

Rethinking Humanitarianism

Episode 10

The Magic Wand Episode

Heba Aly

I am Heba Aly and this is Rethinking Humanitarianism. Over the course of season one of this podcast, we've tackled a number of issues. We've discussed the impact of COVID-19 on aid.

Danny Sriskandarajah, CEO, Oxfam Great Britain: *"We are facing, arguably the biggest humanitarian emergency that our generation has seen. And the response has been pitiful in many ways."*

Heba Aly

We've asked whether humanitarianism needs to be decolonised.

Tammam Aloudat, Senior Strategic Advisor, MSF Access Campaign: *"I hesitate to call the aid sector a colonial power, but I would comfortably call it a part of a colonial construct."*

Heba Aly

We've explored new financing models for emergency assistance.

Tara Nathan, Executive Vice President Digital Solutions for Development, Mastercard: *"Nowadays, we have such sophisticated digital technologies that enable me, sitting in my home in Brooklyn, to go onto my mobile wallet and connect someone sitting in a refugee camp in Azraq to receive any kind of funding that I want to."*

Heba Aly

We've unpacked what it would take to reform UN agencies.

Hesham Youssef, Senior Fellow, United States Institute of Peace: *"I didn't see political will, I didn't see political will, either in the member states, not even in the UN organisations that resisted calls coming for change."*

Heba Aly

We've spoken to the heads of international NGOs and senior diplomats, to donors and aid workers in the field, to people from outside of the system altogether, about how they see the future of the sector.

Michael Koehler, Deputy Director General of the European Commission's Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations: *"The future of humanitarian aid will be decided not in the traditional area of humanitarian aid, in the proper sense of the word, but rather in this grey zone between humanitarian and development."*

Sarah Margon, Director of Foreign Policy Advocacy, Open Society-US: *"Diplomacy is no longer just about government to government relations. Diplomacy is about engaging communities and different groups."*

Paul Currion, Founder of Disberse: *"I do not think the traditional aid industry has a future. To some extent, I don't think it should have a future."*

Heba Aly

This is a show about ideas, and so, inevitably, we don't always land with a clear direction at the end of every conversation. And our aim isn't to come away with any hard and fast solutions. But we do want to try to bring together what we've heard over the last nine episodes of Rethinking Humanitarianism.

As listeners will know well, in each episode we ask our guests for a multimillion-dollar idea to improve the humanitarian aid sector. If they could wave a magic wand, with no consideration for money or politics, what would they change?

So, today, as we close out Season 1 of the podcast, we're going to put some of those ideas to people who may just be able to do something about them.

Finding those people hasn't been easy, because – I mean – who actually has the power to change the humanitarian system? No single person or institution really can and that's part of the problem, right? Every player controls their little part of the puzzle and it takes all of them doing "their part" for change to happen at any scale.

So in our attempt to represent each of those slices of the puzzle – or a few of them anyway – we've brought together senior leaders from the philanthropic sector, from the UN, and from politics.

Valerie Bemo manages the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's emergency response team. She's a native of Cameroon, she's a physician by training and has worked as a humanitarian herself before joining the Foundation. She is joining us bright and early from Seattle. Welcome to the podcast, Valerie.

Valerie Nkamgang Bemo

Thank you. I'm pleased to be here. A bit sleepy, but I'm happy to be here.

Heba Aly

We're also joined by Raouf Mazou, Assistant High Commissioner for Operations at the UN Refugee Agency. A native of Congo-Brazzaville, Raouf is a UNHCR lifer, so to speak, having had quite a long career at the agency. He's also been involved in some of UNHCR's work to try to develop more sustainable models for refugee response. And he is in Geneva. Hello, Raouf.

Raouf Mazou

Hello, Heba. Very pleased to be with you.

Heba Aly

And in the last episode, we promised you to have some ministers on the show, and today I am happy to deliver on that promise. Per Olsson Fridh is the newly appointed Minister for International Development Cooperation in Sweden. He just took office this month actually and he is joining us from Stockholm. Welcome, Per.

Per Olsson Fridh

Thank you. It's indeed a pleasure to join you.

Heba Aly

So this season finale is diverging from our usual format. Instead of asking you for ideas, we're going to put them to you. In Episode 2, we heard from Jessica Alexander, a former aid worker, author of a memoir about her time in the aid industry called "Chasing Chaos", and also the editor of The New Humanitarian's Rethinking Humanitarianism series. Here's her big idea for improving humanitarian aid.

