

Transcript of 'Responding to Humanitarian Crises'

Season 3, Episode 39, Transforming Tomorrow

[Theme music]

Paul: Hello, and welcome to Transforming Tomorrow from the Pentland Centre for Sustainability in Business. I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

Paul: Today we're talking about humanitarian crises and how we respond to them both immediately and for the longer term.

[Theme music]

Paul: Do you consider yourself a good person, Jan?

Jan: [tentatively] Yes, but I don't know where this is going.

Paul: I have no evidence one way or the other, apart from our personal interactions, so don't worry...

Jan: ...so definitely a good person, then.

Paul: [laughs] Definitely a good person. Do you recognise when there are problems in other parts of the world?

Jan: Yes. Uh...

Paul: ...I, I feel there's a but coming.

Jan: No, there's no buts...

Paul: ...mm-hmm...

Jan: ...um, I recognise, and sometimes you feel quite powerless to know what to do or how to help, and indeed, sometimes you can't help. And so you might just have to, you know, give money if there's a specific problem, or I, I have some charities that I give money to over time, who I trust and hope, and I read their accounts, they appear to be doing good things.

Paul: The Jan Bebbington Charitable [Jan laughs] Foundation for the betterment of Jan Bebbington.

Jan: Yes, that's the one I like the best. [laughs]

Paul: [laughing] Yes. So, so in, in answer to my first question, are you a good person? No. Right, okay, we've got that cleared up.

So, do you find that most of your awareness of humanitarian crises comes via the mainstream media?

Jan: It does, and this is where I find that quite unsatisfactory in a way, because I know that there's probably, uh, a great deal more, um, situations and people who I might be moved to help, or could help in some way.

Um, but particularly depending on what's, you know, what's dominating the news, really important humanitarian situations can go unrecorded and unnoticed. And, and therefore any, um, you know, warmth that might be able to be offered from elsewhere in the world is lost to them.

So I think that that whole connection between knowing what's going on in the media is, is quite a tricky one.

Paul: If I was to ask you now, where were there refugee issues in the world, where would you think?

Jan: Alas, mostly everywhere. Um, so, um...

Paul: ...I'm not letting you get away with such a generality [Jan laughs] in hope yeah, that covers everything. No. Can you think of any specific places where there might be issues with refugees?

Jan: So I read and try to understand what's happening in Sudan.

Paul: Mm-hmm.

Jan: Um, clearly some of the big hotspots, um, of global conflict, and when we're recording this, um, that would be, you know, huge amount of the Middle East...

Paul: ...mm-hmm...

Jan: ...um, you know, Palestine, Lebanon. Um, then I guess there are refugee crises that we see from time to time in the Asia Pacific region, but I sort of follow them through the New Zealand news.

Paul: Yes.

Jan: Uh, so, yeah. And there, and you know, I suppose you, you, might come onto this and there but for the grace of God it could be any us...

Paul: ...mm-hmm...

Jan: ...caught up in such things.

Paul: Yes. If I was to say then Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh and Burma, was that something that would've been in your mind somewhere? Or is that something, or not?

Jan: The situation in around Cox's Bazar, I didn't know about, uh, until we had had the earlier guest, Kyla Raby, who made that more evident. I knew that there was movement of, of people off the, the border there, but I hadn't realised the extent to which that was problematic.

Paul: And you've mentioned Sudan and there's issues there with civil war, that South Sudan became a country not too long ago, but there are continued issues there. What about Southern Africa and areas around there?

Jan: I'm not so informed at all. Um, I guess we hear about South Africa a bit in the, the news from time to time. But the, the rest of it is, um, I'm afraid is a little bit of a, a blank space in my mind.

Paul: And this all goes to reinforce my point that you've mentioned the news a few times. You hear about things in the news that if you don't know through the news, it's hard sometimes to find out.

Unless you are an expert in humanitarianism and in refugees...

Jan: ...so what you...

Paul: ...and in the humanitarian crisis response.

Jan: [laughs] So what you gonna tell me is my homework is now gonna be marked by our guest. Please be kind. [laughs]

Paul: Yes. Because today we joined by someone who is a Lecturer in Operations Management in Lancaster University Management School. Someone whose research looks at both the humanitarian and public sectors, and touches especially on refugees. Someone who does some absolutely brilliant work around areas that we're not even gonna discuss today, such as medical supply chains.

But we are here to talk to them about refugees and humanitarian response. We're gonna say welcome to Dr Nonhlanhla Dube.

Noni: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Paul: Welcome, Noni. Now before we get into a serious topic, which all of it's gonna be serious, where at the minute, if we were to have asked you, are there humanitarian refugee issues around the world?

