

A Day in the Life of Tom Arnold

Tom Arnold holds a number of highly influential roles – as Director General of the Institute of International and European Affairs (IIEA), Ireland’s leading think tank; Special Representative for Hunger, Concern Worldwide, Ireland; and ad interim Coordinator of the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement. He discusses the many roles and responsibilities that have gone into an international career that shows no signs of stopping.

Sight and Life (S&L): *Tom, you currently hold more than one very senior position. If we start first with your role with SUN, what brought you to this position?*

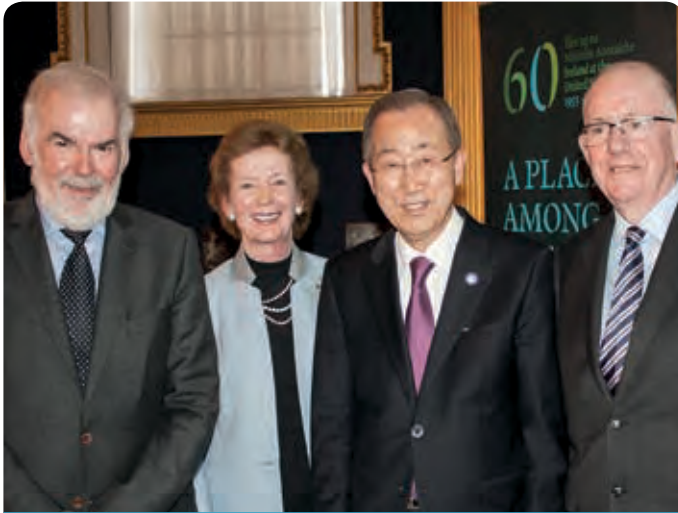
Tom Arnold (TA): I’ve been involved with SUN ever since it was launched by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Irish Foreign Minister Micheál Martin in 2010, when I was still Chief Executive of Concern Worldwide. In that capacity, I was appointed to the SUN Lead Group in April 2012. The Lead Group’s initial term of office was for two years, but this was subsequently extended until the end of 2015. In August of 2014, when the Ebola crisis had reached a very significant pitch, SUN Coordinator David Nabarro was requested by the UN Secretary General to coordinate the United Nations’ response to it. The demands of this new commitment made it impossible for David to continue as SUN Coordinator, so he and Tony Lake, the Chair of the SUN Lead Group, asked me to step into the breach for six months. At the end of that period, I was asked to serve for another six months. By that time, it had been decided to look for a longer-term replacement for David, and so I will be continuing in my present position until that person has been appointed.

S&L: *Until recently you were CEO of Concern Worldwide. You now occupy the position of Special Representative for Hunger for that organization. How has your relationship with Concern Worldwide evolved over the years, and to what extent does it inform your current work for the SUN?*

TA: Concern Worldwide has been a big part of my life; I joined its Board in the 1980s, and was appointed Chief Executive in 2001, remaining in that role until February 2013, when I stepped down. During that period, Concern Worldwide continued to be a leading humanitarian organization, responding to crises all around the world. It also began to carve out a substantial role in the field of nutrition, pioneering the treatment of severe acute malnutrition (SAM) in close collaboration with Valid International. This approach gained acceptance among the global nutrition community, and Community Management of Acute Malnutrition (CMAM) was introduced in 2007 and established itself as the recognized standard. Concern’s activities in the area of stunting were also significant. So when I stepped down as Chief Executive, Dominic MacSorley and the Board asked me to take on the role as Special Representative for Concern. So I keep up to date with all of Concern’s activities, and especially its pioneering work, and I reference these efforts when speaking on nutrition, as I am often called on to do. Concern also works very closely with The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), and this collaboration has really helped Concern to translate its findings into effective policy proposals that have an influence far beyond its own scope of activity. We were also fortunate at the time to have the financial support of Kerry Group, Ireland’s leading food company. I always thought that combining the capabilities of a leading think tank and a leading private sector organization in this fashion was the right way to progress the nutrition agenda – and that’s a message that I still communicate as Special Representative for Concern.

“I always thought that combining the capabilities of a leading think tank and a leading private sector organization was the right way to progress the nutrition agenda”





Tom Arnold (left) with Mary Robinson (President of Ireland 1990–97), Ban Ki-moon (UN Secretary-General), and Charles Flanagan (Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade), at a speech given by Ban Ki-moon in Dublin Castle at an event titled “The UN at 70: Looking Back, Looking Forward”, May 25, 2015

S&L: *And your role as Director General of the Institute of International and European Affairs?*

TA: IIEA’s role is to advise on Ireland’s relationship with the European Union and the rest of the world, focusing on key themes such as security, climate change and the digital economy. Our role is to deliver high-quality thinking that might inform policy; at the moment, for instance, we’re analyzing what might happen if Britain were to leave the EU.

