

# Interview with Joe Murray of Afri

**Rob Fairmichael talked to Joe Murray in Afri's office in Dublin –**

Rob – Maybe you could start with something about your own personal background, where you grew up and how you were conscientised and got involved with all this?

Joe – I grew up on a small farm in Longford, I suppose you could say it's a far cry from where I am today, though at the same time I feel it is very linked and connected. I grew up in a rural community very close to the land, life on a small farm which at that time was very much about caring for the earth and caring for animals. I loved the place I grew up and for me my parents were very inspirational people, who lived a very quiet and simple life but that was somehow very profound! Someone at the recent Féile Bríde was talking about the book, *'Enough is Plenty'*, I think that is the kind of philosophy they lived out of, even though they wouldn't have been philosophers or articulating their lifestyle in that way.

I grew up one of a family of eight. There were a number of things about it; simplicity of life, very rural based life, very strong sense of connection with nature, strong sense of community and also a very faith-based family at that time. My parents operated very much out of a strong faith and that had an influence on us as a family. While their faith was strong and central to their lives, it was not in any way authoritarian or imposed on us as a family. Their outlook in general would have influenced us, I think the main way in which that would have happened was in terms of caring for others, not just thinking about our own welfare. They were people who always looked out for neighbours and always welcomed people as well; our family home was known for its welcome. To a lesser or greater extent those things had a big bearing on me and have influenced me and indeed other members of my family to the extent that we would all be involved in some way in work, I don't know how you'd describe it, that has a social dimension to it.

Rob – How did you get involved in wider issues then?

Joe – Well, I went to primary school and secondary school, and particularly during secondary school I got very interested in people on the margins. I would have worked in an old people's hospital for a couple of summers but even apart from that, at a voluntary level, I used to go during school time to the old people's hospital to visit people there. I used to like to visit people in my own area as well, old people or people who were alone or marginalised in some way. That was a kind of an orientation that I had and I always really enjoyed it, it wasn't like doing a duty, it was something I wanted to do. I enjoyed and benefitted from the wisdom of older people that I knew in my area and the broader community when I was growing up. That might have been the start of it and again I think it came from the example of my parents in particular.

The next step then was, after secondary school, I developed an interest in the Third World, as it would have been called then, and I wanted to find a way to work in relation to that. The main way that people did that at that time, this was 1973, was through religious life or missionary work so I met some people in my locality, one in particular, who was a member of St Patrick's Missionary Society in Kiltegan. I began to find out about that and was influenced to join them, so I did. I spent six years there and I have to say it was a good and a very positive experience. I know the church has a very bad reputation at the moment, and rightly so in terms of the clerical sex abuse scandals, but I would have to say my experience of being in the seminary for six years at that time was an entirely positive one, from a number of aspects. There was a reflective and an activist dimension to it and I relished both elements. I loved the quiet and the opportunity for reflection. And then, to the extent that we were involved in social activity, I enjoyed that as well.

Rob – And when you left there?

Joe – This was the time of my political awakening, really, after I left the seminary. Before I would have done things but very much in an uncritical way, doing the works of mercy rather than the work of justice, I suppose you could describe it. I left Kiltegan and I was uncertain about what I would do. I still wanted to work in relation to Third World issues, as they were described at that time, but I really believed there was no way you could do that while being in Ireland so I was pondering how to do it, but didn't know how.

The first thing that I did when I left Kiltegan was I went to Germany. I don't often admit this (laughs) but I looked for a job over there, I was supposed to be washing pots in a hotel kitchen but all the good jobs, including washing the pots, were gone when I got there. I searched around Frankfurt and eventually I got offered a job with McDonalds so I spent a summer working in McDonalds....

Rob – A skeleton in Joe Murray's cupboard!

Joe – Well, it was my first experience of working outside Ireland and I really enjoyed the experience of being in Germany and being with a crowd of friends. I didn't enjoy McDonalds all that much even though I was approached by the managing director when I was leaving, who tried to persuade me to stay, telling me that if I did stay, I would have a big future in McDonalds...

Rob – Think where you could be today, Joe!

Joe – I could be Ronald! Anyway, I came back to Ireland and was still unsure, knowing the kind of area I wanted to work in, not knowing how I would get there. Then I met up with Don Mullan. Don was doing a course in Development Studies in Kimmage Manor. I had no interest in doing a course but Don suggested I should talk to the director, Fr Dick Quinn, the founder of the course. He was very encouraging and supportive, and he gave me the opportunity to do the course, invited me to do the course, I had no money at the time, but he made it possible for me to do it. That course was one of the best things I have done, which for the first time gave me a political analysis of the world that we live in.

