

Ending crisis, ending hunger: in conversation with WFP's Muhannad Hadi (WFP Regional Director for the Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe)

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Sachini: Welcome to the Development Policy Centre podcast. My name is Sachini Muller and I'm a Research Officer at the Centre. I'm very pleased today to be sitting down with Mr. Muhannad Hadi, the World Food Program's Regional Director for the Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe. Welcome, and thank you very much for coming.

Muhannad: Thank you.

Sachini: So to start off, maybe if you could tell us a little bit about your role and how you got into this type of work?

Muhannad: Well, basically, I'm the regional director, as you introduced me, and thank you for this opportunity, again. Basically, this is the only job I've had in my life. After I finished university, I joined humanitarian work, and I've been doing this job since 1990. So, that's pretty much the only job I've done. I always joke and say I've only done one interview in my life, which was in 1990. So, I'm wondering if I'm ever interviewed again for another job, what would happen. I'm too scared to think about it.

Sachini: It's a life of aid work! So one of the biggest crisis in your region at the moment is in Yemen. What challenges are you facing there at the moment?

Muhannad: Well, Yemen is one of the crises. Syria is another crisis. Iraq, Libya, Ukraine, and the neighboring countries of Syria. And it's unfortunate that each crisis has its own set of challenges. And it's really hard to say if it's a big crisis or small crisis, because how do you define big crisis? The sad part about it is do you define big crisis by the size of the suffering, by the number of people who are suffering?

But at the end of the day, it doesn't really make a difference to us. As long as there's one child, one girl, one boy, one woman, one elderly, anyone who is suffering, who is a victim of the crisis, a victim of war, that by itself is a big crisis to us. To see one child suffering is enough pain for all of us, and enough shame, actually, for the entire world.

We are living in this century, and we're still seeing people that are hungry. Not only that, but the number of hungry people are increasing, especially in the Middle East and North Africa. And why? It's because of manmade crisis. We can't blame nature for this. We can blame other human beings for this.

Sachini: Yes, very true. And a lot of them are conflict-based as well. But Yemen in particular has been quite protracted. And now we've got the cholera outbreak as well. Is the situation getting worse? And do you see an end in sight?

Muhannad: Well, the situation is definitely getting worse. I was there recently. Myself lived in Yemen in the 90s. I lived there for years. I know Yemen, I know Yemeni people. Yemeni people are kind, generous, hospitable people. I've really enjoyed living there. I actually lived there with my wife and kids when I was there, and it was a nice working arrangement duty station for me.

I enjoyed it very much, and I still miss Yemen, but I miss the old Yemen. When I lived there, there was no conflict, and people were not killing each other, when there was no cholera, there was no famine, when it was a country that even tourists went to. There were many European tourists, and even tourists from Australia sometimes made it. It was an attraction place in the Middle East.

Do I see an end to the crisis? By nature, I'm an optimistic person, and I can only afford to be optimistic. Doing my job, if I lose hope, then I lose focus. And I do hope that peace will come to Yemen soon. But as I see it today, I think we're still a long way. Yemen needs a political solution. Yemen needs an end to this conflict, an end to this war.

Whatever we're doing now at the World Free Program and other UN agencies and NGOs, what we're doing is we're just basically working with the results of the conflict, or the results of the failed politics, with the victims of this war. We're trying to help them, we're trying to give them hope. We're trying to nurse their wounds. Until a political solution is found, the only solution for Yemen is an end to this conflict, is an end to this war. And I don't see this end coming soon. But hopefully, we will see it sooner than later.

Sachini: Yeah, sure. Like you're saying, we do need a political solution, but what should the international community be focusing on in order to end the crisis? And what still needs to be done for us to get there?

Muhannad: Well, two things need to be done. There needs to be support to the political arm and to the political process, and we need to make sure that pressure is applied to both parties of the conflict to end this war and to come to a solution, to put the people up front, to put the interests of the people and the interests of the country up front. From my experience, there are no angels in war. People, they're only victims of the war.

So, what politicians need to do is to put pressure on the conflicting parties to put the interests of the people before their own interests to make sure that they end this war. This is the support to the political process. The Special Envoy is trying very hard, the UN Secretary General Special Envoy, Manual Bushiri, is really doing a great job in trying to help parties to end this conflict. But I don't think he has reached a solution yet.