Noni: Actually Cox's Bazar would have been top of the list, and mostly because it's one that's been going on for as long as everyone can remember. And Dadaab in Kenya probably comes second, if I'm not mistaken, unless they've been overtaken by someone else, because that's the state of flux that we're in right now.

Uh, so it's essentially a refugee camp in what has become a desert just because of all the refugee activity around the place. But it will be one of many. And in Southern Africa, interestingly, since you brought it up, I'm aware of two camps that we have and they have different models.

So actually in Zimbabwe they have what they call an, an encampment model. You actually have a proper refugee camp. In Mozambique, they have what they call a settlement model. So people are free to come and go within that space.

And in South Africa, even though they do receive a lot of Africa's refugees, they don't have a formal refugee procedure, as we would expect, or as we would associate with these types of places and problems as well.

Paul: So there we go, Jan, there's Kenya there. I didn't know anything about the Kenya one, I'll be honest. So there's, that's one that's not been brought to my attention.

I was a little bit more aware, mainly through the fact I've worked with Noni before about ones around Zimbabwe and Mozambique. But yeah, it's amazing there's these issues all around the world that are there.

So, Noni, can you tell us then a little bit about your background and how you came to be interested in understanding and contributing to this whole area of humanitarian research?

Noni: Yes, it's a funny story. I'm an accidental humanitarian, if you will call it that. So my story begins in 2006 when I graduate with my Bachelor's in Applied

Mathematics in my home country, Zimbabwe. And we have an unemployment rate of about 80%. So at that point, you know, any job will do.

So I came across an ad for an NGO that was looking for, they called them medical data clerks. Had no idea what that was, so I had to look it up and I put in an application essentially saying, I will do whatever you want me to do. I understand medical data, you know, in mathematics we model some of these things, so I should be fine.

I don't hear from them for a couple of months, so I kind of forget about it and move on. Then they call me and say, you applied for a job with Doctors Without Borders a couple of months ago, but you were overqualified. But we have an opening now for a logistician, and we wondered if you'd be interested in that.

I had no idea what a logistician was, [Jan and Paul laugh] but I was like, sure. It's a job, right? So my journey starts there with Doctors Without Borders, with me doing what became supply logistics.

So I had started off as a general log, I should have been even managing their vehicle fleet, but it's not something that I was interested in. So I got into the story of supply logistics and trying to ensure that essential supplies are delivered where they're needed, when they're needed, in the condition that they're needed, and that they are maintained in the right condition, otherwise you can't use them after a certain period.

And this is where then I began to know even about the problems in my own country. So it, it's not your fault that you don't know much, because you will be surprised what happens right under our noses or within our own neighbourhoods that we are never exposed to. Because it's a world that we don't essentially dabble in.

So by being part of the world, of that world, I started to learn a lot, even about my own country, but about humanitarian issues more broadly.

Jan: And what kind of situation triggers the need for a humanitarian response?

Noni: So we will have crises. I think they will always be, and have always been with us. And they will have different types of categories. In most states that function normally, you know, there will be mechanisms for the government to take responsibility for them.

So what we call humanitarian crises right now, or maybe always have, would be the types of issues that reflect state failure to fulfil their obligation towards the public.

It could be things like healthcare access, right? So if a country, or a particular part of a country, doesn't have good healthcare access, it means that there's a failure in the system, and usually humanitarian operations will step in to try and fill that gap.

It could be issues related to basic nutrition, especially for children. This is a big concern, especially right now. Also what we see with contemporary conflict and the famine that it triggers, but also climate change and other issues, um, is no longer a childhood concern, actually. Even adults now suffer from issues related to malnutrition.

Could be basic water and sanitation as well, right? So if this is not taken care of, then usually you are more likely and susceptible to all kinds of waterborne diseases. Bilharzia, some people haven't even heard of it, still persists because water and sanitation isn't taken care of in many places of the world.

So a humanitarian crisis is when you would get needs that we will consider to be basic human needs, and they're not met at a large enough scale to cause concern.

Jan: And there you're talking about the capacity of a, of a state to, you know, look after their citizens well, or to look after people who've maybe moved into their country as well.

But would there also be a, a case for when some event that happens that's beyond any state, no matter how well functioning they are to deal with that would again engender this need for a humanitarian response?

Noni: Yes. So your classical humanitarian scenario is the type of disaster that happens so suddenly and creates massive needs that cannot be fulfilled realistically within the timeline by any state.

So one of the biggest disasters of our time remains the worst disaster of the century. Maybe some of the listeners will be old enough to remember the tsunami of 2004. I think they call it the, is it the Boxing Day or the...