Rob – And the rest is history!

Joe – From there I got a job in Afri with Don and that began my involvement in Afri. One thing to say about Kimmage, I would have been coming out of a theological perspective. There was a man lecturing on the course, Michel de Vertail who was a liberation theologian from Trinidad. He was certainly one of the people who was most responsible for my political awakening and beginning to move from the idea of charity as a response to the idea of justice. He was a very charismatic and inspiring figure for whom theology was not an abstract art but based on a practical analysis of political and economic structures. Through this course, I crossed a bridge from one perspective to another. I also worked closely with Toni Ryan in a homeless people's shelter in inner city Dublin, at this time. Toni and I later started a house for homeless people which continued for over two years. But that experience was very challenging and influential, as well.

Rob – Before we go on to talk about Afri, I wanted to ask about how you manage to keep all the balls in the air. How long do you work for Afri?

Joe – At the minute I am in two part-time jobs. I work part time for Afri and part time as Justice and Peace Coordinator with Kiltegan, back where I started. I was in Afri solely for many years and I loved it, and it is my first love to work for Afri, but the insecurity around it and the reality that I have a wife, Mary Lou and four children, Aine, Diarmuid, Eoghan and Oisín and a home to maintain, means that I have to ensure that I have a little more security of income than I had previously. So I have taken on the job in Kiltegan, I'm enjoying it, it's very similar to the work I'm doing here [in Afri], with the environment/care for the planet as a very strong dimension. The main focus of my work is not in Ireland but in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. That's amazing because that's where my interest has been for much of my life and I'm now getting the chance to go there to work on justice/peace/environmental issues with people there.

Rob – Can you go on to talk about Afri, its origins, and how it has developed over the years because its origins, though you've come back to it a bit, is different to where it has been working to some degree.

Joe – Yes, Afri was founded in 1975 as an aid agency, pure and simple. The purpose of the organisation was to raise money in Ireland and to channel it to projects overseas, particularly in India. That's how it continued for the first five years of its existence.

Rob – It was founded by?

Joe – A man called Fr Sean McFerran, a Salesian priest who had worked in India for forty years. He was posted back to Ireland in 1975. Even at that stage he was aware of the relative wealth of Ireland compared to the poverty he had left behind in India. So he simply formed an organisation to raise money here and channel it out to work in India, for anti-poverty work. It was not attempting to do anything else for the first five years other than raise money.

Rob – Until 1980?

Joe – Yeah. It was located in Sean MacDermott Street parish, one of the poorest areas in Dublin, which was very insightful, we always felt, and we worked out of there and would have liked to continue working there. But in that sense it made connections between poverty in Ireland and poverty internationally. Then, again through the course in Kimmage, another Salesian, Jim O'Halloran, came in to teach and he talked about Afri. Don Mullan was interviewed for a job as director and was given the job in 1980. I went on the board in 1980 and I joined Don on the staff in 1982 and really, apart from one year out, when I worked for Concern in Sudan, I have been involved with Afri since then.

Rob – The areas where Afri has been involved includes being the first group in Ireland to work towards commemorating the 150th anniversary of the Great Famine. Can you say something about that and how that came about?

Joe – Over the years I have been in Afri we have been lucky to be involved in some amazing issues, experiences, campaigns and projects. The first and probably most impressive was the anti-apartheid Dunnes Stores strike. We didn't initiate it or originate it or anything, it was just an extraordinary thing that happened; people working in the supermarket in Henry Street made a link between the work that they were doing and the reality of the apartheid regime.

Rob – What year was this?

Joe – It was 1984. Mary Manning in particular decided that she would do whatever she could do, which was to refuse to handle what she called the fruits of apartheid, and to literally refuse to take in her hands the produce of South Africa. Since her job was to check out the goods it inevitably led to conflict with her management and she was suspended from her job. Eight other people walked out with her and there was a strike which lasted for two years which was extraordinary and amazing. The strikers never gave up, and Dunnes Stores never gave up but the government intervened and banned the importation of South African fruit and vegetables. So the strikers won effectively.

I think that was like a light going on in our heads at the time, seeing the power of this example. And the strength of it was that it made a very direct link, a local and global link. It wasn't just people talking about apartheid in a theoretical way but saying we are directly linked with that reality, and we can do something about it. That became our trademark, our charisma, looking for ways in which we could link issues in Ireland with internationally, not just picking issues out of the air abroad, but asking in what way can we connect our experience in Ireland with particular issues that are happening in developing countries.