The support any country can give is important, and especially a country like Australia; a key country in the international arena. Side by side, simultaneously, until a solution is found, and even after that, we need to support the humanitarian efforts. We need to support the efforts of the United Nations and the NGOs to make sure that we have the right financial

resources to feed the people, to make sure that they have access to safe drinking water, access to medical facilities, so we don't lose lives in cholera.

Cholera is a disease that can be treated. Death can be avoided in cholera. Death is not imminent in cholera. It can be avoided if people have access to the right medical facilities. And with that, we need two things as humanitarians. Again, we need political support to make sure that we have access to all the people, but we also need financial support to be able to provide the required food, medicines, water purification equipment, other necessities, also education.

Because when you don't—when kids lose out on education, you lose a generation. And the scary part about it now is when you lose a generation, when kids lose education, they become so vulnerable. And then they become an easy target for terrorist organizations, like Al-Qaeda and ISIS. You can only fight extremism with education. You can only fight it with an educated generation.

Sachini: Yes, wow, you've touched on a lot in that one answer. There are quite a few emergencies in that area of the world at the moment, in South Sudan as well. But some of them are getting very little global attention. Does it make your work harder, especially as you said you need funding to do the work, to get resources to the people that need it? If you don't have global attention, is it harder to get the resources?

Muhannad: Absolutely. As a matter of fact, Yemen, until recently, was called the forgotten crisis. And sometimes it's difficult to put an emergency, put a crisis on the humanitarian radar. Syria has been on the humanitarian radar for so long, and donors have been very generous. Now donors are engaging and supporting the Yemen crisis, which is good.

Australia, actually, is one of those countries. We appreciate what Australia has done. Australia has supported the Yemen crisis, Syria crisis, Iraq crisis. Australia is a country that supported even conflict prevention in Syria, even before the crisis, when they supported the World Food Program in addressing the drought crisis in the northeastern part of the country.

Yes, we have to work hard. We have to go the extra mile. We have to travel to capitols. Now we're trying to engage the private sector. We're trying to engage academia also, universities, to help us improve our performance, to find new, innovative ways of supporting the people.

Previously, we used to support people just by giving them dry food, which is a box of food which contains rice, pasta, chickpeas. Now, what we're doing is we're learning. We're finding other ways of assisting people. Refugees in Jordan, Syrian refugees in Jordan, and Lebanon, Turkey, other places, are actually getting a prepaid credit card. They have a MasterCard, they will do their own shopping.

This is a way where we are addressing the protection issue, where we are preserving the dignity of the people, making the people decide on their own. No longer are we dictating to a family what to eat. This is another way of promoting even the gender identity, where we make sure that the woman is part of the decision-making process in the household.

All of that needs a lot of work, it needs extra effort, and that's what we're doing. But we are lucky that we are doing—we are lucky that we are doing this job. This is a job that, no matter how tired you are, how much effort you put into it, a smile on the face of a kid when he gets his food basket, or a smile on the face of a parent when he knows that his credit card has been uploaded again for another voucher to do shopping, this smile makes it worthwhile.

Sachini: Makes it worth it. I guess you're not getting the amount of funding you need for these crises as well? I saw online there's a tracker that shows how much funding out of what you need, you've gotten. And earlier this month, when I had a look, Yemen only had 52 percent of the funding it needed, and Sudan only had 38 percent, which seems very low. If you don't have the money, how do you help these people? How does that lack of funding affect your ability to actually do the work you need to do?

Muhannad: Well it has, it affects the overall approach to the humanitarian work. But the ones who are most affected by this are the victims of the war. When we don't have all the required funding for Yemen, what happens? It's exactly what we're doing now. We're reducing the value of the ration that we give. That means people get less food than they need.

What does that mean? That means people have to resort to negative coping mechanisms. That means that people who have some source of funding, instead of buying nutritious food, they go and buy less nutritious food. That means that kids, instead of going to school, their parents take them out of school and put them on the streets to work and earn money. That means they subject them to different types of exploitation. That means that girls have to go and get married at an early age. It's a menu of challenges. It's a menu of negative coping strategies that the families have to do.

So actually, this is what happens, and this is what we see everywhere when we are unable to do that. But there's another danger too. We've learned the hard way that whenever humanitarian workers, whenever the UN and NGOs are unable to fill the humanitarian gap because of lack of funding or because of access or other reasons, there are people, evil people, waiting to do that.

