

The SCOOP Foundation- The Dóchas New Voices in Development Conference

*'Looking out for the little guy'*

Andrew Sweeney, Founder and MD



Ladies and gentlemen, first I would like to thank Dóchas for giving me and the SCOOP Foundation the opportunity to present ourselves to such a distinguished audience. I will take this opportunity to give you a brief history of our formation, what our aims and core values are; our own place is in development and what our plans for the future are.

I am sure there are a lot of you here who haven't yet heard of the SCOOP until today; well we are a relatively new non-profit, at this stage not even a year old. And maybe some of you would be interested in hearing about our own experience in how we formed, especially in such a precarious time where either a lot of businesses are failing, or a lot of people are losing their jobs. Not to mention that other charities are finding it difficult too as donations have decreased also.

In fact, our story begins with a strange twist of fate, a chain of events I don't mind sharing with you now because it's the truth of how we formed. One of our principal and core values at the SCOOP is that we wish to always remain honest and truthful even if this truth reveals our own flaws, mistakes, inexperience or even insecurities.

I had just finished college and with no real desire of living the life of wife, home, car or children, like most Irish men down on their luck, I left. First I spent time in Central America and then worked my way over to Asia. I was travelling through Cambodia, very much in the same way I was in my life at that time-without direction, motivation or much care for my own safety or well being.

One night while in a bar, I spotted a pool table, and began playing on my own. Eventually I was playing some local 'tuk tuk' drivers and we ended up playing for money, only a dollar a game, but the possibility of losing a whole days pay to some of them. To cut a long story short, near the end of the night I accepted a can of tainted beer, was drugged, whisked away on a moped and robbed. I was later robbed again that night as the owner of the hostel allowed the robbers into my room.

The following morning I gathered what little of my thoughts and possessions I had left, and promptly left the hostel, the owner and 'tuk tuk' driver sitting outside still laughing at my predicament. I was walking down the road, eyes to the ground, probably little life in my face, when a passing Canadian girl approached me asking me if I was ok. I ignored her and kept trying to get away from her but she

didn't give up, I was clearly a mess and she wasn't letting go. She took me to a hotel and checked me in. We agreed to meet for dinner later that evening and in the meantime I had a bath and slept, trying to get my head around what had happened, though at the same time happy that it was over.

That evening I did indeed meet Kyla, the Canadian and we relaxed with a few beers and began getting to know each other. Obviously I was cursing Cambodia through my teeth, so she mentioned she had been volunteering at a small orphanage just outside the city and asked if I would like to go with her the following day. I agreed hoping it would take my mind of the drugging the previous night and the following day I visited a small orphanage a little outside of Phnom Pehn. Little did I know that that day would dictate the next year of my life, and quite possibly, I hope, the rest of it too.



The orphanage was a small

dark and dank two room building with a classroom downstairs and a bedroom upstairs, with everyone sleeping on mats. There were 11 children living there with a man called Sath Samith and his wife who had both built the centre after they had found a girl in a ditch one day. Like me, their path too was dictated by a strange twist of fate. Sath needed help with caring for the children and for the building of a home and school for them so he began putting up simple signs in hostels requesting volunteers, like the one my Canadian friend had seen. Even though Sath and all the children were still living in extreme poverty, they were all so happy living together and genuinely loved it when each and every visitor came, crying when each one left. The place had a profound impact on me as I learned each child's story, many of whom had suffered abuse in the awful sex trade over there and had been abandoned by their parents. Nonetheless Sath was doing right by them and was trying to feed them, cloth them and educate them.

Upon returning to Ireland I vowed to try and have the same impact on their lives as they had mine. For the first time in my life I had an idea of what I wanted to do with it, and this began with a fundraiser for the orphanage. I put on a small benefit concert through friends I had known when in college and we raised €3,500. The following day, the day I sent the money to Sath, the SCOOP was born. I began hatching ideas for other fundraisers, and began asking some friends and acquaintances if they would be interested in setting up a small charity, one where we would raise funds through cultural events, or in other words through having a good time, and where the money would be sent

straight to schools, orphanages or any project with the welfare and education of children at their heart.

Regarding a name, I asked my Mum, an avid cross word fan and general word freak to think of a suitable name. Minutes later she suggested S.C.O.O.P. – Save Children Out Of Poverty.