Paul: ...mm-hmm...

Jan: ...yeah, the Boxing Day...

Noni: ...tsunami, yes. So what was significant about this disaster is that even though it originates in Indonesia, it's a tsunami. So it was an earthquake under the sea, and then it caused the water to rise up, and it affected more than 15 countries across multiple continents.

So Somalia, for example, was one of the affected countries. That's how far its impact went. And about 230,000 people are estimated to have died as a result of that.

So, such a death toll in such a short space of time that comes with destruction of infrastructure also creates issues because you have water everywhere, and some people are missing, still unaccounted for, and they are 2.3 million people suddenly in need of assistance.

So no government will be able to take care of that by themselves because of the suddenness, and also the destabilising effect that it has on the public infrastructure that will be needed to deliver these services.

What was interesting about this disaster, the tsunami of 2004, is that it's actually one of the most well-funded disasters of our time, as well. So we actually do see a lot of governments come together and there's, uh, they all respond to the appeals for humanitarian assistance. But it's still a disaster in terms of the response.

Jan: Mm-hmm.

Noni: So everything that could go wrong actually did go wrong. The response was not well co-ordinated. People didn't think through a lot of the important things.

Logistics was choking because of all the staff that was coming in from different places that was and wasn't needed. And sorting through it became a nightmare as well.

And this is also, interestingly, the birth of humanitarian logistics formally as a research discipline. This is when we realised that you need good logistics. You need to coordinate efforts among multiple stakeholders in order to be able to do a fantastic job.

Paul: That was an incident that sparked something that needed humanitarian response. But you've also seen longer term things. We look at climate change is affecting, um, issues there, you look at things such as droughts, you look at...

Back to the 1980s where you had the African famines that were publicised by likes of Band Aid, by likes of Live Aid, by various other things. The longer term issues.

When does an issue that is building in the long term become a humanitarian crisis? When does it stop being a local issue that maybe local authorities can deal with to something that needs a much broader response?

Noni: This is always an interesting question. It's a million-dollar question. If I could answer it, I wouldn't need to be working as an academic. [Jan and Paul laugh]

But I, I think the, there are lots of issues that are related to this. I think sometimes humanitarian crises also gain legitimacy just because of the attention that they get.

So the example that I just gave of the tsunami is what we call within the discipline a 'CNN disaster', because it gets all the media attention and people therefore are aware and they're going to be willing to do a lot of things.

But also we have what we call the forgotten humanitarian crises, and these are typically the ones that you refer to. You mentioned Sudan at the start of this conversation.

It's formally the worst humanitarian crisis in the world right now. And few people know enough about it. They, they can't probably even locate Sudan on a map, right?

So these are what we call the slow burners. And sometimes it's also difficult, because there are also political elements implicated within these types of disasters.

So if you would think, for example, let's look at the Arab Spring uprisings, and the sort of issues that were linked to it, like how long it took before the humanitarian community said we have a humanitarian crisis in Syria.

It was kind of a couple of years in, because you are straddling the fine line between political interference and actually also being able to serve needs. Or it's a numbers game again.

So if we look at Sudan now being formally the most serious humanitarian crisis, you also see that in Gaza with a population of about 2.1, 2.3 million, more than 90% of that population is affected, whereas with Sudan it's just under 50%.

So which one would constitute an emergency in that type of situation? This is always very difficult to tell. But I can say that there will always be a point where you realise that from a humane point of view, this is no longer acceptable. And I think a lot of humanitarian organisations will not play those numbers games.

That's why they're in places that we don't know about, and they are looking after things that we have never heard of. Because in the end, it's about the humanity. It can be anything from a small community to an entire nation being affected by these types of disasters. But we get to know the CNN ones.

Paul: Do you think we as a global society maybe need to lower our threshold then, to come to see things that at the minute we don't see as a humanitarian crisis, as a humanitarian crisis, before we get to that CNN point?

Noni: I don't know if it's a question of threshold or it's a question of what we are sensitive to. I, I, over time I start to see it as a question of what we are more sensitive to, right?

So the CNN disasters are that exactly because they immediately appeal to our emotional side. You know, you can relate to somebody's life being turned upside down suddenly overnight, but somehow, you know, we are a bit more numb to these slow burning disasters where for a couple of decades people have been living a particular way.

So it might not be so much about where we set the threshold, but I think it might be more about what we are sensitive to and at what level we actually think about crisis and at what level we actually think about people suffering, reaching a point that is so unbearable that we need to do something to alleviate it.

Paul: So that's a big challenge. There must be other challenges though, within the natural disaster response, the logistics there where you're, the areas where you're working.