Then the famine was a very obvious example of that. The Great Famine project, which was obviously about the Famine in Ireland, arose as a result of a comment by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who is our international patron. We invited him to our first ever international conference, in 1982, but he was refused permission to come by the apartheid regime, who confiscated his passport. But in 1984 he took up the invitation and he did come and, as part of his talk, he spoke about the obscenity where food in South Africa was being exported out of the country while people were dying of hunger. Don and myself were sitting beside each other and Don immediately said, "That's the Famine in Ireland". And out of that we identified that the 150th anniversary of the Great Famine was coming up and we decided to look at the issue of poverty today through the lens of the Great Famine in Ireland. I think it has been a very effective way because the Famine in Ireland is imprinted on the psyche of people here. Again it's not abstract or it's not theoretical, it's saying we went through this in our history, only a few generations ago. When we learned about the famine in history in school, the last lesson was the famine is over and we don't have famine any more. What we wanted to do was take a step further and say – "The Famine is over in Ireland, at least for the moment, it just has moved to another part of the world".

Rob – Exactly the same thing is happening elsewhere –

Joe – Exactly the same thing. That's the strength of it. I worked in Sudan in 1989, with Concern. My job was to bring seeds to farmers out in the countryside, to meet the chiefs and negotiate little allotments of land. And then go to farming people who had no land and give them implements, a plot of land and seeds, and they'd grow the seeds and feed themselves for a short while. We were working in ten villages, like spokes of a wheel going out from the town of Renk where we were living, as we drove out every day or second day we'd drive past acres and acres of dura, which is the mainstay food. The irony was incredible; we had the little bags of dura to give out to people but we were passing acres of it, as far as the eye could see. There was one really impressive building in Renk, - most of the houses were small mud huts - it was a grain store; but it wasn't a grain store for keeping food to distribute to people, it was a grain store for storing food before it was exported to Europe and Saudi Arabia. Exactly the same was happening as with the Famine in Ireland.

That's why we believe the Famine is such a strong symbol. It's important that we remember the Famine for its own sake, it's where we have come from as a people and that's very important. But also because it's not irrelevant, it's not something that's over and we don't need to deal with any more. It's literally laden with layers of messages that are relevant to the world that we live in today.

Rob - Another issue which you would be involved with currently, which also links internationally, is the situation in Rosspoint.

Joe – Exactly, and interesting how we came to be involved. Bishop Tutu introduced us to the Famine, Ken Saro-Wiwa introduced us to the Corrib issue, because we were very involved with the Ogoni, aware of the devastation that Shell

were creating in the Ogoni region of the Niger Delta in particular. (I actually spent 12 days in the Niger Delta before Christmas and saw the devastation wrought by the multinationals there). We followed the case of Ken Saro-Wiwa, campaigned for his release, tried to highlight his case and were absolutely appalled when he was hanged by the Nigerian government with the collusion of Shell. We were appalled by what happened in the Niger Delta and were then horrified to realise it had come back home in recent years when Shell moved into north-west Mayo and began to operate in more or less the same way as they do in the Niger Delta, it's a bit more sophisticated, it's a bit less crude, but in fact many of the traits of how multinationals operate in the Niger Delta are visible also in the Corrib area.

Rob – And the government's approach would provide a case book example of how not to relate to local people.

Joe – Exactly. It's a fundamentally flawed project and that is the difficulty, it's a project which has corruption at its root, and that's why it's not succeeding. The government provided semi-state land for the terminal. The Multinationals obviously got a very good deal, acquiring a large tract of land, far more than is required for this current phase of the project. And that's one of the reasons the local community are concerned, they say, "Why did they get so much land?" They believe that this is going to become the hub of all the extractive industries off the west coast of Ireland, that that's the long term plan.

The government gave them land and gave them permission to build a refinery before they had found a means for getting the gas from the well head to the refinery. So it was cart before the horse. And it showed a contempt for people really, pretending that there is a planning process but really saying that whatever it is necessary to do, we will back you up to ensure that it is done. What they didn't reckon on was the courage and commitment of the local people. Afri have got involved to support local people and we're proud to stand side by side with them, because I believe they are torch bearers for our society to a certain extent, they are standing up to corruption, they're standing up to bullying, to threats, and they're saying "We're not prepared to sell out on our birthright regardless of what threats or violence or legal harassment, which is the latest phase, is put in our direction." It's an incredibly important struggle. Unfortunately people of that region have been, by and large, abandoned.

