



### Season 3. Episode 3: Navigating the Aid Front Lines with Head of OCHA's UAE office Sajeda Shawa | DevelopmentAid Dialogues

This podcast is sponsored by [developmentaid.org](https://developmentaid.org), your gateway to international tenders, grants, and the largest job database in the aid sector. Secure free registration and access funding opportunities. Calls for partners, exclusive insights, and weekly News Digest. Become a member today to achieve your sustainable development goals.

**Hisham Allam:** Hello and welcome to DevelopmentAidDialogues, the podcast where we take a close look at the realities and challenges shaping humanitarian aid today. I'm your host, Hisham Allam. World Humanitarian Day, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) was observed globally on August 19th.

This day stands as a powerful tribute to the courage of aid workers worldwide and the urgent needs of millions caught in crisis. Giving OCHA a central coordinating role, we are honored to bring you a timely conversation with Sajeda Shawa, head of the United Nations OCHA in the United Arab Emirates. Sajeda brings over 18 years of experience leading humanitarian efforts across the Middle East and beyond. Notably serving in Syria crisis respond at OCHA's regional office, managing donor relations and resource mobilization as special advisor to the UN Assistant Secretary General, and regional humanitarian coordinator for Syria. What sets Sajeda apart is her passionate advocacy for communities affected by conflict as an Arab woman with deep lived regional expertise. She understands the realities of regional, not just professionally, but personally bridging her local roots with global humanitarian action. Thank you, Sajeda, for joining us today. DevelopmentAid Dialogue podcast.

**Sajeda Shawa:** Thank you very much for having me.

**Hisham Allam:** Thank you, Sajeda. As we reflect on World Humanitarian Day 2025, how would you describe the current global humanitarian landscape from your vantage point with OCHA, UAE?

**Sajeda Shawa:** Thank you very much, Hisham. I'll start with explaining what is the world humanitarian day. Unlike many of the international days, it's not a celebration.

It's a day where we mark and we remember the humanitarian colleagues that lost their lives while delivering aid in emergency context and war zones. The day was marked when we lost around 22 of our colleagues in Baghdad in 2003, in an explosion in the Canal Hotel. And that was probably the main or the first incident of its kind where we lost that much of colleagues in one place in a UN facility.

So, we started marking the day to make sure that people are reminded that human chain aid workers risk their lives to deliver aid as the last line of hope when places are hopeless, when there are crisis and conflicts. So, looking at the figures and at the overall picture.



## DevelopmentAid Dialogues



Last year, for instance, more than 380 humanitarians were killed, not dead, killed. This was the highest number ever recorded. Hundreds more were wounded, kidnapped, and detained. So, looking at these figures and in Gaza last year, 528 workers or was staff were killed since October 2023 the deadliest place for humanitarians for the second year running. And this number doesn't even touch the hundreds of staff who have lost their family members, others in Sudan, for instance, 60 colleagues lost their lives over double the year before. And looking at these figures, those are colleagues that had families, they had their own kids, their lives, and each one of them had a story.

So, it's not only statistics, it's not only figures, it's normalization of violence against this community. And each attack on a colleague is an attack on all of us. But looking back at why all these colleagues have lost their lives or what are the circumstances that they're operating within? Today, there is more than 130 armed conflicts happening around the world in 2025 while we are speaking today, Hisham.

If we're looking at the number of people in need, there are around 300 million in need of humanitarian assistance today, while we are speaking. There are forced displacement, primarily driven by conflict at its highest ever levels. Today, one in every 67 people on Earth is forcibly displaced, not by choice, unfortunately.

The global food security crisis has escalated dramatically with 295 million people facing high acute food insecurity. Conflict insecurities were responsible for catastrophic food insecurities in Haiti, in Mali, in South Sudan and Sudan. Famine, 10 locations in Sudan, and famine risk across all of Gaza as it was announced quite recently.

Sexual virus, on the other hand, is on the increase in the DRC, it was estimated that a child is rate every half an hour. While in Sudan, nearly one in four people, most of them women and girls are now at the risk of GBV. The horrifying impact of war on children continues to mount with around 50,000 children reported, killed, or injured in Gaza in OPT between October 2023 and May 2025.

**Hisham Allam:** This is heartbreaking.

**Sajeda Shawa:** It's, and the figures are increasing. More and more figures are shared from all over the world, but I mean, we need to remember as well that climate is, is part of this, the natural disasters in the first half of 2025 with earthquakes in central Myanmar and cyclones in Mozambique and the hurricane in Latin America and the Caribbean is now beginning.