Can you give us examples of some of the key challenges that there are there that need to be addressed?

Noni: So with natural disasters, I think usually the biggest issues will relate to infrastructure damage. Once your infrastructure is damaged, then the logistics of moving around becomes very, very difficult.

So a very good example would be the 2010 Haiti earthquake, because the epicentre actually was in the capital, the main port of entry, where a lot of these organisations would've come in to bring aid was affected. They had essentially one functional landing strip.

And if you have a lot of people trying to bring in supplies through that landing strip, then it becomes a choke point in itself. And then you also had the problem of, again, coordination, right? So who's sending stuff from where and where is it supposed to go?

So a bunch of people at Lancaster University might feel compelled to do something. We put something on a plane and we send it off to Port au Prince, it's not addressed to anyone, it doesn't say what is in there. We don't even know if they will need it. We imagine they will need it.

Like, we send them winter coats because we are feeling particularly cold this time of the year, but they probably would never need the type of winter coats that we have to use in this area.

So coordination also becomes a problem. And I think what's interesting when you look at the natural disasters and the sort of challenges that they impose, a lot of them outside of the infrastructural damage and all the other things relate to people trying to do good. It comes from good intentions gone bad, essentially.

So it gets really, really difficult to sort of manage that influx of support and be able to communicate in real time. So if we were to have some kind of preparedness plan for disasters, I think such a preparedness plan also has to educate the public on what you would do in a disaster situation where you wanted to help.

So, Jan, you mentioned earlier, for example, that you know you will donate money to a charity that you think you can trust. Usually in these situations, this is the best thing that you can do. Because they will know where to get the best resources and sometimes they are also able, at least the conscientious ones, increasingly try to support the local businesses through such a disaster.

So they will know where to source items and they will know what will be needed. And so that money doesn't go to waste. But also it means that you do not create so much waste in that space that it becomes difficult.

I don't remember which context it is, this is something also in the logistics literature from the early days, where humanitarian logisticians had to end up bringing incinerators with them to a disaster point just to burn the stuff they didn't need, 'cause there was nowhere else to put it. So these are the types of things that will usually go wrong.

Jan: And I suppose cash is the most flexible.

Noni: Cash is king.

Jan: Yeah, yeah. They're really flexible.

So that, having a preparedness plan strikes me as very important, but are there other, um, examples of good practice in this context, where, where responses have either been good or there are particular elements that have really made a, a response work well?

Noni: Mm-hmm.

So I, so I think also it's important to note that the different types of disasters are going to impose different types of needs, right?

So if I think of flooding, there was a, a famous director for Doctors Without Borders who said with floods, at least if they are alive, they are wet, you know? So your medical needs are very low. You're more concerned with other things and probably rebuilding, because people are gonna need shelter at the back of that.

But then there are also some humanitarian disasters that, say, if there's been an earthquake, people will need surgeries, right? Because they will go through traumatic injuries that need some kind of intervention. But then you have to understand from the moment that you give the surgery, there has to be follow-up treatments that are associated with that, and rehabilitation.

And when we are in 'we need to help' mode, we usually think about meeting those immediate needs, and we do not think about the long-term implications because you set people on a particular path depending on what you do in that very particular moment.

So there always needs to be a balance between thinking about what do the choices or the help that I offer today actually imply for this community going into the future? And how do I make the resource available to make sure that they are taken through their journey in an appropriate way? So that they are

actually meant to be where you intended for them to be when you first felt compelled to, and therefore took action to, actually help.

So preparedness is going to take very different forms depending on the types of disasters that you're facing, but it's also very context specific. So if you look again at the example of the Haitian earthquake, it was a weak earthquake. In relative terms, it's like a magnitude 7.0 earthquake. But because of the population density and the infrastructure that was there, this is why the impact was that high.

You know, in the same year, I think we had an earthquake, it must have been in Chile, it was more than 300 times stronger, and the death toll was about 525 compared to an estimated about 300,480...

Jan: ...yeah...

Noni: ...so all these things, you know, they, they play into what actually preparedness looks like, but also there has to be an element of improvisation because, depending on where the disaster hits and what the dynamics are within that context, you are looking at very different scenarios.

But I would say the most important thing is to think about not just the immediate needs, but what those immediate needs actually imply for the future and making the funding available to ensure that the long-term help is made available.

There's also the issue that is related to earmarked funding. That's one of the worst, most limiting factors that we see within the sector. So the CNN disasters tend to get overfunded and then you start to see silly things happening there. I once interviewed someone who was talking about being on the shoreline, like after, I don't know, it must have been a flood or something.

