



Dominic MacSorley, CEO, Concern Worldwide
Address to the members of the Joint Committee for Foreign Affairs
July 14th, 2021

Good Morning Members of the Committee and my thanks to the Chair and the Clerk for facilitating this important discussion on Ireland's Overseas Aid at such a critical point in the Budget 2022 negotiations.

Let me be very clear, Ireland's aid is not only a lifeline for many millions of people but it is also an investment in a better world, an investment in peace and hope and its impact cannot be underestimated. It is needed now more than ever.

2020 was a year like no other, for Concern- an organisation that is hard-wired to respond to emergencies – we had never had to deal with a crisis that affected all of our country programme and home offices at the same time.

However, our organisational commitment to stay and deliver held strong, enabling us to deliver on three core priorities: protecting the health and safety of our 4,000 staff; scaling up Covid awareness and prevention across the communities we worked with; and adapting our on-going programmes- enabling them to keep operating to the fullest extent possible.

Central to this was the support of the Irish Government, the Irish public and other donors including the EU that enabled us last year to reach 35 million people across 24 of the world poorest and most fragile contexts - a huge collective effort with our donors that saw over 20 million people receive Covid prevention messages, 1,200 water and sanitation stations installed in Syria, over 600,000 people receiving soap, clean water in South Sudan, working with the Ministry of education in Sierra Leone to enable thousands of children to continue their education remotely; and here at home ensuring that 9,300 schools debaters could continue to compete online. Central to our ability to adapt programmes while scaling up Covid prevention was the flexibility of the Irish Aid team who were phenomenally supportive in enabling this to happen.

The true impact of Covid will not be known for some time but we already know it has hammered the poorest and most vulnerable. We see it every day in the communities we work with. To say the pandemic has been devastating for the poorest people is an understatement. Our initial expectation of COVID was of a health crisis, but what we now see is a crisis on every level – health, gender-based violence, education, mental health, livelihoods and peace and most importantly, a crisis of hunger and deepening inequality.

Late last year, we were part of a global survey of 16,000 households across 25 countries that looked at the impact of COVID across multiple levels, what was notable was the direct impact of lockdowns on women working in the informal sector repeatedly stated: *'If I don't work today, we don't eat tonight'*. ...60% of women had cut meals, mothers eating less and last, violence against women and girls spiralling, in some cases by a factor four.

Already a staggering 270 million people are estimated to be acutely food insecure or at high risk, that is a leap of 120 million- an 81% increase since the onset of COVID. 41 million people now at risk of falling into famine in 43 countries.

However, we cannot blame the virus for everything - this is a problem that has been long in the making driven by the climate crisis of course but and what is critical to remember is that the main driver of food insecurity is still conflict. If you look at the countries most at risk, they were all experiencing conflict-induced hunger before the pandemic.

Almost all the 24 countries Concern are in one of the 5 phases of food insecurity, most are in phase 3 that is a food crisis phase, and others have growing numbers in phase 4 -emergency and phase 5 - famine conditions.

In Somalia - 3 million people are in the crisis phase - a combination of failed rains and conflict and still dealing with impact of locusts last year; in the South west of the country we are starting to see populations moving towards already crowded displaced camps.

Kenya - failed rains - both the short and long rains - in October there were 600,000 people in crisis phase but by the end of July this is expect to increase to 2 million.

Haiti, even before the current political crisis had 12% population in emergency phase and rest in crisis -a combination of insecurity and economic decline - - poor harvest last year and lack of remittances as a result of Covid is a key contributor – the Humanitarian Appeal is only 5.4% funded - and was a modest \$ 235 million.

Globally and we know it will get worse - Sept-Dec will be a very tough time for people who will be depending on harvests

So in summary

- Level of humanitarian needs are going up –driven by Covid, Climate and Conflict, however the level of funding relative to these needs is down – the Global Humanitarian Appeal is currently 20% funded and we are already mid-year

The good news is we have been here before and we know how famine can be prevented.

A decade ago in July 2011, the world saw the first famine of the 21st Century. Mary Robinson travelled to Somalia with RTE and the CEOs of Concern, GOAL and Trocaire. She sat with them, listened to their stories of leaving children and older people behind in order to save the rest of the family. Over 260,000 people lost their lives in tragic circumstances- because there was not enough money and the response was too slow. Thanks to television coverage, the world witnessed the suffering, and loss caused by conflict and recurrent drought and could not choose to turn away.

Five years later, in 2016 and again in 2017, humanitarian actors used improved early warning systems (build with support from Irish Aid to Concern and others) to respond to and avert 4 separate threats largescale famines in N East Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen. With adequate funding, we can keep our systems going. We can work with governments ahead of crises, and we can reach people where they are and when they need assistance.

Ireland's overseas aid is essential in preventing crises, now than ever.

Ireland has led the way on providing multiyear funding in humanitarian crises – a decision that changes and saves lives.

In Central African Republic, a country worn down by climate change, conflict and geopolitical interference, over 2 million people depend on humanitarian aid. Yet last year, there was a 63% shortfall in funding required. With the stroke of a pen, food rations for half a million internally displaced were cut to a quarter - not even the bare minimum. When I asked the head of the UN Mission what was the immediate impact he said

'We have become firefighters. We can only go for the most acute, we have to leave the moderate ones today, who in turn become the most acute tomorrow.'

One bright light is Irish Aid's five year funding cycle, which provides certainty and continuity to communities in crisis and enable organisations like Concern to support immediate humanitarian needs and work with communities on recovery and resilience

It is easy to feel overwhelmed by the level of global need. Before the pandemic, there was cause for hope in how progress towards the SDGs was being made. The pandemic must be an opportunity to pause and think about the kind of world we want to live in, and the world we want to invest in for the next generation. It is also a spotlight on how important overseas aid is.

Addressing hunger and extreme poverty is not possible without funding but we also need peace, and stability and better international cooperation. I commend the work of the Department of Foreign Affairs, the commitment to securing peace and addressing conflict as part of Ireland's tenure on the UN Security Council. I also commend Irish Aid who are often overlooked, for the important behind the scenes role they play in furthering Ireland's international reputation.

We have learnt that human progress is not inevitable but we know human solidarity is essential. The combination of climate change, conflict and COVID-19 risks taking us back to a world we thought we had left behind; one where extreme poverty has risen for first time in 20 years, and famine- something we thought had been consigned to history- is back.

But history doesn't have to repeat itself. Ireland's international reputation benefits us all. Ireland's international aid programme is respected and recognised as a symbol of that solidarity and global leadership, and our commitment to building a better world.

I thank you for time and your commitment to this issue and with my colleagues here today, I ask that you advocate for the necessary cross-government support for Ireland's overseas aid programme.