S&L: *Going back to the subject of the SUN Movement, Tom, what do you think it has achieved in the past five years?*

TA: I think SUN has done a great deal to highlight the political importance of nutrition. A lot of the world’s political leaders are now beginning to appreciate the significance of nutrition for the current and long-term welfare of their people, as well as for their prospects of economic growth. This new understanding is encouraging the introduction of policies that begin to tackle the problem of undernutrition in particular. To give you an idea of the scale of the problem, the average level of stunting across the 15 southern African states is 39%. This is a frightening problem, and requires very serious attention. On a more practical level, the SUN Movement now numbers 56 countries, plus the Indian state of Maharashtra, and member countries are increasingly pooling their experience and sharing best practice. SUN is creating opportunities for this thinking to be shared, focusing on topics such as attracting the necessary resources and building the required capacity. We hold global meetings, and these are real hothouses for learning, generating enormous enthusiasm and commitment.

S&L: *So how do you think SUN will develop in the next five years?*

TA: I and others have spent a lot of time in 2015 thinking about precisely that question! We’ve developed a strategy which was endorsed by the SUN Lead Group in September 2015 and will become effective as of January 2016. The first five years of the SUN Movement were spent getting people working together across borders in a really effective manner. Our focus for the next five years will be very much on implementation, achieving results, and obtaining more resources for nutrition. We’ll also be trying to ensure that nutrition spend, whether direct or indirect, achieves more. So we’ll be trying to support better outcomes, whether the interventions in question are nutrition-specific or nutrition-sensitive.

S&L: *Looking back over your five years to date with the SUN, has there been a defining moment for you?*

TA: I think back to the Global Gathering in Rome in November 2014, which brought together some 300 people for a three-day period in the run-up to the second International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2). I thought the exchanges between participants were very significant, because people were standing up and showing what they had achieved in their own countries, and others were asking them detailed questions about how they had managed to do these things. It’s not about new ideas as such: it’s about doing a few things well, and doing them collectively – ensuring, for instance, that appropriate sanitation is in place, providing the conditions that are conducive to good nutrition. In the longer term, I think it’s crucial that women’s voices should be heard and that they should help to formulate nutrition policy and shape nutrition programs going forward.

“SUN is not about new ideas as such: it’s about doing a few things well, and doing them collectively”

S&L: *In October 2012 you were appointed Chairperson of the Convention on the Irish Constitution. Can you tell us a little about this role? Why is a Convention on the Irish Constitution necessary, what does it aim to achieve, and how does it operate?*

TA: The Irish Constitution dates from 1937, and there was a growing feeling in Irish political circles that aspects of it could benefit from a review. After the general election of 2011, therefore, it was decided to reconsider and possibly revise certain elements, subject to a referendum on these subjects. A Convention consisting of 100 people was therefore created, compris-

ing two thirds citizens and one third politicians and reflecting the overall composition of the Irish population. I was invited to chair this Convention, which was tasked with considering eight aspects of the Constitution during the course of a year. It was a great honor to be asked, and I couldn't say no! We met during the weekends and voted on each subject after a weekend of discussion and debate. We enjoyed a certain amount of latitude, and added a further two topics, completing our conclusions after 14 months. Of the recommendations we made, the one that has so far led to constitutional and legal change concerns same-sex marriage, which was barred under the terms of the 1937 Constitution. We also examined topics such as the voting age and the role of women in society. It was an excellent experiment in direct democracy and has attracted a lot of interest among political scientists worldwide; an academic book on the subject is currently in preparation, in fact. Not a lot of the recommendations of the Convention have been enacted yet, but this may change when the next Irish government is voted into office.

S&L: *Moving on from that example of direct democracy, Tom, can we discuss good governance in the nutrition space? What are the prerequisites for good nutrition governance at a global level, in your view?*

TA: A fundamental principle of SUN is that of mutual accountability. The SUN Movement has many stakeholders, but they have to account to one another for their decisions and actions – and of course, their actions can only be implemented with the help of many hands. What SUN is doing very successfully now is to bring its many stakeholders together in a structured way that facilitates concerted and effective action. Returning to the Convention for a moment, one of the things that impressed me most about it was the degree to which the citizens in it took on their responsibilities. I'm a great believer in the two great political principles that all politics is local and that people like to be consulted. If you engage with people properly and make them feel that they have a role in the overall process and a responsibility to discharge that role, they will usually rise to the occasion.

“I'm a great believer in the two great political principles that all politics is local and that people like to be consulted”

S&L: *You have held many illustrious positions besides those already discussed – Assistant Secretary General and Chief Economist in the Department of Agriculture*

and Food in Ireland, Chairman of the OECD Committee of Agriculture, Chairperson of the Irish Times Trust and Director of the Irish Times, to name but a few. Is there a common thread that runs through all these appointments?