***Jessica Alexander:** Imagine if every political leader, whether it's a senator or a parliamentarian, a president, a prime minister, before they start office, they have to sleep in a refugee camp for up to a week, right? They have to sleep under the tents, they have to eat the food that's provided, that we slap our labels on. It can be overseas, but it also can be, you know, a leader in Greece living in Moria camp, it can be a president in the US living on the US-Mexico border. But anyway, they need to experience what it's like to be a vulnerable person. And I know that that may seem tokenistic just for a week, but I think it can do a lot to open people's eyes to what that means.*

Heba Aly

I want to start with you, Per. You're new in office, which might be just the right moment to ask you: Is this something you would consider doing?

Per Olsson Fridh

I think the whole idea of putting yourself in someone else's shoes, trying to experience or at least feel some small part of what a person in a situation where they're very much left behind,

as we hear in this idea, I mean, I think that is a need. As a decision-maker, if you don't have any relation to people whom you are here to serve, you will end up with the wrong decisions. And the world is increasingly polarised, so we are less than before able to actually capture what it's like to live in a completely different circumstance than ourselves. As a Minister for International Development Cooperation in charge of Swedish humanitarian aid, I need to visit and talk and meet with people. In my previous capacities, I've tried to do so, and that is not only for me to understand, but for me to be able to tell their story, and to share their story, and to build support for a continuous sort of generous, you know, aid budget – the fight we need to take in parliament's to try to foster global solidarity using those stories as a narrative. I hope to travel to refugee camps, to border regions, to conflict zones, to experience that more, to get more of those stories to share. You know, if every prime minister or president or parliamentarian in the world did that, I think we would have more solidarity and we will have more and better decisions – we will have a greater understanding that the world is not us and them, it is actually just us.

Valerie Nkamgang Bemo

This is a great idea. But it should not be just at the beginning. We see people coming with good intentions. And it should not be just a politician, all of us who are in positions of power, who are in a position of decision-making, who has influence, should be able to do that often. Maybe not necessarily go and sleep all the time, but at least go back to the people you serve, trying to sit with them, understanding. But more important, I think is about how you listen to them from your heart and make sure that you actually see what they are thinking and you actually can do something about that. When we're talking about 300,000 people in shelter, going there, talking to one person – not a number, it changes your perspective. And that is essential, not for just when you start because things change, but constantly find the way to always connect with the people you serve.

Raouf Mazou

Something that we have found extremely effective also has been to encourage the participation of the refugees in peace processes. Because often the issue is that those who are negotiating the peace process do not really understand and know the consequences of the conflict. And the importance of peace for those who are in refugee camps. Most recently, it was done in the context of South Sudan and it was very, very useful. So that's clearly something to make sure that the decision-makers understand what they are negotiating, or what they're talking about, is really crucial.

Heba Aly

I think the three of you are probably very positively inclined to do this kind of engagement. But Per, you're from the Green Party, how do you convince members of government who might be on the other side of the spectrum to engage in this kind of way?

Per Olsson Fridh

Yes, in parliament, for sure, we have parties who want to, you know, to decrease Swedish funding for development aid for example, and so on. So, I mean, yes, I think..

Heba Aly

Those are the people that need to sleep in the refugee camp.

Per Olsson Fridh

Yes. And I think you're spot on that, of course, I mean everyone in this discussion and who are listening to this podcast, for example, are probably very much also engaged in humanitarian issues, and are very much willing to reach out, and to sit down, and to learn, and to develop, and to be better at what we do. But what about the rest? What about the growing number of people who are turning more to nationalistic or authoritative methods of dealing with conflict and who are not eager to solve global challenges with joint solutions? And I think that is maybe the trick question here.

Heba Aly

Valerie, I'd like to turn to you next. In our first episode, we spoke to Danny Sriskandarajah, CEO of Oxfam GB, and his multimillion-dollar idea was a global fund for social protection.

***Danny Sriskandarajah:** There's been increasing talk about universal basic income, about social protection floors. And I think, you know, one of the lessons I hope from COVID is that we do need to get serious about what we, as humans, offer each other as a basic minimum – and we need to fund it. And it won't cost much.*

Heba Aly

I'm conscious that the humanitarian team at Gates Foundation is a very small part of the overall Foundation. But is this the kind of thing that foundations like the Gates Foundation might consider funding? Do you think there's an appetite out there, particularly in the wake of COVID, to invest more seriously and systematically in social safety nets?