A good example of this is ISIS. ISIS in Syria managed to go and fill the humanitarian gap that we couldn't. But that comes at a cost. ISIS has no respect. ISIS has no respect for humanitarian principles. Terrorists have no values, have no ethics. And that's what happens. When they see a vulnerable family, they go and give them the food, or medicine, or whatever they need. But what do they do then? They spread venom into the heads of the

children, to make sure that those kids will end up as terrorists in the future. This is the other danger.

So, there is an imminent, immediate consequence for the lack of funding, but there is future danger also for it. And that danger is not restricted to the conflict area. It's not restricted to Yemen, to Syria, or to the Middle East. Terrorism has no boundaries now. Terrorism is affecting all of us around the world. It's a danger that is affecting the entire globe. And we must stand together to fight it. And I really praise and appreciate the support that Australia is giving us in the Middle East to meet humanitarian needs.

Sachini: Yes. And as you said, Australia does contribute to these emergency appeals, we do give foreign aid. But in the last few years, Australian Aid has been scaled back quite a lot. Are we doing enough? And what more can we do, what more can the average person do when these issues are so big that one person, they can't really make a difference to such a big issue?

Muhannad: All of this makes a difference. Anything that we do eventually will make a difference. Because you have to take the collective efforts of all of us. Australia itself cannot support all the humanitarian needs of the world. Even if you take the humanitarian needs in Yemen and Syria alone, we're talking billions of dollars. We're not talking millions of dollars. The food needs in Syria is over a billion, and Yemen, likewise.

There is no one country that can support. Australia is part of the donor community that supports Yemen and other countries. So, it's a collective effort of all the countries. And that actually reflects on the generosity of the people, and here in Australia, it reflects on the generosity of the Australian people.

The other point is, you can't imagine, supporting the humanitarian work has a lot of benefits. It sends all the right signals. You have to imagine now with me. Just imagine that there is a kid living in Syria, or a woman in Yemen, and they get a bag of rice or wheat flour. It says, "Gift of the people of Australia, from Australia." Not only that the food—not only that this food would help them meet their requirements for that day, or for that month, but it sends a message with it.

It sends more than one message. It sends a message of hope, that we're with you, that the world is with you. But it also sends another message, that the generous people of Australia, share the same values as the good people of Syria. This is something important.

It's an extremely important message for people in conflict to know that other human beings in another part of the world far, far away from them, support them, that they share the same values, they understand what they're going through, and they're doing everything they can to support them. Those signals, those messages, really are very, very strong messages.

What people can do? People can support more. People can even speak to politicians and tell them that it is in the interest of Australia, it is in the interest of the entire world to support the humanitarian work. Hunger shames all of us, by the way. Hunger shames all of us as human beings, regardless of where we live, regardless of in which country we reside. It's important that we stick with each other as human beings. It's the difference between right and wrong. This is the message that sends.

What can Australia do? Australia is already helping us, and we're expecting more from Australia and Australian people, because we know how generous the Australian people are, and we know how much they care. But we also look forward to the political support of Australia. Australia is a key player in the international arena, and they have been supporting us, and we do count on their continued support.

Sachini: So, it's more about collective action. Even if one country can't make a difference, one person on their own can't make a difference, collective action is what gets us there?

Muhannad: Absolutely.

Sachini: I guess to end then, the sustainable development goals are also all about collective action. We all have to work together towards them. The second one is about ending hunger. Given that over the last two years, we've seen quite a large increase in the need for humanitarian aid, do you think that that second goal is achievable, to end hunger?

Muhannad: A conditional yes. Hunger can end if manmade crises end.

Sachini: Okay. Ending the conflicts?

Muhannad: Ending the conflicts, finding solutions, ending war. This is how we can—you can end hunger. No matter what you do, as long as there are crises, as long as there are displaced people, and as long as there are refugees as the result of an armed conflict, manmade conflict, you can never reach the hunger. You need people to be home. You can't—when lives and livelihoods of people are destroyed, you can't end hunger. Hunger can end. Hunger can end in our lifetime even, if we stop conflicts today.

Sachini: Excellent. Thank you very much for all your answers. Beautifully put. Is there anything else you'd like to add, anything that I didn't ask you about that you think is quite important in your work?

Muhannad: I think you've done a good job. Thank you very much.

Female: Your questions were really excellent.

Sachini: Thank you.