Rob – Also demonised.

Joe – Demonised by the media and criminalised by the state. Everything is working against them. But they are standing strong and they have refused to give in and Afri are proud to be there with them to the extent that we are.

Rob – Other issues you've been involved with include the arms trade. We just did an interview, in the last issue of *Nonviolent News*, with some members of Foyle Ethical Investment Campaign who were paying tribute to the fact that it was a joint Afri conference along with Children in Crossfire which actually led to the formation of FEIC. So the arms trade is another issue you've been involved with.

Joe – Yes. There are a few key people along the way that influence you and this is what is great about this work, that you do meet inspirational people, and they shine the light and show you the way. In this case Sean MacBride was one of our special advisers in the early days of Afri and when we were talking to him, as we often did, about the Famine, and he was very interested in the Famine Project, and supportive of the idea, but he always said, and it took me a while to realise what he was saying – that "You can't talk about famine unless you talk about the arms trade". I began to see the wisdom of that, years later. Just look at the arms trade figures today, the latest is \$1,400 billion for one year's trade in the arms industry. That's a shockingly obscene reality in our world when that is what our governments are choosing to spend our resources on. That's contributing to famine in a very direct way, it's diverting much needed resources away from the provision of food and shelter, clean water and the basic things that people need, and contributing towards an industry that ensures people are oppressed, intimidated, and killed. That's one reason why we got involved.

Rob – Evil may be a strong term but I would say there is evil associated with it, without a shell or single bullet being fired or bomb going off.

Joe – Exactly, in itself it's an obscenity, but not only that, it is then used in the most oppressive and destructive way. We've done a number of things. First of all we published a report to highlight the role of the arms industry in Ireland. Later, we heard about the arrival of Raytheon in Derry, which was one of the saddest things. That the third largest arms company in the world was welcomed by two Nobel Peace Prize winners is extraordinary, and a perversion of what peace and justice is about, and an illustration of how parochial we can be in many ways in looking at our own reality, not looking at the consequences of our actions.

Rob – Jobs at any cost.

Joe – Yes. A lovely story about that. That conference in Derry that you were talking about which Afri organised with Children in Crossfire, we brought a number of people to that including Dino from East Timor, a victim of the arms

trade, Richard Moore was there, a victim of the arms trade, and a man called Michael Lapsley from South Africa. I just realised the other day, after we heard that Raytheon were leaving Derry, which is fantastic, that Michael was a victim of the arms trade, he was sent a letter bomb which blew off his arms. So the man who launched FEIC had no arms, he suffered as a result of the arms trade but to some extent also he was instrumental in driving an arms company out of Derry. There's something extraordinary about the symbolism of that. It's amazing.

Rob – Are there other aspects of Afri's work that you'd like to mention such as development education?

Joe – We do development education and that's ongoing and important, working with schools and young people, exposing them to other realities, especially bringing the developing world into the equation, because again often our focus is exclusively on our own back yard, and we don't often see the bigger world in which we are operating. As well as development education we organise 'Education for liberation' seminars, and they are important. Féile Bríde and the Hedge School are regular annual events, in spring and autumn, and the Famine Walk in the summer.

Rob – Financially it must be difficult, you were talking about the fact you're now part-time.

Joe – It is difficult. We're not doing work that evokes an emotional response. In relation to Haiti we are planning to do work but it'll be looking critically at how the aid operation has been militarised, how over the years Haiti has been neglected, abused, penalised. So it's more an analytical, critical approach and for that reason it doesn't evoke an emotional response and therefore it's more difficult to generate funding for our work. Also we're not popular with some of our funders because we're critical of the Irish government. But we feel that in order to be true to our origins and to our history we have to maintain the ability to look critically at decisions and structures in our own society and which impact negatively on more vulnerable people in the world.

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For a photo of Joe Murray taken at the time of the interview, see <http://www.flickr.com/photos/30253151@N07/4362983076/in/set-72157623376298793/>

● Afri is at 134 Phibsborough Road, Phibsborough, Dublin 7. The phone number is 01 - 8827581 / 8827563, e-mail [afri@iol.ie](mailto:afri@iol.ie) and website <http://www.afri.ie> Afri is a member of the International Peace Bureau, Dochas (The Irish Association of Non-Governmental Development Associations) and Stop Climate Chaos in Ireland. Charity number 7627. Details about making a donation to Afri are on the website, including an online option, or you can post your cheque, bank draft or postal order, made payable to Afri, to the above address.

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