Valerie Nkamgang Bemo

My question is who deals with the fund? Because we have a lot of funds. Who owns it? Who is accountable? Who decides? And that is the big issue for me. It's not so much about the fund. It's about creating another big creation that is the North deciding what the South needs to be. And for me, just by that idea, I will pause it because it's just not the right way to go. It will be, how do we make sure that people – themselves and their government – have their voice to decide what they want and to come and talk to it, versus creating another gigantic fund. And Mazou, sorry, we don't want another UN tool or another big sacred, big thing to decide again for the people. This is another form of colonisation that we're actually creating. I don't think this is something that the Gates Foundation will want to be doing. And on top of that, if you look at the

high humanitarian amount of funds, the Foundation in general, even not just for humanitarian, is just a small drop in the bucket. And not the big money, although...

Heba Aly

Well, if you look at how much the Foundation has propped up things like GAVI [Vaccine Alliance], it is a major player.

Valerie Nkamgang Bemo

it is a major player, but if you look at how much the dollars, we are not the bigger player, you may be the voice, but not necessarily the big bank into GAVI, actually. Yes, we created, and that is where the Foundation's call is catalytic, but it needs to make sense for creating another fund for safety net. I'm not sure about the idea.

Heba Aly

Raouf?

Raouf Mazou

I mean, when I heard that idea, during the podcast, I found it a good idea. The very notion of social safety net is something which during COVID everybody has understood around the world the importance of. That social safety net does not necessarily need to be funded by whatever foundation. A social safety net normally is funded through taxes and the rest in a given country. And I would say that the private sector could actually help countries. And there are actually quite a few countries which as a result of COVID started thinking about social safety nets in a completely different way. So a social safety net, yes, not necessarily funded from a big fund managed by the UN or not. But a fund that would actually be linked to the respective economies. Often, humanitarian assistance is a substitute for that, which is a problem, and which is not sustainable.

Per Olsson Fridh

I think the role of development cooperation here is foremost. I think making sure that there's capacity-building, institution-building so that, you know, countries can manage these social protection systems for themselves, for the best for their population. Our role there is to work with a partner country in this way so that there's also enough domestic tax revenue and so on so that they can themselves, you know, manage these systems. There is one connection to humanitarian, well it's that we are also increasingly working with cash based transfers in the humanitarian world, because we see that that is very efficient – that would be the start of what could then be taken over by development actors, and building on something that could lead into a social protection system or social safety nets, which is governed by the country when development has gone so far that that is possible.

Heba Aly

Valerie, you mentioned the lack of interest in having the UN managing another big fund. Raouf, I want to share with you a couple of ideas that relate to this question of the UN and its role in humanitarian response. In Episode 4 it was the early days of a conflict between the Ethiopian government and rebels in the northern Tigray region, and we heard from the Muthoni Wanyeki, Head of the Open Society Foundation's Africa programme, about the response to what was then an unfolding crisis.

Muthoni Wanyeki: *“There are already what 36-37,000 Ethiopians who fled over into Sudan, everyone's in massive preparation. At the community level, the response of ordinary Sudanese across the border, who have nothing, who are devastated by conflict themselves, who have only just the other day sent their leadership to Khartoum to join the government, the transitional government. And yet, you know, you see the Ethiopian-Sudanese friendship society, sort of, mobilising, you see the University of Khartoum collecting donations and sort of linking with community-based groups in the east to provide support. And those are the things, I think, that will save us in the end. What will typically happen and what is about to happen is that the UN planning and all of their international subcontractors are going to kick in very soon. What gets crowded out by that is this community-level response.*”

Heba Aly

In that same episode, we also heard from Paul Currion, a so-called recovering aid worker who founded a company called Disperse which used blockchain to provide a platform for more transparent and accountable financing in aid. And here's his idea of networked humanitarianism.

Paul Currion: *“The network society, the network humanitarian model is to distribute, to decentralise, to create modular organisations rather than mammoth organisations. But it's also thinking about, well, what is the real resource that we're talking about here? If we're talking about how local communities respond to aid, how local communities respond to disaster – the way they respond is they use the resources of the network society. That's how they organise their own responses. And so what becomes important is not just the material resources of aid, but the information resources, about understanding who is doing what where, where resources are, about being able to collaborate effectively. There's a number of examples of this: Tahrir Square during the Arab Spring, when a Twitter account basically organised the resourcing for a field hospital to treat the protesters that were injured, up to and including \$40,000 worth of medical equipment. I see the empowerment of communities, of individuals, by network technologies as being the single most important shift that we as aid organisations could be supporting.”*

Heba Aly

These are a couple of examples of the way in which these two worlds – the popularly organised and locally-led and networked model of aid, and the more institutional version – don't really

interact with one another. And the UN-led response often tends to steamroll its way over whatever already exists at the local and popularly organised level. Raouf, how do you see UNHCR responding to this call, to respond to crises in a way that leaves room for these other players and builds on what they're doing?