And on one part of, one side of the river, there was so much funding that they were handing out mobile phones. And on the other side of the river there was virtually no funding and they were not able to do it because the donors had decided, you know, this is where we draw the line. All the money should go to this side of the river and you can't do anything on the other side.

Jan: This brings to mind the, the UK's, um, university's Twin for Hope programme, when we talk to colleagues from Ukraine.

Paul: Mm-hmm.

Jan: So in some ways, um, I mean there, there are obviously humanitarian disasters are unfolding there, but this is a, almost a preparatory phase for when we, you know, hope and wish Ukraine comes out of its, its war. And actually then how do the universities rebuild?

So I think that would, that really links well with exactly what you've been talking about, this legacy process that actually needs to be thought of in advance.

Anyway, sorry, it just came to mind. So I derailed it there. I'll pass it back to you...

Paul: ...stop, stop derailing things. No, actually it ties in with what I was thinking as well, which is that of course has large input from the people in Ukraine. Is it important to have a lot of local knowledge and local perspective in any plans?

If you've got large international organisations, it must be so easy for them, being based wherever they are in the world, just to think that's what they will need there, because that's we think of from our perspective in whatever country they're in, rather than going to the people and saying, right, if you were to have a flood here, what might you need?

I know for instance, one of your former colleagues there, Konstantinos Zografos...

Noni: ...yeah...

Paul: ...in Lancaster, worked in Sudan before the current conflict that's going on there. And they were looking at what might be needed if there were floods. And it was the case that, well, if the people are gonna move, they're going to want to take all their cattle with them...

Noni: ...mm-hmm...

Paul: ...so any plans that are put in place need to be, not just for moving the people away from the flooded area, but for taking the cattle as well. But if that hadn't had the local knowledge there, they would not necessarily have ever thought about that. So that walking noise must be essential.

Noni: It is absolutely essential, but unfortunately, it's usually one of the casualties of 'we need to do something now'. And I think when we talk about

preparedness, these are some of the things that you can sort of build into your consciousness when you walk into any place.

So having worked as a practitioner myself, I've heard a lot of stories where a big disaster has happened, you bring in your international team and they lock themselves in a room and they're making plans about what to do, and the locals are sitting outside the room waiting for you to deliver a solution on what is going to happen.

But, indeed, there are these kinds of things that get overlooked. So I heard recently about how in Mozambique, this kind of displacement due to flooding is quite usual, it's normal, just because of the location and climate change actually makes this a worse problem.

But they're also learning that people will always go back where they were, you know, once the water levels go down. And now one of the local solutions that they're trying to think of is, how do we make sure that they have somewhere to start from when this happens?

So can we collect a bunch of seeds and whatever they might need if they're farming communities, and ensure that it's gonna be protected even if flooding happens. So where do you bury it? In what condition, and how do you make sure that people are able to find it so that they can resume life and activities in as normal way as possible?

So I think we always have to think about what are the minimum conditions that need to be met, that are contextually aligned and even culturally aligned that allow us to do this. And this means actually listening to the voice of the locals, because they're the ones who are going to have to live with the consequences of the decisions that were made in the name of, we just wanna do good.

So we have, I mean, I could give you a list that goes all the way to Timbuktu about all the humanitarian misadventures, like white elephants, where you have world class healthcare facilities that were built in the middle of nowhere, right?

And then when people started resuming their normal lives, they're just sitting there, they're in white elephant, no one's going to use them because that place was never meant to be a permanent place of dwelling.

So this local knowledge and incorporating it actually means that some of the things that we do as part of the humanitarian effort can actually become something that you hand over for the development effort afterwards, if you put enough careful thought and you involve the people who have to live with these decisions much more in the decision making.

Paul: So we've talked about a few areas where there's issues that need to be resolved, and we also said that humanitarian logistics is quite a young discipline.

Have, though, there been positive changes, have you seen positive developments over the years that it's been going on, where you can see, yes, we've learned lessons and we are doing things better now than we used to be?

Noni: There, there are a lot of innovations that happen that go undetected. So if I will give a very simple example. You know, one of our famous symbols of humanitarian assistance is the tent, the humble tent. You know, we can pitch it anywhere in a matter of minutes and we are able to do a lot of things with it.

There's a small company in the Netherlands that actually now specialises in designing tents that are a bit more durable and are also gonna be better for the environment in the long term. So this durability also means that, for example, we have seen quite a few incidents in the sector where stray bullets just go through a tent and people lose their lives just because they were in the wrong place in the wrong time.

