



Season 3. Episode 4: Shadows Of Conflict: Why Some Emergencies Get Left Behind. A Quick-exchange with Désirée Ketabchi from OXFAM

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Hisham Allam: Hello everyone and welcome back to DevelopmentAid Dialogues. I'm really excited today because we have Désirée Ketabchi, who lead the Humanitarian Action and Advocacy at Oxfam Belgium, which she has been working for the last four years. She has based in Brussels and has previously worked at the European Parliament and Première Urgence Internationale, among other organizations.

There is a lot happening in the world right now, and we will dive into how the EU decides where its aid goes, especially when some crisis like Ukraine have the spotlight while others like Haiti, Sudan, or the Sahel risk being forgotten. We will also get this rate take on what happens when major donors like USAID pull out of fragile places like the DRC and what this means for people whose lives depend on that support.

And of course, we cannot ignore Gaza, where every day seems to bring new challenges and urgent needs. Désirée thank you so much for making time today. I have been looking forward to this conversation.

Désirée Ketabchi: Hello, Hisham. Thank you for the invitation.

Hisham Allam: Thank you. Désirée, millions of people suffer in silence every day in crisis that rarely make headlines.

How does it feel knowing that while Ukraine gets a lot of attention and fans, places like Haiti, Sudan are left struggling at the shadow, what does this mean for those affected.

Désirée Ketabchi: It's frustrating. We try to make our humanitarian action as people centered as possible. So, this means that we, we look at needs rather than politics and geopolitics.

On the other hand, we try to, to look at Ukraine as an example also. What is the result when people and government feel solidarity towards people in in need? So, this is, we have mixed feelings, let's say.

Hisham Allam: But from Oxfam's view, are EU aid decisions mostly political, or are there practical reasons behind focusing on some crises over others?



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Désirée Ketabchi: Humanitarian aid is more and more linked to geopolitical interests or more opening so than before. Which yeah, it means that it's difficult to find actions in overlooked emergencies. Like, like you said. And also public fundraising is more difficult. If it's not in the media, people will not feel so close to a crisis.

And on the other hand, humanitarian needs are growing and funds are decreasing. So yes, it's quite difficult in this global system where that's already overstretched.

Hisham Allam: Was it always difficult or it became difficult?

Désirée Ketabchi: It's becoming increasingly difficult. Funds are decreasing and needs are increasing, and conflicts are also becoming longer and more impactful. This is also why we ask donors for flexible funding so that we can deliver aid on the base of needs and on the base of what people need at a certain time, rather on geopolitical interest and economic reasons.

Hisham Allam: And do donors accept this concept of flexible donations or funding?

Désirée Ketabchi: It depends. It depends on the donor, but we do have ears that listen to us. Practice is more difficult. Even internally, governments find at their own difficulties because the humanitarian bodies are not sometimes separated from, from the actual government, the foreign, the ministry of foreign affairs of the deciding body.

So even among donors, we find the frustration for blockages to more flexible fundings.

Hisham Allam: Désirée, what can advocates do to push donors to take these forgotten emergencies seriously and fund them fairly, especially when media focus and political interest pull resources away.

Désirée Ketabchi: We show the impact on people, the linkages between different crises. We live in a global system, so all the contexts are interlinked. We show also how people are always, and especially women and girls, and young, young people and children are the most affected by crisis and conflicts. So, we should be focused on showing that to the public and to governments and decision makers in general.

Hisham Allam: Do you think that the situation in Sudan was affected negatively with what's happening in Gaza?

Désirée Ketabchi: In terms of attention, you mean?

Hisham Allam: Yes.



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Désirée Ketabchi: When, there is one big story in the media, for sure, other stories have less space. So, I think Sudan is undeniably affected negatively by Gaza? Yes.

Hisham Allam: Especially when we're speaking about fragile communities, women and children. There's majority of victims in Sudan. And I think it is somehow very large amount of population getting affected by this situation, but it doesn't have the same impact to media coverage and also from donor organizations.

Désirée Ketabchi: I agree with you that Sudan doesn't receive the same attention as Gaza from donors, from the public, from the media. And this has a big impact on the crisis. Yes. And on the humanitarian context and on vulnerable population.

Hisham Allam: On the same context, USAID sudden funding cuts in fragile areas like the DRC have created big gaps in health, water, and sanitation services. How is Oxfam dealing with this on the ground and what don't people fully understand about the real impact these cuts have on everyday lives?

Désirée Ketabchi: Unfortunately, due to USAID cuts and other donor cuts, we were obliged to reduce the response, and the team in DRC. Unfortunately, the ultimate victims are always the vulnerable people because they are going to receive less support. And also I mean in conflict situation, humanitarian aid is the first support that people receive the first protection. So, it's in the end they are the one paying the most.

Hisham Allam: And are there any alternatives for people who are suffering?

Désirée Ketabchi: Since there are cuts, cuts are affecting all the organizations and as well as the UN. The system is trying to rethink itself and to be more efficient to be more people centered. These were reflections that were already ongoing before. And the risk is that accelerating might create more chaos, but in the end we try also to make the most out of it.

I mean, there is also something positive in being more efficient, of course, but yes, we, we try not to, to make people pay the biggest price.

Hisham Allam: What did the biggest challenge Oxfam is facing recently?

Désirée Ketabchi: I don't see just one challenge. One challenge for sure is the decrease in funds, but also the fact that humanitarian needs are growing and that the fact that to geo political interests are in the middle of foreign affairs and government's decisions.

Also humanitarian access is very complicated in a lot of different areas, so it's difficult also to deliver it, be it in the Sahel or in Gaza. The impediments are growing as well.



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Hisham Allam: So, what, what would happen to push to accelerate the process of the aid delivery and to encourage the giving nations again to push more donations and international aid.