Raouf Mazou

All around the world, if you ask refugees, the first people who provide support are not institutions, governments, it's people. And that needs to be protected, it needs to be maintained. Now, we also know that often refugees arrive in places where people are quite impoverished and are sacrificing the little resources that they have to support. So, they need to be supported. The hosts need to be supported. And this is what the Global Compact on Refugees, which was affirmed by governments in December 2018 is about. The shift and the change from what we're doing before to what we're talking about now – all together, not just the UN partners, governments, everybody – is to say let's have a model where we acknowledge the support that the host populations are providing, we reinforce the host population. And then instead of having refugees in camps, or refugees being provided with assistance for years and years, let's try and move towards self-reliance for these refugees. So if you take a case like the Sudan or DRC, that means that we actually invest in the communities that are receiving refugees. We look at the capacity that they have, schools that they have, health centres that they have. We reinforce, we invest, and then the refugees benefit from the services that are there. And once the situation is such that they can return, these services are there and will continue to benefit the hosts. So that's on what Muthoni was saying, she is very right. And definitely we are moving now in that direction as an international community. But again, it's not just the UN, it is the governments, it is the private sector, it is the refugees themselves, it is the hosts.

On the point that was made by Paul, I don't think we should necessarily consider that it's one or the other. I would say it's both. Social media has definitely helped a lot, supporting and providing a framework to the natural solidarity that people are expressing. What we're seeing now is that it's easier to share information, it's easier to communicate – somebody has arrived here and this person needs a blanket, needs this or that, and somebody through social media, will be able to say, 'this, I can provide'. So this citizen type of response absolutely needs to be there, absolutely needs to be protected. We are providing support and assistance to these organisations, we work with these organisations. So we are definitely moving to a place where we make much greater use of what social media allows us to do, in terms of providing information fast, in terms of saying what is available, and in terms of ensuring that it is not just the big institutions providing support, but also the citizens, as they do.

Heba Aly

Per, I want to come to you because the next idea sticks with the theme of the UN and the role of the UN. It comes from Antonio Donini in Episode 2. Antonio had a long career at the UN as head among other things of the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in Afghanistan, before turning to research and writing, and he proposed merging UN agencies into one big UN agency.

Antonio Donini: *“I think a minimal thing would be some consolidation of the system. I mean, why do we have this salami-slicing machine where if you're outside a country, you're coordinated by UNHCR and if you're inside the country you're coordinated by OCHA. Let's merge IOM, UNHCR, and OCHA and have one major UN humanitarian agency – it would be economies of scale. Maybe you could throw in bits of UNICEF and bits of WFP.”*

Heba Aly

Changing UN mandates has been a very popular topic in reform circles. And we cited earlier in the series, a forum held by the humanitarian network ALNAP in 2015 in the lead-up to the World Humanitarian Summit, where the most popular recommendation by far among some 300 participants was for the UN Secretary-General to reform UN agency mandates and roles to better meet the basic humanitarian needs of affected people. And yet no one on the political side, and this came up during our episode about multilateral reform, has dared to touch this topic. How do you feel about it, number one? And where do you see openings at this political level that you operate on to reopen that conversation?

Per Olsson Fridh

I'm not sure I completely agree with the fact that it hasn't been touched by the political level, because what we've seen in the last year is a UN reform of historical size, where we've established the the Resident Coordinators, we have forced the agencies to fund some programmes to act as one on the country level. Sweden has very much been a driver for this reform. And I think during the COVID-19 pandemic, we've seen the results of this. That the UN is much more coordinated now on a country level than before. And we see heads of agencies, funds, and programmes speaking out much more, you know, unified. And that is, I think, a reform trying to achieve what I think this suggestion is trying to achieve. Then the different agencies have different mandates, and that enables them to act in different contexts. And I'm not necessarily thinking that that is a bad thing. But what I've experienced myself, for example on the Venezuela-Colombian border, is that we've seen different organisations with different plans, working on the same, very small geographical area, and not very coordinated: OCHA for example, UNHCR, IOM. And of course, as a donor, as a partner to these institutions, we have to push them to be more, you know, to synchronise plans and to work more in a coordinated manner. And that's an area where we still need a lot of progress. To merge these agencies into one, not so sure that that is going to be a more fast-moving, you know, easy to govern agency. But I think the UN reform on the other hand, having a Secretary General appoint Resident Coordinators who are in charge of what's going on in the country, I think that is a reform that is already given fruit.