So, it's not only manmade, it's manmade and naturally making it more and more difficult for humanitarians to respond all around the world but making it more and more for people that are in need and waiting for the only hope to get them assistance through the humanitarians.

**Hisham Allam:** Yes, I totally agree. We can see that attacks on aid workers are at record high this year globally, as you have mentioned. So, my question is what priorities has OCHA adapted to safeguard humanitarian, personal, and sustain a delivery in such a challenging security context?



## DevelopmentAid Dialogues



**Sajeda Shawa:** Unfortunately, the attacks against aid workers have been met with the rampant immunity. In the first five months of 2025 alone, 128 workers were killed across 17 countries, 98% of whom were national staff.

Highlighting that additional danger faced by local responders, not only by international responders. The OPT was unfortunately the most dangerous place in the world for aid workers. What we continue to do is that we, we advocate, we urge member states, we urge all parties to the conflict to respect their responsibilities.

And not to let go of all these incidents. Zero accountability of international inaction. Empathy is not acceptable. The member states must not accept it in all our advocacy at all levels by the senior UN officials, the ERC and the different representatives of agencies, principles, and all officials are continuing to urge member states to not accepted and to, as a humanitarian movement to demand the protection of civilians and aid workers. And we demand that the perpetrators are held to account.

**Hisham Allam:** So, the past several months, I have seen measure reductions in aid budgets, notably starting early this year with deep cuts from donors like USAID that's happening while humanitarian needs continue to surge.

How are these funding costs concretely impacting aid workers' ability to respond effectively on the ground?

**Sajeda Shawa:** As referred to and stated by many UN officials and particularly the USG Emergency Response Coordinator of the UN, that it's one of the most challenging times for humanitarians around the world, but not only for humanitarians, but for people in need as well.

So ahead of 2025, humanitarian partners appealed for over 44 billion US dollars to assist over 178 million people facing life threatening and urgent needs through the global humanitarian overview that OCHA produces on behalf of the humanitarian actress. However, in the first months of 2025, multiple major donors, as you rightly said, cut their contributions, including the USAID, which accounted to 45% of funding against the 2024 global humanitarian overview, as well as Germany, the UK, and others. The magnitude, gravity and suddenness of these cuts forced of course the humanitarian community to high reprioritize its response efforts. We had to regroup to rethink how we work and to consider this hyper prioritization as a humanitarian reset.

And it aims to save as many lives as possible with the resources available. And I just want to seize this moment and opportunity Hisham to say that having this reset does not necessarily mean that the number of people in need is less. It only means that we were forced to take tough decisions on prioritization of trying to decide priorities over priorities, over priorities, given the limited financial resources that we have at the moment.

So, through the hyper prioritization humanitarian needs have identified 114 million people who are facing the most life-threatening needs to be most urgently targeted with assistance and protection, and assisting them will require 29.1 billion US dollars. The reprioritization of these humanitarian needs and response plans were based on two main criteria.



## DevelopmentAid Dialogues



The first one is concentrating response, where needs are greatest based on intersectoral severity as a starting point and to prioritize lifesaving activities including protection,

**Hisham Allam:** Sorry for the interruption. But how would you put this criteria? What is the scale?

**Sajeda Shawa:** It's based on internal coordination between the inter-agency standard committee members and the different humanitarian actors based on coordinated information available from the field and between the country offices and based on previous assessments. So, it's a coordinated approach that is not called by one person, but it's based on coordination between all the actors. Part of the ISAC and part of the humanitarian response.

**Hisham Allam:** But you interfere in this process, NGOs, local partners, governments, or it is something relevant to the UN community.

**Sajeda Shawa:** It's done in consultation with all humanitarian partners, actors that are part of the humanitarian response plans and part of the coordination clusters, the different coordination mechanisms. So, everybody has a say on the prioritization exercise.

**Hisham Allam:** Okay. That's clear.

**Sajeda Shawa:** What I wanted to add on that is that the regional response plans have also prioritized what must be done first through tires. Going back to your question on lifesaving and protection interventions, time sensitive activities to stabilize communities, and finally, medium to long-term efforts such as advocacy.

And lastly, on the hyper prioritization efforts that all worked to build on priorities expressed by the crisis affected people and communities. So, it's not only the humanitarian actors speaking on behalf of affected communities, it's in constitution with the local communities, hit by the crisis in the different parts around the world.

