

Concern for the Poorest

An Interview with Dominic MacSorley,
Chief Executive Officer, Concern Worldwide

EDITORS' NOTE In February of this year, renowned humanitarian Dominic MacSorley was appointed to CEO of Concern Worldwide. For the past 10 years, MacSorley served as the Operations Director of Concern Worldwide U.S., its affiliate organization based in New York City. A Belfast native, MacSorley joined Concern in 1982, and over the past three decades he has responded to some of the world's most devastating humanitarian crises and worked in some of the toughest environments in the world, including Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia, Rwanda, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Darfur, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Haiti. His outstanding leadership and contribution to humanitarian relief and development have been recognized by Queen Elizabeth II, who invested him in the Order of the British Empire (OBE) "for services to International Humanitarian Aid" and the Northern Ireland All Party Group on International Development. MacSorley also represents Concern and Interaction, the representative body for U.S.-based, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), at the United Nations.



Dominic MacSorley

ORGANIZATION BRIEF Concern Worldwide (concernusa.org) is an international, nongovernmental humanitarian organization dedicated to reducing extreme poverty, with more than 3,200 personnel working in 25 of the world's poorest countries in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. Concern Worldwide targets the root causes of extreme poverty through programs in health, education, livelihoods and microfinance, HIV and AIDS, and emergency response, directly reaching more than 8.5 million people.

How has the mission and vision of Concern Worldwide evolved?

In 1968, a famine in Biafra (Nigeria) was claiming the lives of an estimated 6,000 children every week. Images and reports of the crisis in Biafra were televised throughout the world and struck a deep chord with the Irish public. Ireland had close links with Nigeria – and Biafra – through the thousands of Irish missionaries working there. Among them were two young brothers, Father Aengus and Jack Finucane. They turned to Ireland for support, launching an appeal to "Send One Ship" to sail from Ireland to Biafra with relief. The public response was overwhelming and what started as one ship turned into nightly deliveries of life-saving supplies.

Over the past 45 years, our commitment to impacting the lives of the world's poorest people has never swayed. We are at our core a humanitarian organization and respond to the needs of people affected by natural disasters, famines, and conflicts, but unlike many other NGOs that specialize in either emergency response or development, we remain in communities long after the crisis has subsided to break the cycle of extreme poverty over the long-term. It is also important to note that while we were founded by two priests, we are a non-religious organization – our focus is always on serving the needs of the poorest.

How have you had such deep impact when you're working in such difficult areas?

By maintaining a very active and involved presence on the ground, we are able to understand the context within which we are working and can directly engage local communities to ensure that they become the drivers for change. We have found over 40 years of working in countries caught up in natural disasters or prolonged conflict that having the right team on the ground matched by strong systems and close monitoring is essential.

Take Pakistan, for example, which is a particularly challenging country; through a rigorous vetting process, we identified local partner organizations that had a humanitarian commitment and mission, that had no political or terrorist affiliations, and that had the financial systems and capability to deliver. We now have a network of 60 or so trained partner organizations that we can reliably plug into to mount fast and effective responses.

The U.S. government became aware of our approach and they subsequently awarded Concern a grant in excess of \$20 million to respond to multiple crises, including the devastating floods in 2010 that affected 20 million people

How broad is your reach?

We work in 25 countries, reaching more than 8.5 million of the poorest with a diverse range of programs. One of the reasons I've remained with Concern for so long is that we are effective in both emergency response and development, and we don't limit ourselves to a single blueprint approach.

We work on a whole range of sectors including education, health, water, sanitation, income generation, disaster risk reduction, and emergency response. There are many factors that drive poverty and, because of this, if you go into any of our project areas, you will find different combinations



Dominic MacSorley with Concern's team in the Democratic Republic of Congo

of support that are largely determined by the communities themselves. And what we do works.

Should more be done to bring organizations together in order to coordinate efforts?

There is significant coordination that does already occur, particularly in large-scale emergencies where you have multiple players from the local government, UN, and NGOs. More could be done, as these structures can be complex, for newcomers and local NGOs in particular. One important initiative that we are working on is the 'Building a Better Response' project, which is developing an e-learning tool for NGOs to better equip them to participate in coordination structures. It's funded by the U.S. government and we are working in partnership with International Medical Corps and the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative.

But we also are working on improved coordination with the private sector. A great example of that comes from our engagement as an active member of the Clinton Global Initiative and the work that they are doing in Haiti. In the aftermath of the earthquake, the Haiti Action Network was set up by Bill Clinton and Dennis O'Brien, CEO of Digicel. This network brings together representatives from the NGOs, the private sector, and the Haitian government to find practical solutions such as creating jobs and building factories, which bring about a sense of renewal. It is a really strong example of coordination, learning, and complementary efforts that happen on the ground level. I'd love to see more of it.

Where does the international community stand today in terms of addressing poverty?

Much has been achieved, and global poverty and the portion of people living on less than \$1.25 per day is half what it was in the 1990s.

The progress is largely as a result of economic developments in China and India, while sub-Saharan Africa is still home to deeply ingrained poverty. Conflict, inequality, and natural disasters are all on the rise.

The global statistics are brutal – 850 million people will not find enough to eat and will go to bed hungry. Conflict and disaster have forced 43 million to flee their homes, the highest number of displaced in 30 years. Sixty-one million children, most them girls, never go to school and 9.7 million children will die this year from easily preventable diseases. This is intolerable and unacceptable. Eliminating poverty stands as the greatest challenge of our generation.

We know what the solutions are. We can end global poverty. We have the knowledge and the technology. We simply need to mobilize the resources. ●