Heba Aly

Raouf, I'm sure you have opinions about merging with WFP and other UN agencies.

Raouf Mazou

You can always say that you want to have a huge and big institution, big UN agency. But it's better to have modular small organisations working better together. Saying that you want to merge all organisations and avoid mandates. Mandates are useful for accountability, if they are used properly – because you clearly tell organisations, 'you are accountable and you're responsible for this specific activity'. The Secretary-General brings, once a week, all the heads of agencies around the table for about two hours or so. And this is clearly a place where a lot of discussions are taking place – key discussions on topical issues with decisions that are being made. So definitely – and I would agree with Per – that there is progress that has been made in making sure that organisations work much, much better together. Of course, there is still a lot to do. And we have to continue that. And we have to also make sure that it's not just the UN, it is the private sector, it is the government, which should provide asylum, receive refugees, provide them land and the rest. So it's really making sure that you get all the partners together.

Valerie Nkamgang Bemo

I agree there has been evolution. But I also agree with the proposition that it's a bit too slow and not enough, and it's something that needs to be done more. If you look at how the UN was created after World War Two, the situation has changed completely. We are in a different era, we're in a different type of world. Now this is to say, okay, bring them all together, that I think is important to really go back to say, how do we organise? I know some organisations are trying to decentralise a little bit from headquarters, like UNHCR, moving a bit more responsibility to the field etc. It's painful. But I think, in addition to the UN, all of us have to do thinking though. I come from the humanitarian sector, I've done stuff that like, maybe it should not be me going to do some of these. Maybe we should be looking at more the people themselves. How do we put them at the centre? And I think, to me, that is the fundamental piece of the reform that needs to be done, because you can reform the UN any way you want, but who sits at a table is still the most important. If you have an emergency and then the OCHA coordination meeting is only the international NGO and the UN sitting at the table and the conversation is still made in English when the local people are not sitting – that is all the problem, then is more about how not just the UN, but how also the humanitarian sector sees ourselves as the saviour, instead of seeing us just as a player. And the people themselves are the essence. And that, for me, is more the reform we need than just the UN.

Per Olsson Fridh

I completely agree with Valerie and her point here. What limits us to uphold humanitarian values is not the lack of coordination between different agencies. But we see increasingly how humanitarian interventions are very politicised. And we see that humanitarian actors are not given access to areas where the biggest needs are. And this is not the fault of the agencies, but the fault of political leaders around the world who doesn't respect international humanitarian law, is not willing to give access to agencies so that they can fulfill their mandate. And I think this is a bigger threat to a successful humanitarian operation than the fact that we have a number of different agencies and organisations, institutions that work parallel in the field.

Heba Aly

Your point on coordination not being the core of the issues is well taken. I think the series, and the wider reflection going on within the humanitarian sector more broadly, does tend to be insular at times, and looking at what the sector can do and thinking very much that – as Valerie said – the sector is the centre of the story. But the point around coordination has come up pretty repeatedly over the course of the series. And I'd like to move on to another idea, and maybe I'll put it to you, Per, first: We heard in our last episode from two senior government donors, one from the European Union, and the other from Ireland, complaining a lot about a lack of cohesion – as they saw it – between humanitarian and development arms: another example of a coordination challenge. And what I found really interesting is that if you talk to a lot of NGOs, they're frustrated by the fact that donors fund them in ways that aren't long term, aren't sustainable, aren't coherent. And then you talk to the donors, and they say, 'well, it's not our fault. It's the politicians' fault because we're working within the systems that we have and those systems are what's really handcuffing us'. So I'd like to you take a listen to the views of Michael Koehler, who's the Deputy Director of the European Commission's Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid arm, ECHO:

Michael Koehler: *“The real challenge is that all together – and this is not only true for donors, this is also true, I think, for the United Nations and for many big NGOs – all of us we're spending much too much time with coordination, and overcoming artificially created barriers that we wouldn't need to spend time and energy on if the structures were different. But I'm afraid I have to be reborn in order to live that scenario. Let's say destiny had it that I went into humanitarian aid. If I was in a ministry of finance, I could, then I could perhaps try to change the system. But it's what it is. And we have to make the best of it.”*

Heba Aly

Here, he's talking about the artificial barriers between humanitarian and development aid that make it hard for humanitarians to give long-term funding to protracted crises. And I was really surprised to hear that he didn't feel empowered to change that himself. He felt it was a political issue that was out of his hands. We heard the same reference to the need for political will from Catherine Bertini earlier in the series, the former head of the World Food Programme. How much appetite is there to change the system at the political level to make the bureaucracies function better? And what would it take for you, as minister in this role, to really want to open up that Pandora's Box?