**Hisham Allam:** How does UAE leverage its position as a strategic humanitarian hub to strengthen coordination and crisis response capacities in the region and beyond?

**Sajeda Shawa:** Thank you Hisham for the question. OCHA, UAE is one of the liaison offices that OCHA has not only in the GCC area, but globally.



## DevelopmentAid Dialogues



We are part of four offices in the Gulf based in Saudi Arabia and Qatar, Kuwait and UAE. And there is a liaison office in Japan and a liaison office in US. But this is part of the wider presence of OCHA of 60 countries around the world and part of the regional offices and country offices.

And it's an interconnected presence that serves to advise the senior leadership on how can we work best with our partners and member states around the world? So, the case specifically for OCHA UAE is that we work closely with the UAE Government on humanitarian coordination of assistance. In terms of advocacy, in terms of sharing sensitive, timely coordinated information doing coordination with the other humanitarian responders and making sure that whatever humanitarian decisions taken by the government of UAE are based on facts and based on factual information and that it is done in coordination with local actors. With the actors like the UAE aid agency the UAE Philanthropy Council. We are actually hosted in UAE by the biggest logistics hub Dubai Humanitarian and UAE, where humanitarian assistance actually is coordinated and is sent out and efficiently in certain incidents, for instance, for Gaza or for Yemen or for the earthquakes sometimes it would take up to eight hours to be able to put out a coordinated shipment of aid from UAE based on coordinated efforts between the partners and the close coordination with the government.

On different non-emergency components, we have revised our engagement strategies in the Gulf and we started strongly investing in engaging with the government on new fronts, on humanitarian diplomacy, on engaging with think tanks and academia on engaging with the youth and women, and engaging on women empowerment in a way that we are able to speak to the next generation of Emirati humanitarians diplomats youth and making sure that we're working on an additive where humanitarian needs are portrayed as human needs. And where the next generation of Emiratis diplomats, humanitarians would receive the knowhow and the knowledge and making sure that they are part of the response, not only as donors, but as interns, as experts, as equal partners negotiators and contributors.

**Hisham Allam:** Appreciate your detailed response. Moving ahead to another important topic, which is climate change, that is increasingly entwined with humanitarian crisis. How is OCHA integrating climate adaptation and resilience into emergency programming?

**Sajeda Shawa:** As you know, well, Hisham and through the figures I shared at the very beginning climate change is becoming the largest cause of humanitarian needs globally in line with the manmade disasters.

And to make sure that we are able to respond to this we have a dedicated team managing climate change with a senior advisor to the USG, and they are based in New York. However, working closely with this team and the wider colleagues in OCHA and particularly in UAE, we intensified our engagement with the UE government on ahead and during the COP28. During that time, we invested a lot of time in working closely with the government and with the presidency team on a task force that introduces humanitarian work. And for the first time ever in any COP with the support of the government, OCHA led the first ever humanitarian pavilion.

That was a platform hosting more than 60 humanitarian partners across two weeks. And to utilize that platform as a space to come and speak about the different humanitarian issues whether it's gender, whether it's cash, whether it's resource mobilization. And on that note, I want to say that we have managed with the support of the government to get representatives of the affected population. We had a beautiful group of 15 activists that



## DevelopmentAid Dialogues



came from different parts of the world and different continents from Africa, from Asia from Latin America, and from the manna region to be able to speak for themselves. On behalf of their own people and to be part of the conversation close to decision makers, politicians, and advocates.

One of the key learnings that came out of that experience was that they were able to negotiate and to put the details of their problems on the table, making sure that their voice is heard. Not through mediums, not through representatives, not through politicians, but to compliment their presence and having them on the table and creating the space OCHA has launched in the COP 28, the surf Climate Action account as a resource mobilization tool that enables countries to allocate financing as an emergency. And for it not to be only a reactive, but to be reaching those in need as a quick, efficient, and rapid platform for resource mobilization.

We continue, of course, our advocacy with the UAE government and others. And of course, through a lot of funding the surf activities already support communities to adopt the climate change, including, for example most recently the rehabilitation of water points and the provision of drought resistant seeds and unconditional cash transfers.

**Hisham Allam:** That provides a great clarity. Moving on, I'd like to ask you about partnerships and diplomacy, which are the pillars of your work. How do the collaboration fostered by the OCHA's UAE office, bringing together governments, UN agencies, NGOs and the private sector enhance humanitarian responses under current conditions?