TA: One factor was certainly being in the right place at the right time, and another was always pursuing opportunities that interested me. At the beginning of my career I was deeply interested in Ireland's relationship with Europe, and I graduated from university just at the time when Ireland was joining the European Economic Community (EEC), as it was in those days. I was fortunate in being offered a role with the European Commission at a very exciting time. I was also extremely interested in developing countries, and I hoped as a student to have the opportunity to work in development overseas. At an early stage in my career I spent three years in Africa, later working in Brussels on matters relating to Africa. Then comes my interest in agriculture. I grew up on a farm and studied agricultural economics at university. And so I've been working in these three interrelated areas of Europe, the developing world, and agriculture all my life. I've never really had a career plan as such; I've just been extremely fortunate, and I've always followed the simple principle of trying to do whatever I do as well as I possibly can. I'm a firm believer that if you do that, your career will find a way of looking after itself. So I've been enormously fortunate, and I've also been blessed in having a very happy family life.

S&L: *You are known as a powerful advocate of better nutrition for poor and vulnerable populations worldwide. What is the secret of effective advocacy, in your view?*

TA: I think it's essential to care deeply about whatever it is you're advocating. There's a saying that “If you can fake sincerity, you've got it made,” but I don't think that you can really fake sincerity and get away with it. Either you believe in something or you don't. I didn't go into Concern with the sense that I was going to spend a lot of my career as an advocate. There was, however, a growing interest in nutrition at the time, and I felt that Concern had something important to say that was grounded in this reality. We had valuable evidence, but the second part of the challenge was the question of how to deploy this evidence to maximum effect – which involves knowing who the key players are and how to influence them. Learning these things is an essential part of becoming an effective advocate.

S&L: *The Irish are famous for their love of poetry, and for the many great poets they have produced. Is there an Irish writer who inspires you particularly, or a work of literature that has had a special influence in your life, Tom?*

TA: One of the best-known Irish poets of recent times was Seamus Heaney, who died two years ago. He was truly remarkable. One of the most notable things about him was his generosity of spirit – he had a great natural grace about him, and he always had time for people. I often think of one of his early poems, *Digging*, which was published in 1965. It was a clear statement of intent: writing poetry was what he wanted to do with his life. The poem is about watching his hard-working father digging turf with a spade. The poem concludes with the lines: “Between my finger and thumb / The squat pens rests. / I’ll dig with it.” His evolution as a poet was quite remarkable, and included an intense exploration of the work of various writers from the past and a range of mythic subjects. He carved his own way, that is to say, and he left behind an oeuvre that was complex in terms of its content but also extremely accessible. Heaney has always inspired me.

S&L: *With so many different roles and responsibilities in your professional life, you must be very good at managing your time. What are your working days like? Is there such a thing as a “typical” working day for you, or is every day different?*

TA: I certainly don’t have a “typical” working day. I travel a great deal, attending many conferences, and I’ve always tended to have more than one role at any one time. Essentially it’s a question of managing your time efficiently. But I certainly believe that you cannot do any job successfully unless you prepare for it properly, so preparation has always been extremely important to me. This is especially the case with chairing meetings. To an extent this is a learned skill, of course, but things go much better if you make the time to really prepare yourself well.

S&L: *If you look back over your career to date and could change one thing about it, what would it be?*

TA: I’ve been very fortunate in being able to pursue many interests – working in overseas development, the civil service and also the NGO space. So I’ve done many things that I’ve wanted to do, even if I hadn’t actually planned to do them. One area in which it would have been interesting to work is the private sector, if I had been able to find the time for it. I have no regrets, though, and I’m very thankful for the opportunities that I’ve been given.

.....
“It’s essential that nutritionists should build on the work of recent years and ensure that their voice continues to grow”

S&L: *If you could change one thing about the nutrition community as a whole to make it more effective today, what would that be?*

.....
TA: If we look back seven or eight years, the nutrition community used to be really very disjointed. It was sometimes referred to as an “institutional orphan,” in fact, because it didn’t really “belong” within national bureaucracies. This is changing through the work of the SUN. The nutrition community has really come together in the past few years to agree core agendas, and national bureaucracies have started to realize that they have to take account of nutrition. There will always be diverse approaches at national bureaucratic level, and there will always be differences of opinion within the nutrition community, of course, but it’s essential that nutritionists should build on the excellent work of recent years and ensure that their voice continues to grow and that their views are taken seriously.

S&L: *How do you relax from work, and what are your interests outside the professional sphere?*

.....
TA: Watching sport when I get the time is very important for me, as is reading. I possess a large number of books that I hope to be able to read some day ... I also try to keep fit, and enjoy playing tennis – although it’s difficult to fit it in with all the travelling. I enjoy going to the theatre as well. But I haven’t managed to retire yet, and I’m unlikely to do so as long as people keep asking me to do interesting things, so my spare time is still very limited!

S&L: *Tom, thank you very much for your time, and all the best with your current and future work.*

.....
TA: Thank you, Jonathan.

.....
Tom Arnold was interviewed by Jonathan Steffen