Per Olsson Fridh

I mean, I will take every chance I can to open that Pandora's Box because to me this is a question on how we fund, and I think we need to significantly increase levels of flexible and multi-year funding to agencies and institutions, both in development and in humanitarian. Meaning, we don't earmark multi-year funding to our partners, we allow them to act swiftly, when it's needed, where it's needed, and in the best way possible. If we're serious about, you know, we want the institutions, we want agencies to break barriers, to not work in silos, we have to stop funding them in silos. And I speak very often to colleagues saying, hey, look, you need

to un-earmark, you need to be much more flexible. If you want WFP or UNHCR to be more flexible, and how to, you know, to be more preventative or anticipatory and coordinate themselves with IOM and others, you know, then fund them in ways that allow them to act in the best proper way, in order to do so. And I think that is a case that I bring to the table as often as I can. And it's not a Pandora's Box, you know, in the way that we know what's inside. We know we have all the evidence that flexible funding is much more efficient. And I hope colleagues around the world would, you know, increasingly, consider moving into the un-earmarked landscape because it's, you know, it's much more efficient.

Heba Aly

Sticking to the topic of how donors fund. Valerie, in Episode 5 we heard from Sema Genel, who's the Executive Director of a Turkish NGO called Support to Life. She's also the chair of the NEAR Network of Global South NGOs that are trying to flip the switch, as you were suggesting earlier, around who's leading these efforts in humanitarian response.

***Sema Genel:** "I would love to see locally designed, locally mobilised, and locally owned funding mechanisms in each country. Because this would be a system driven and shaped by the great diversity of actors at the local level at the country level, and would present a more dignified way of allocating resources to where they really need to go. In one of your episodes, you had mentioned the metaphor of a tree where change in the aid system has up to now only meant trimming the leaves and the branches and not really addressing the structural roots. The tree itself we definitely have to trim. But it's more about planting more trees in different parts of the world, especially where disaster risks are high."*

Heba Aly

You work very closely, Valerie, as part of your core mandate with local organisations. That falls under a kind of capacity-building stream of your work. And then in your response funding, you do often channel funding because it's urgent and you need the kind of scale into larger organisations like UNHCR and Save the Children. Would you consider re-channelling that money into these kinds of local pooled funds instead?

Valerie Nkamgang Bemo

I think she's right, that there are a lot of ways to harness, like you said, the funding at the country level. And there's a lot of funding there. There are possibilities to get the funding. As you mentioned, our emergency preparedness is actually focused on local and national institutions in the different countries to support them to strengthen their capacity. And we have been evolving. For example, in 2020, when we look at the funding that we made, even for relief, it is usually international, but we're doing an effort to start giving more and more to the local and national institutions. And we realised that we were 25 percent of our relief fund – not the capacity-strengthening or preparedness. The relief fund, we had 25 percent that was given to local and national institutions, including governments. Because of COVID, we work with ministries of

health, we work with local organisations, and we aim to do even better in the next few years. And I think what we're trying to do is to link the preparedness, because the ones we start funding are the ones we have been investing in for some time, to help them have the capacity and be able to do – because at the end I'm accountable as well. I have stewardship for funding that I need to have the minimum quality that we have been invested in some of our organisations, and it's started showing the fruits because now we can give them funds directly. One of the organisations in Central America is a network of 100 plus NGOs. We have been working with them for a long time – it takes time – almost eight, nine, 10 years. And the good result is that they started from being an expenditure of responsibility. That means that it's so complicated to give them funding. Now, they are affiliated now... and that means that we can give them a rapid response grant. That took time, it took time to get them to work in the system. And I think we need to do more and more, have an intentionality to work with them when there isn't even an emergency – identify them, prepare them, work with them, and set the walk. We actually believe that they have the capacity and they can do that. We are not building their capacity. We are just strengthening their way of going so that they can actually harness more funds.

Heba Aly

In Episode 7, we heard from Tammam Aloudat, who is a Syrian doctor who works with MSF, Médecins Sans Frontières. And he presented his vision for how to address what he considered a colonial construct in the way humanitarian aid is structured. Here's his idea around how to reform the leadership and the governance of humanitarian organisations.