**Sajeda Shawwa:** You know that with a multitude of crisis happening around the world working alone does not serve the purpose. And maintaining the way that we used to work. Does not work anymore. So, looking at the wider humanitarian diplomacy, it's becoming or it requires more and more innovation.

So led by the revised engagement plans that we had in this part of the world. And revised engagement plans around different parts of OCHA, we opted to engage more and more with different actors, governments as you rightly said, the private sector philanthropy. So, in UAE in particular, the dialogue is expanding to diplomatic academies, in particularly with the Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy where we're engaging not only with the representatives of MoFA, but as well with the next generation of Emirati students that will become soon diplomats. But there's a lot of engagement as well with the universities, with schools and making sure that humanitarian diplomacy is explained in its simplest formats and giving examples of successful humanitarian diplomacy from the public and a private diplomacy.

**Hisham Allam:** Sorry, what do you mean by private diplomacy?

**Sajeda Shawwa:** I mean, you know, that humanitarian diplomacy is not a straightforward process. It's normally a lengthy process where a lot of negotiations happen behind closed doors leading to delivery of aid or securing access or negotiation, securing negotiations for.





## DevelopmentAid Dialogues



So, one, one good example that I can recall from the UAE is the massive engagement of UAE in Gaza in facilitating access and aid and medical supplies, and facilitating airdrops of assistance. So, a lot that is being discussed behind closed doors but eventually lead to delivering needed aid when conventional ways of delivering aid is not happening as regularly and as it should.

**Hisham Allam:** Okay, that's clear. Now let's shift the spotlight to localization, which is a critical focus in humanitarian response, particularly in the meaningful inclusion of women and youth as key agents of a change. From your perspective, leading OCHA UEA office, how is localization advancing in the Gulf area and Middle East region? And what strategies are proving most effective to empower women and young people in shaping humanitarian outcomes.

**Sajeda Shawa:** Thank you, Hisham. Looking at your question from agenda lens, if you look at the majority or the percentage of people affected by crisis, you would note that more than 50% are women and children, and as responders, you would find that among the task force few years back in time, the number of responders of women among decision making and responders was less than 50%.

So there has been clear revision of the engagement of women in this whole process. And decisions were made at the highest level of decision at the UN and with the different humanitarian actors that there need to be stronger engagement of women at different levels, whether it's decision making, responders, targeting of beneficiaries and making sure that it is thought of throughout the process since the beginning of the planning of the response, and to make sure that it's integrated into the different parts of the implementation of projects. Now speaking of this here in UAE, we have been working closely with our local actors, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the General Women Union, UN Women, the Gender Balance Council on making sure that we are exchanging the know-how and building more capacities making sure that the Emirati women would be in a position of not only delivering aid as one of the largest humanitarian donors and, and being only there as, as a donor from the financial perspective, but making sure that they are there as well as responders, part of the teams. So, you would see an increased number of engagement from the UAE part in UAE women leadership in, in the different parts of the planning, deciding policymaking and delivery of aid as well as humanitarian diplomacy.

**Hisham Allam:** Sajeda, out of the focus of the discussion. You are the first Arab woman to play this role in the gulf area, right?

**Sajeda Shawa:** For the OCHA UAE office? Yes.

**Hisham Allam:** Yeah. What does this represent to you?

**Sajeda Shawa:** It's, it's an honor, but more on that, it's an obligation for me because I know that it compliments the mission of my life with my professional responsibility. Knowing that I come from this part of the world, I've studied here, I've worked here, I've specialized in human trained response and the studying more thoroughly the



## DevelopmentAid Dialogues



humanitarian landscape in this part of the world post Arab Spring, and I feel like it's, it's part of who I am as, as a woman, as a mother, as a humanitarian. Passing on the message that humanitarian workers and experts are, are not superheroes, we are real people that come from this part of the world and that more people from this part of the world can serve and can help.

The main principle of localization connecting to the previous question is that problems would be solved locally by the people living the problems themselves as no international expert would be able to come and solve a local problem as much as a local would know. I mean, go back and look into any problems that our grandmothers managed to, to solve with any crisis, with any problem.

