and distribution of emergency humanitarian supplies. The Minister for Foreign Affairs has put overseas development and humanitarian assistance at the heart of our foreign policy, demonstrating a desire to engage with the wider world in ways that promote peace, development, prosperity and justice.

In this country our key resource is our people. Irish people are known worldwide for their creativity, innovation and generosity and we must build upon that reputation. Ireland has a leading role to play on the world stage and we must strengthen every strand of our international reputation – from culture and the arts to business innovation to humanitarian and peacekeeping work. LIT is at the very heart of these ambitions, from our internationally renowned award winning fashion students in our school of Art and Design, to the LIT Enterprise Ladder, cutting edge research, and innovative new programmes such as the Masters in Humanitarian Assistance here at LIT Tipperary. LIT is showcasing the best of Irish traditions and will continue to deliver on its philosophy of Active Leadership in Education, Enterprise and Engagement.