Tammam Aloudat: *“There's no reason or purpose for the massive concentration in Europe for the leadership of humanitarians. I'm not going to pretend that sending all the headquarters to Africa is going to automatically solve the problem, or to the Global South. But having an absolutely hierarchical system where in all humanitarian need, where the bosses sit in a Western capital and the, you know, labour sits in the South is unfeasible. There are ways where you can: have more representation; have people unionise and be part of the decisions of their organisations – from biggest decision to the accountability of their managers; have country officers, rather than be reporting to the middle manager that reports to the boss, have them be federated, and have a, you know, a democratic representative system whereby they have as much voice as the capitals have.”*

Heba Aly

He also made another point in the podcast, which was that people of colour “make it” to the top when they act, in his words, ‘whiter than the white people’. Raouf, you come from Congo-Brazzaville, as I mentioned, I would venture to guess that you are one of the people that Tammam has described as perfectly eloquent, able to express yourself bilingually in many languages, and having to fit the model as it has been kind of structured in order to reach the high levels that you did. Where is there scope, do you think for UNHCR, as an example, to evolve its leadership, its governance, and its ability to be more inclusive? It is, of course, an

organisation, like most UN agencies, led by a white man from Geneva. How do you flip the leadership and governance model?

Raouf Mazou

I really enjoyed the episode on decolonisation. I think a lot of the important points were raised, but the issue for me is more than an issue of governance, it's an issue of what are you doing as a humanitarian actor. In a number of contexts, you basically have a refugee sitting in a camp for 30 years receiving humanitarian assistance for 30 years. So there is dependency. And what I would say, and when there was reference earlier to humanitarian assistance being a colonial construct, there is an element of dependency that is there, which we need to move away from. And the way to move away from that dependency is to make sure that people become self-reliant. So, for me, the key thing is making sure that we get people off dependency, and we try to make sure that we normalise their life as fast as possible. Second thing I would like to say is that – and we've seen that in UNHCR – power is not necessarily where you think it is. You may think that power in a UNHCR context is in Geneva. Especially in situations of fast moving emergency, it is the person who received the refugee, the person who decides and devises the programme in the field who is an extremely important person. We have 557 offices around the world, which is a fairly high number by UN standards. Valerie made reference earlier to the fact that we've also created regional offices. The reason why we started that process is that if you want to achieve solutions, which are in general involving a number of countries, you need to be present in the region. And the solution is found in the region. You need to find people at the regional level who are there. So there is an important role there. So it's clear that if you look also at the funding of our organisation, we are funded through voluntary contributions. We have about 10 countries who probably cover probably 80 percent of our funding. So it does influence, a lot, our action. But I would say, if you want to find a solution to a number of the points that you've raised, you have to look at issues as a whole. There is, indeed, a need to fund activities in a different way. We need to make sure that we do not keep humanitarian situations dragging on forever. And we definitely need to make sure that we have greater diversity at all levels of management. And this is definitely something that as an organisation, not just UNHCR but the UN generally speaking, are conscious of and working a lot to evolve.

Heba Aly

But are the ideas to federate, to unionise, to really give voice in a structured way feasible? Is that something you're discussing within UNHCR?

Raouf Mazou

The main objective is to have structures which are geared towards moving towards self-reliance of refugees or IDPs.

Heba Aly

But self-reliance is a different issue than diversity and representation in the management of the aid organisations.

Raouf Mazou

What our purpose is is to make sure that we are structured in a manner that is geared towards solution, and making sure that you have, at the place where refugees are, people who understand the context in which the refugees are, and make sure that they can communicate with all levels as appropriate. And if you do have in Cox's Bazar tomorrow, a situation where the manager, for whatever reason, believes that he or she needs to speak to the High Commissioner, the person will do it. What I would say is that, for me, the most important thing is to be structured as an organisation in a manner that helps us achieve solutions – meaning to have people who can speak to various countries, countries of origin, countries of asylum, the regional approach that we have. That's one thing. And the second thing is to have people who can look at the refugee situation and set up programmes that get the refugee off the dependency in which he or she is, meaning working with the government, working with local organisations to make sure that the refugees are included in the society where he or she is. So that's the vision, and that's how we're trying to organise ourselves and evolve as an organisation.

Heba Aly

But I just want to clarify and make sure I'm understanding you right. Are you saying that we should be pragmatic about diversity, in that diversity should be a means to an end in having people who are locally attuned enough to find the right solution will let you be more effective? Because I think what Tammam is trying to get at with his idea is separate from a solutions orientation. I think he very much sees diversity and inclusion as an end in itself. And having people who are affected by these aid programmes, involved in the governance of those aid programmes, having the staff of these aid programmes – which are largely people of colour – represented in management and in governance. And I think that's quite different than the way you're talking about the value of diversity.