So bulletproof tents for places where there's active conflict is one thing that is being done, but also tents that you can actually build as a module. So they come in modular structures. As your needs change, as you go through the different phases of the disaster response, you can actually repurpose the same tent and use it to achieve different things.

And then when it reaches the end of its life, you know, what sort of opportunities are there locally for people to further repurpose it and use it for something else? So in that case, you start to see that people start to understand and internalise this idea that a lot of what we have considered to be temporary actually is not.

And that sometimes as part of the humanitarian effort, we also do generate a lot of waste, or we contribute to environmental issues. So what sort of things do we have to do? Even things about, what sort of packaging do we use? Is it

gonna be biodegradable or is it, can we repurpose it for something else once it reaches the place? So all these kinds of considerations now are going into that.

But I would say the most powerful, in my view, of these initiatives is trying to look for local solutions to the problem. So the refugee camp that I have been to, for example, you have people actually trying to grow a lot of their food locally.

So they're trying to develop, or work with, experiment with sustainable practices for growing their own food. So that they don't have to get a bunch of food shipped to them. It's going to be suitable for their local tastes or wherever they're coming from, and it's going to be appropriate for the climate where they are, which is very important from a nutritional viewpoint as well.

So if you empower people to be able to do these things, and they're telling you this is exactly what we need to eat, and they might even tell you, historically, this is how grandma used to plant this, so if you just give me a patch of land, I'm gonna be able to do what grandma did. And those things actually turn out to be sustainable. They were always done for a good reason.

So we start to learn a lot just by, at least you, if you did the kind of humanitarianism, I think that just sets a system in motion and then you step back and you let it sort itself out. This is where I think you start to learn a lot of interesting things.

But it also has a very big and positive impact on people's mental health and sense of agency if they have the freedom to do that. And I see that as probably one of the most important things that you would hope to get out of these types of operations.

Jan: And I suppose there you've really alerted us to the fact that a camp can be quite long standing. So it's not, it's not like, uh, going on holiday and camping for two weeks. A camp could be there for generations and decades.

And so in that respect, if you like, thinking of a refugee camp as a temporary installation is probably entirely incorrect in many places.

Noni: Yes, it is. And I think I also had the same mindset. It's, it's very different, I think, when you read about it versus when you actually experience it, right? So when I went to the first refugee camp ever, I just had the expectation, I know what it's supposed to look like.

It didn't look anything like what I thought it was supposed to look like. You know, they had brick houses because they have started to accept that this is going to be a kind of permanent space, semi-permanent space.

Or even if people come and go, that place is always going to be there. And if it's always going to be there and providing refuge to people, you might as well at least make the shelter something that's a bit more bearable, respectable, gives them privacy and all the things that you can think about.

But also, I mean, I also met their people who had been there for more than 20 years, and they hadn't set foot outside the camp in those 20 years. And it also changed my perspective because when we were driving towards the camp, it's a very green area, it looks so beautiful. And I was thinking, oh wow, this place is amazing.

But by the end of day one, driving back to our accommodation, I was thinking there are people who stepped in there, and they've never stepped out. And they actually don't know if they will ever step out, or if they will be alive when they step out. And this became, like, something that is in a way distressing, if you think about it.

And also then you think about humanitarian programming, right? So every year a major agency like the UN, and so on, is gonna make a plan for what sort of things are we going to deliver to this place. And then after a year they make another plan.

So these people get to relive the same year over and over again without any real progress in terms of what matters to us as humans, you know?

Paul: They must, therefore, if you say these have been going for 20 years, and roughly what's the oldest refugee camp that's still operational now? Do you have an idea?

Noni: That is a good question. I actually wouldn't know. I would be interested to know. I mean, the one in Zimbabwe was probably set somewhere in the early eighties, and it was because of the conflict in Mozambique. So it was meant to serve people seeking refuge from Mozambique, but now it actually houses lots of nationalities.

I think the most interesting one that we came across could have been someone from Ukraine, at the time that we were visiting...

Paul: ...mm-hmm...

Noni: ...so people come from far and wide in, into this camp.

Paul: So you've got decades old ones. You must therefore have people who've not only who've gone in and never left, people who've been born there...

Noni: ...yes...

Paul: ...and never left people who've lived their entire life within these refugee camps.

Noni: Yes. We met a lot of the youth that we spoke to within this camp are exactly in this situation. You know, they haven't known any other reality. They cannot imagine any other form of existence.

And it's also interesting to see how it shapes their thinking, I think, compared to the people who remember a different form of life or who remember the journey to there, and how their expectations are. And then in that respect, but yes, there will be people who are born there and might live their whole lives there as well.