It was always the local expertise. They needed the education to expand the horizon of their knowledge, but local expertise would be always. Best fit to solve the problems locally. And that's how I see my role coming from this part of the world, sharing the international knowledge and experience that I gained, luckily through the different places that I worked in or the guidance that I got from the different mentors and different colleagues I worked with, or being in the field and knowing that, I have a message to pass on a, to that I need to pass on. And I think that's it.

**Hisham Allam:** I'm happy to hear that. And I know that few years ago speaking about a woman having this position and in the Arab region, and specifically in the Gulf, it was kind of a dream, but now it, it came true.

**Sajeda Shawa:** I mean talking about this since 30, 40 years. Yes, it was. But I'm very proud of seeing more and more women in the system. We have a fantastic set of female leaders in OCHA, in the wider UN system with the member states that we work with, that I'm very, very, very proud to be part of. And I know that we have a responsibility to pass on to the next generation of, female, leaders at different sectors, but specifically in the humanitarian domain.

**Hisham Allam:** Okay. By back to the hard talk, the geopolitical and donor landscape continue to shift rapidly. How does OCHA navigate these external pressures to secure funding and political support for humanitarian initiatives?

**Sajeda Shawa:** You're absolutely right we're facing dramatically cut assistance and protection as funding. So, we, we are making sure that intense advocacy continues with the different member states that it doesn't stop. We continue talking about protection services and prevention efforts. About the need for preventing diseases and mortality.

We need to continue talking about managed children and services for refugees but more and more, importantly is that we continue advocacy, we continue engaging at all levels with all member states. And of course the main message that we cannot avoid is talking about resource mobilization.





## DevelopmentAid Dialogues



We ask our donors to consider the additional 2025 funding for OCHO budget while we aim to reach 181 million of the 300 million in need across 73 countries, only 18% is funded. A 40% drop from the same time last year is putting too many people at risk of not receiving aid at all. So, you can imagine how, how scary these are the deepest.

Funding cuts the international humanitarian system has ever faced. Millions will go without lifesaving aid. So, we are being asked to do more with less, and the cost will be measured in lives. We need urgent donor support. Donors are asked to consider directing additional contributions, either as earmarked support towards any of OCHA country and regional offices and headquarters.

And of course, the pledge and pay early towards. Which is budget, but we strongly encourage donors to make contributions as early as possible in the year to ensure that sufficient available cash balance for the continuation of operations and to inform our future budget, and that.

And just to conclude that humanitarians cannot stop. There are so many people depending on us to respond. So, it's, it's a huge risk.

**Hisham Allam:** Yes. And this is my final question. As world humanitarian day encourages us to act for humanity every day. What key messages would you like to leave with listeners about the importance of sustained global solidarity and informative engagement?

**Sajeda Shawa:** Two key messages, actually, three. One, humanize the figures. I unfortunately had to share a lot of figures with you today, but those are not statistics. Those are human beings. Every figure that we are referring as one out of the 300 million people in need is a human being sitting somewhere who had a family and who had a decent dignified life before the crisis hit. So please, please, please humanize the figures. Don't get used to hitting numbers and figures in the newsletters or in the news bulletins or on social media. And just keep a blind eye that, oh, all these figures, no, we're speaking about human beings. The second piece of information that I want to share is please crosscheck on figures. Go after confirmed stories crosscheck on the sources of information. We're unfortunately facing a lot of misinformation nowadays on different means and platforms of, information and use. So please resort to the reports that are there. You can find all accurate information from the UN side.

You can check all the assessment reports, the global humanitarian overview. Just seek the sources of information. And three, don't stop telling the stories of people because if we stop, we are at the risk of people losing the last hope.

**Hisham Allam:** Thank you for joining us on DevelopmentAid Dialogues for this vital conversation inside OCHA's role amid rising needs and the shrinking aid. It was a privilege to hear from you, Sajeda Shawa, the head of OCHA's UAE office, and the first woman to lead an OCHA office in the Gulf region.



## **DevelopmentAid Dialogues**

Sajeda's leadership not only reflects remarkable expertise and dedication, but also represents a powerful example of women. Breaking new ground in a field where their voices and perspectives are essential. As humanitarian challenges grow more complex and resources tighten, we are reminded that solidarity cooperation and courageous leadership, especially from an aspiring figures like Sajeda, are what keep the spirit of humanitarian action alive.

This is Hisham Allam, for DevelopmentAid Dialogues. Thank you for listening. Until next time, stay informed, stay engaged, and never underestimate the power of compassionate leadership and global solidarity.