Thus the SCOOP was formed. The aim was to have a hands-on energetic board consisting of an eclectic mix of people who either had relevant professional experience or who had spent time in the developing world. Most importantly we wanted people with altruistic traits who could lend something to the table that would either offer us valuable experience or contacts, or could help us keep costs to a minimum.

So far involved we have people who have already or presently work in the charity sector or have studied development; we have someone who worked in PR, a promoter, an auctioneer, a graphic designer, a youth worker, an actress/writer, two DJs and a musician!

So once we had the Board in place we got down to our projects. Using the orphanage as an example, we wanted to take on schools or orphanages that had already been founded, in other words there was already someone local who had shared the same vision as us, the vision that the welfare, education and happiness of children is the key to alleviating poverty, in the short term day to day, and in the long term also. Using the advent of the internet and the personal allegiance with the projects we would be able to keep close contact with the projects, finding out more and more about each and every child, and where their potential might lie. Thus led to the idea that there needs to be an organisation that recruits skilled volunteers that can teach children or young adults the specific skill, in the hope it will lead into employment.

We also want to be an organisation that is ultra inclusive by encouraging everyone from all walks of life to volunteer at home or abroad, and by using our SCOOP Group committees to make the decisions of the organisation, more of which a little later.

So the foundations were beginning to set. We had our team, we had momentum, we knew the type of projects we wanted to support and we realised that we were becoming a unique non-profit. We also realised that we were becoming living proof that today an NGO can be established without massive financial backing. We were working from home thus knocking out the huge overheads that come with an office. We were all playing to our strengths and putting on events close to our own hearts that were raising the funds we needed. We were using our combined wealth of contacts around the city to put them to use too. People were responding to the events, our cause and new people were getting involved all the time. In the last year we have hosted a number of concerts, club nights, art auctions & exhibitions, table quizzes, football tournaments etc and have raised just over €30,000.

This is not to say that there weren't pitfalls along the way, nor any low points or moments where our ignorance and inexperience were revealed, but we were honest and worked hard on gaining the

trust of those around us, especially those who would come to our events and give us their hard earned money, time and attention.

So regarding development and where the SCOOP fits in, well we simply want to give support, albeit financial or otherwise to schools and orphanages and other such grass root projects that already exist, or are in the development stages of founding. Then we need to develop a personal contact with the project and the people involved directly, without any middlemen, or if there are middlemen that they come from an existing and reputable NGO or people we know and trust. Again the internet and the easiness of travel today work for us invaluablely. These both allow us to keep in contact on almost a weekly basis so we can report back successes and failures to our followers, creating a real and tangible link between the SCOOP, the projects and our supporters.

Like many other organisations here today we see that education, in all its forms, the process of learning or the feeling of being involved that comes with it, as a key factor in development.

We see the importance of education and using local teachers to not only develop a school and but also to sow the seeds of a community. We also realise that each child is different and may not exactly be book smart and could be better of learning a skill, as this is also probably the most realistic avenue for gaining work in the developing world anyway. We want to have carpenters, plumbers, mechanics, artists etc volunteer to teach the children, or more appropriately the young adults. We would also like to be able to send some of the brighter children onto further education if at all possible. We have done all of these with our first project, the orphanage in Cambodia,



the Save Children In Asia Organisation, the SCAO. So far at the SCAO we have helped two of the boys learn to become mechanics and we have helped two of the teenagers go to college also. We also helped them set up a small sewing enterprise which Sath's wife works with some the young girls and this allows them raise funds themselves for food and clothes.

Though this was not the only work we helped Sath with. We helped him build a new brighter classroom that could hold more children, and even local adults now attend too.



The centre was then hit by a bad flood and we helped him rebuild the foundations and to make it flood proof and more secure. Then we helped him build two extra bedrooms, as he needed to separate the boys and girls as they grew older. And most recently we helped build another bedroom for more children, and a new front to the centre.

There are now almost 30 children living there, with a classroom that can hold up to 60-70 people attending. We also paid for school uniforms for the children and bicycles too.

We have made a huge difference to the centre and look forward to the future of it and all the children there.

Our second project is the School of Life in Varanasi in Northern India. This school is run by a local India named Sheelu who spends most nights finding street children who are living in dumps to survive and brings them to the school for medical attention, food and care.



The head teacher there is a German woman named Kati who is developing a more holistic approach to learning for the children. Every morning they take a Yoga class, then they have classes in Hindi and English then spend the rest of the day doing many different experiments like the concept of prisms and light or gravity where they are learning by their actions and experience. Kati also teaches local Indians how to teach and she is the only non Indian teacher there.