Paul: So that must mean that part of the logistical operation should be to figure out how you're going to educate these people rather than just have them growing up with no education or anything at all. Just some kind of educational system would need to be built into the camps...

Noni: ...yeah, so luckily there's been a lot of advocacy in relation to that. I would guess UNICEF is among the agencies that would lead it because they're thinking more about children's needs, and they're thinking more about childhood development.

But there will still be constraints, because the donors for humanitarian activities do not necessarily see education as a humanitarian concern, right? So the humanitarian concern is to keep people alive while they go through a crisis.

If it's temporary, that's not a problem. But if you are going to be stuck for decades in the same crisis, then it does pose a serious challenge. So we know that there were efforts to actually fund education for a lot of the, not just the camp that I visited, but across the globe.

But then one of the things that happened, a side effect of the Ukrainian conflict, was that we saw more funds being redirected to Ukraine. And then education became one of the things that was cut off drastically in terms of serving the needs for other populations as well.

So at the time that we were at this camp, there were students who had done extremely well on their ordinary levels, but no one could tell them if they would be able to proceed to advanced levels. And those who had their advanced levels, unless they would go to a state university, but they would also still need some funding because they have to live outside the camp, then no one knows what's actually going to happen.

Jan: And that really brings, um, uh, our conversation around to not only other humanitarian, uh, causes, you know, shifting money, but in general, I think 2025, 26 has seen donors draw step back in a, in a big way, particularly state-based donors.

So these, these big changes, how are they coming through and do you see a, a point in time where global donor activity might come back to something like it was before?

So this is a really horrible question. I'm so sorry, Noni, to ask...

Noni: ...yeah, I dunno, I don't know if we, we can expect that it will ever bounce back, but as I said in the beginning, I think crisis always has been and always will be with us.

I just have to hope that there's something in us, about our humanity, that means that we will rise again, and that this will become just one of the major points in the history, or in the timeline, where we probably learned some hard lessons and we then did things a bit better. Who knows?

But yes, the changes have been drastic and so. If I would look at what has happened just in the last four years or so, 2022 becomes the first year in history that you get more funding directed to humanitarian crisis than development.

So this was a big deal, and it also sort of left us with very uneasy feelings, because ideally you would want to believe that you are making enough progress that you can channel enough funds to development causes.

But the humanitarian crisis, even at that point was still severely underfunded. There were still issues really in relation to meeting the needs, but then we had a very, very dramatic change in 2025 when the US withdrew funding from a lot of the agencies, and they've been historically one of the biggest donors.

So about one third of humanitarian funds were lost as a result of that. And other nations started following suit, just because of everything that's happening in the world, or whatever, who knows?

But it looked like by the end of 2025, we were set to lose about 45%, or it was gonna be 45% less than what we had in 2023. So that's a lot of funding to lose in a very short space of time. When it is also clear that your needs are not going down, they are actually going up.

And the factors that drive those needs are such that, from our understanding, these needs are gonna be here for a long time. They're not just going to suddenly disappear, you know?

Jan: And our listeners will include businesses, but also individuals, and individuals that live within communities and work for businesses.

What can they do to help address both, you know, when disaster happens, but also this changing context within which such a catastrophic loss of capability and funding to allow, you know, people to live with dignity?

Noni: So I think what would be interesting, if you look at the, well, funding, I think remains one of the biggest and most pressing issues right now. And there are a lot of organisations that actually do rely more on what we call private donors, so people like you and me. Doctors Without Borders that I work for is one example of such an organisation.

So they have tried for a long time to not rely too much on institutional funding because of the issues that it brings, right? So it's unpredictable. An institutional donor at any point in time, for whatever reasons, might decide to pull out. Or an institutional donor might tell you, you have to give to this side of the river, but you can't give aid on that side of the river.

But it's also how you are perceived, right? So depending on where your money comes from, you can actually have issues delivering humanitarian assistance. They may not trust you if you're taking money from a government that is not trusted.

So it's a very, very complex landscape. And by being able to get money from individuals, people like you and me, what usually happens is that then they can make the decisions to actually direct their resources and efforts to where the needs are biggest.

And that will usually be your forgotten crises, like Sudan we were talking about, and on so much the CNN disasters, because they're already overfunded and we start to do silly things with the money that we get, right?

And then the second issue would relate to when you do that, so usually we get in touch with these organisations because something relatable has just happened somewhere, and we really would like to help.

Much as you would like to help that particular place, it's usually wiser to say, I just would like to donate to your cause. You know, use these funds as you see fit because once they have reached whatever capacity they can in terms of that place that drew you to them, they're free to use these funds elsewhere.