Désirée Ketabchi: With more aid, we can support more people. So that is the ultimate goal of our work. And also my fear is if when you decrease fund, also you increase competitions between organizations and we are always stronger when we work together.

In humanitarian action as well as in advocacy and in development work. So, I think it's also the cooperation and coordination that we have seen between organization is something that we should foster. And this is more difficult when there are financial constraints.

Hisham Allam: The countries that decided to cut the international aid, the Netherland, the UK, the United States. What should happen to make them consume the international aid as it was before?

Désirée Ketabchi: I think an important point is also understanding the security, which is the buzzword now. It's not just military security. Security is also providing people with the basic need.

So, people are more safe if they are protected, if they have access to food, shelter, water, and I think this is a key point to understand that security is multifold. So, I think this is a key point to dialogue with governments that are cutting development and humanitarian funds.

Hisham Allam: With donors pulling back funding unpredictably. What can humanitarian organizations do to prepare for, and soften the effects of these sudden losers?

Désirée Ketabchi: That's, that's a difficult question. Unfortunately, when cuts are sudden, it's difficult to answer quickly. We diversify our funding sources, but also one way to avoid, depending on one donor is also to find the synergies between programming projects.

So not to have one program and one project funding a whole response, but having a complementarity and, and synergy between different actions, if this makes sense. Again, I think coordination between organization is also key because when one organization has to step down, another one can step in. If we've worked together, I think this is also very important.

Hisham Allam: Okay. Are we seeing donors grow tired of sustained crisis? And if yes, how can advocacy challenge this dangerous trend before it costs more lives?

Désirée Ketabchi: One thing that we do at Oxfam to avoid getting tired of crisis is to connect everything together. I mean, at the end of the day the root causes of most crisis is inequality. So, by linking all the root causes, all the causes of different crisis, conflict, climate economic justice is all connected to, to inequality.



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Episode 4 Season 3



So, we look at the big picture, bigger picture. So, this is also what we try to convey to our audience and to our decision makers we talk with.

Hisham Allam: Given the increasing complexity of global crisis, how does Oxfam balance mediate humanitarian needs with the long-term goals of advocacy and structural change?

Désirée Ketabchi: Our program is never thought in silos, so there is always a connection between humanitarian development and advocacy and addressing root causes of inequality. So, the secret or the way we do it is having, colleagues, teams, talking to each other. So, this is where the Oxfam confederation comes in, where the strength of having a global network based in many countries.

Because if we are going to only think for a short time, we are never going to help people getting out of their vulnerability. And we are just creating dependence on aid. So, the key is to link resilience with humanitarian and advocacy.

Hisham Allam: Sometime there's kind of political interference, accusations toward the people who are working in humanitarian aid or in delivery. So, this is kind of pressure on your teams. So how do you handle this?

Désirée Ketabchi: I would say that the team, especially those who work closer to communities are getting their motivation from the proximity to the communities themselves actually, because we are in close contact with people we work with. So, this is quite resourceful. And then as I said before the confederation gives strength also too, because there is also a lot of collaboration in advocacy.

We do advocacy at different level in different countries and contexts. So, this gives a lot of strength and to colleagues and teams.

Hisham Allam: Can you tell me a little bit about the strategies does Oxfam use to promote economic justice alongside media humanitarian aid?

Désirée Ketabchi: When we do advocacy about certain context, we always look at economic impact of the conflict, for example, or how certain segments of the population are most affected than others. And economies often at the center of the root causes of a conflict or a crisis.

Hisham Allam: And how important did youth engagement in Oxfam's advocacy work? How do you involve younger generations in shaping humanitarian policies?



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Désirée Ketabchi: We have a strong base of volunteers and supporters in different countries. And youth people, as you say, are key and are involved and sympathetic to Oxfam arguments such inequality and access to human rights. For instance, they participate in protests, we take part in, or other campaigns and actions worldwide.

Hisham Allam: Can you share a specific example from your work where advocacy efforts successfully influenced the EU's aid allocation toward marginalized or forgetting crisis.

Désirée Ketabchi: I have an example of a recent advocacy success. Actually we were invited by the king and the queen of Belgium to a round table of actors working in Gaza. And the king mentioned the situation in Gaza during his speech for the Belgian National Day. So, this was a success in advocacy wise in Belgium to give attention to Gaza.

Hisham Allam: This is impressive. Relevant to this, there have been growing calls for more creative solutions in Gaza. What bold or unconventional approaches should humanitarian actors other than Oxfam and donors consider to get aid through and support the population who are more effectively?

Désirée Ketabchi: I don't think we need a creative solution. I think we need to be allowed to do our work because at the moment, since March 2nd, almost no organization has been allowed to deliver track of aid. So, I think we should just be allowed to do our work and that we are also professional and we know how to do that.

Hisham Allam: Finally, what is your message to the main players in the aid delivery worldwide regarding the current situation of international aid cut and the increase of needs of vulnerable communities among the increasing of crisis zone.

Désirée Ketabchi: My message is that countries should not just remain co engage in their commitments to global aid and solidarity, but also remember that by allowing violations of international law, they are also fooling conflicts and humanitarian crisis worldwide.

Hisham Allam: Désirée, thank you for your honesty and passion today. This was not just a policy debate. It was about real people whose future depends on the choices made in Brussels and beyond. Your commitment and Oxfam's work challenges us all to see past the headlines and remember the dignity and hope. We owe those caught up in the crisis.

To everyone listening, the impact of aid or its absence is felt in families struggling for safe water. Children waiting for a meal and whole community disparate for protection. If this conversation moved you, don't just tune it to out. Keep talking and speak up and find a way to help. Change starts with all of us. Désirée has been an honor having you here. Take care everyone, and see you next time on DevelopmentAid Dialogues!