Raouf Mazou

The importance of having the people who are affected by programmes being part of the decision-making. That for me is a fact, and that's something that through community-based organizations, through the way our colleagues work with the persons who are affected, that's something that is then we need to do more of course, but that's a fact. There is no way you can decide what is best for somebody without having a conversation and making sure that there is full agreement. Actually, a person who should determine what is best for him or for her. So that's one thing. Diversity in itself around the world is an end in itself. We must make sure in all the ways we operate and we work that we ensure that there is diversity to make sure that the views, understandings, beliefs, strengths of everybody are taken into consideration.

Valerie Nkamgang Bemo

I think the question and the topic about diversity is essential. For some of us who have come from the underprivileged to be in position, we also have a role in the way that we have power,

we have privilege, and how do we use our power and privilege to make sure that voices are at the table? I agree with you, Raouf, that is not always about the top, the person leading, but it is still important to have diversity. Who sits at the table is as important – what decisions are made. All organisations, we have to make an effort to really decentralise the power dynamic, not just so much of who's always in the region now, but who leads and who makes decisions. This is essential and we will not make the next step unless we are intentional. And we who have power, who are privileged, what role do we play? Sometimes, we are the worst enemy of that. And I think it's a challenge with a lot of us. But it's actually an important piece that we should all take a position on that.

Heba Aly

We're going to have to leave it there. We've covered a lot of ground. And if I'm to try to summarize, it sounds like the idea of a global fund for social protection has some proponents but others are worried about how it work. Having politicians sleep in a refugee camp – all for it, but need to convince some of those on the right side of the spectrum. Merging UN agencies seems to me off the table. And federating or unionising the staff of aid agencies, I'm not seeing that the sector is quite ready for that just yet. I have to thank all of you for accepting to have been put in the position to speak on behalf of the humanitarian system. And before we close, and I'm very sorry to do this, but I do have a question for you, minister, that I promised my team I would ask. They think you're the best dressed MP in the world, and they want to know, which tailor makes your suits?

Per Olsson Fridh

Well, thank you. I think I have to take that as a compliment.

Heba Aly

It is, they're very, very picky about their humanitarian fashion.

Per Olsson Fridh

Yeah. I don't have a specific tailor. No, I don't. I try to pick and consume as sustainably as possible. Meaning that most part of my wardrobe is vintage or second hand buys. My best suit is something I inherited from my grandfather. So I'm thinking also that you know, if I buy a suit, someday my children could wear it as well. And I think that guides me more than any specific brand or tailor.

Heba Aly

Very Scandinavian answer that is.

Per, Raouf, Valerie, thank you all so much for taking part in this finale of Season 1 of the Rethinking Humanitarianism podcast.

Per Olsson Fridh

It was a pleasure, indeed it was a great, great conversation. Thank you very much for having me.

Raouf Mazou

Thank you very much Valerie, and thank you Heba.

Valerie Nkamgang Bemo

Thank you. It was a pleasure being here. I can't wait for Season 2.

Heba Aly

This brings to a close Season 1 of Rethinking Humanitarianism. Thank you to all of those who made this series possible, both at The New Humanitarian and at our partner, the Center for Global Development. Merryn Lagaida helped conceptualise the podcast and did a lot of the work behind the scenes in reaching out to guests and preparing clips and scripts. Whitney Patterson and Stephanie Donohue did the audio editing. Sean Bartlett and Matt Crook helped with the promotion. And Rose Warden, Patrick Saez, Ben Parker, and Jessica Alexander supported some of the research and content that went into the episodes.

Of course, a big thank you to my former co-host, Jeremy Konyndyk. And to all of you for listening.

We did think we could fill a gap by providing a forum for deeper conversation and debate about the way humanitarian aid is conceived of and delivered. But, to be honest, we didn't expect such a resounding response to this podcast. We have been so encouraged by our listeners' engagement and reactions to the podcast, and I really want to thank everyone who has written in with thoughts and messages of support.

We are going to take a short hiatus while we plan what's next, and we'll be back in the spring with Season 2 of the Rethinking Humanitarianism podcast. We will have a new co host, and I'll leave that to your imagination for now.

In the meantime, if you're worried about withdrawal symptoms, check out a new podcast featuring a selection of The New Humanitarian's articles in audio format. Search for TNH Audio Reads in your podcast app or head to our website for more.

Thank you so much for listening to the Rethinking Humanitarianism podcast. It's been such a pleasure to host this series and see you in Season 2.