I found out about the School Of Life through a close friend of mine who had worked and lived there for 6 months and introduced me to it. After talking to him about their endeavours, we knew it was our second project. As fate would have it, when I got in touch with the founder, Josh O'Shea from Cork, they were actually on the verge of closing due to lack of funds. We began sending them funds and now they have become stable again, and Kati's teacher training has resumed. Our next plan is to help them build a new cleaner and safer residence for the children, this is about to begin in the next couple of weeks.



Our third project came after one of our Directors, Calvin took a trip to Uganda last July. He came across a small football academy that were playing on an uneven surface and all the boys (aged 5-14) were all using the same boots, shorts and shirts. For the last few months we've been working on writing up the constitution with them that will put the rules for the academy in place. Working with the UPA, the Ugandan Pioneers Association we can monitor where the funds are spent and the progress of the academy on our behalf. With the funds they are going to rent a new surface, line it, buy new goal posts and each child will have their own sports gear. It may not lead to the next Didier Drogba but it will certainly lead to a lot of fun for the kids, not to mention each one will own all their own gear. But more importantly it will help us begin a network of trust there for future projects. There is the possibility of a skate park as well as a school and other such youth centres for the future.

At home we also have begun a fourth project which focuses on getting teenagers from areas such as Clondalkin and Blanchardstown in Dublin engaged in fun youth workshops such as workshops in DJing, art, spray painting, acting, music production etc using a host of volunteers from Dublin.

But regarding international development we see ourselves as looking out for the little guy. That is focusing on children, their own development and education, and the people that work hard with their own vision to make this happen, and deserve the dig out. We already have a short list of 4 such schools in the developing world that we will take on as we progress ourselves and know from talking to those who have travelled in these countries that these schools and orphanages exist in abundance, maybe even some of the organisations present here have helped build them, but they could all benefit from our service.

As we take on more schools we also want to be taking on more volunteers. Thus we want to become and be recognised as the most inclusive non-profit around. We want people to realise that going to one of the schools can be a life changing experience in itself. Thus it's the volunteers call. We're simply the platform to allow you to become the change that these children need.

Regarding gaining new members we are going to continue promoting music and the arts in Ireland through our own venue which we're calling the SCOOP Arts Centre. At present we are working on getting a premises for the SCOOP Art Centre which will not only serve as the SCOOP office where people can come and become involved, or even to confront us about any issue but it will also be our own version of a charity shop, where funds are raised as a venue rental and through the promotion of the arts. We also want it to become a hub or centre for people to exchange ideas and positively and actively become involved. We want to use the space to host 'SCOOP Group' meetings; our committee meetings where anyone genuinely interested can participate and influence the decisions of the organisation, again helping us realise our vision of total inclusion.

We have many more ideas for the space too. We want to realise two programs, the first being our Skill Swap program.

With the Skill Swap program we want to match those who are willing to donate their skills and time, rather than their money, with people who wish to learn the certain skill. In return we ask for a donation to the organisation. Though how we really benefit is that we are creating our own skilled volunteer base that can either work at home or abroad.

The second is the Fashion Program we want to work with young designers and secondary school students who can use the space, and use unwanted clothes, or clothes left behind in venues in the city, and make them into something contemporary and sought after.

But the main point of the centre is that it is a blank canvas there for positive and inclusive action.

In the next few years we also want to appeal to Transition Year Students to begin a program where they set up their own social aware mini-charity, setting up a board and assigning positions such as fundraisers etc and they organise their own event and raise funds for their cause, or even for one of our schools. Then they work on creating a link between themselves and their cause or school, maybe they must find a Primary School Class that they can link with the class in the developing world where they send each other drawings or, if technology allows, they can become viral pen pals. But the point of the project is to get young people involved and aware that there are those children around the world who live an extraordinary life compared to how we live here in Ireland.

I guess I'm transgressing now, but this is what the SCOOP is becoming. It is becoming an inclusive hub for ideas and action for positive change, an endless list of possibilities. Whether we can translate all this into new members, and donors which will allow us to take on more schools and projects still remains to be seen. This is our own personal challenge as it is the challenge we all face. At the SCOOP, we have only begun our journey and are honoured to begin it in the presence you all here today, and to be a part of the hard work and successes you have laid before us, placing Ireland as a major force in the support of development.

Thank you