So they also lose a lot of precious time contacting donors to say, you know what? That money that you gave us, we no longer need it there. Can we redirect it there, or can we pay it back? So it's also time that they don't have that they are going to lose.

In kind donations are also usually like, they are quite intuitive, right? I just look around in my cupboard, or at this point in my life, in life I love coffee. I might think all those people might need coffee. Can you imagine [Jan laughs] going for a whole week without coffee? Let me donate all my coffee, right...?

Jan: ...yeah.

Noni: But not everyone is a coffee drinker. Or even if they were under certain circumstances, probably coffee is the last thing on their mind. So as we were saying earlier, cash is gonna be king, always better to give cash.

But there are also more direct ways now to, to give aid. I would still say channel it through the experienced organisations, but there are places where now they face limitations just because of how they're perceived. It's quite easy to get in touch with grassroots organisations.

A lot of them will have some kind of online presence. They will have some kind of track record, and I think there is a drive towards that localisation. So we have to think beyond what we consider to be our classical charities and try to find out locally who is doing what and who can we trust with a particular task.

And then that should hopefully help us to diversify the landscape and also get an injection of new ways of doing things that we don't get. But also ask the hard questions, I think, especially when it comes to what's the long-term plan?

So you are asking me to give you 20 pounds so that you can perform a simple surgical procedure. So what happens after the surgical procedure is done? Who's gonna see to it that it's done responsibly for this individual so that their quality of life actually does improve as a result of it, rather than declines?

Paul: Do you think we can expect to see more humanitarian crises, disasters in the future?

We've got issues such as climate change, we've got issues such as what we've seen in the Middle East with the conflict there. Do you think there's gonna be more of these that will therefore lead to more causes that need assistance?

Noni: Sadly, much as I am a very optimistic person, I think if I'm realistic, this is going to be the path that we are on, at least for a while.

And part of the reason is that we have all these interacting factors and we can't really tell, you know, where they're coming from or we don't know which point to hit first in order to be able to reverse it.

A lot of the issues that we see now actually are at the back of climate change. The climate change is actually causing a lot of conflict, it's causing a lot of displacement. And then you have other things that are thrown into the system that make it worse.

So right now we talk about AI, it's the big thing. But a lot of these data centres actually are fuelling land tenure conflicts in these already very precarious environments.

So farmers might think, if I haven't had a good yield in 10 years, I might as well sell off my land to a data centre. But then questions start to arise. Who has the right to sell the land and what goes on there? But also it has polluting effects, right? So water bodies are not the same. Water that was already scarce is not drinkable because of this activity. And then this also forced people further out, and then they're having to fight for very limited spaces and resources.

So we have a, we are stuck in a vicious cycle where it's really difficult to pinpoint like, okay, where do we need to effect change in order to start reversing this for that to happen?

So yes, unfortunately, at least for a while, we should expect that these disasters are going to arise. But also we should, now, I suppose at this point, also accept that we are gonna have to do something.

Otherwise, if it goes unmitigated, you know, we might just obliterate ourselves. And it, it sounds like a doomsday thing, but I think, if we do not intervene and we continue to carry on as we do, I don't see how we are going to deal with the effects of what is happening now, and they also are going to have an effect on the rest of the world.

Right now, Europe talks about the refugee crisis, right? Where these people coming from, they're being displaced from these places because they're becoming uninhabitable. And it's very difficult to account for what causes what, because we don't have formally what we call a climate refugee, right? So I can't go to a country and say, because of climate change, where I come from is unlivable, and I need refuge in this place.

So also the strict and formal definitions of who counts as someone who needs help, what counts as a disaster, what counts as what needs an intervention. It's all outdated. We need to look at it again before we can be able to make progress, and we can see a downward trend.

Jan: So one thing that strikes me, Noni, from talking to you on this podcast, but also from, from having shared a coffee with you, uh, more recently is that, um, you, you need a [soft laugh] huge heart to do this kind of work.

Um, so, so with that huge heart, you know, sort of fully pumping, what do you see happening in the future in this area?

Noni: Probably the future of humanitarian action is a return to the basics. You know, uh, we talk, this is a, in English, they say charity begins at home. [Jan laughs] And, and what, what is home and what does it look like as we become global citizens, right?

I think it, it has a lot with us sort of leaning into our humanity, more than anything else. A lot of what drives the world now is much more, I don't know, external. You know, we think about economic indicators, we think about, well, even the Happiness Index is based on economic success. It's not based on things that are internal, you know, that would make us happy.

I'm upset that my own home country is considered to be a miserable country, because that's not my experience of it, right? But I think just tapping into our humanity and being able to have empathy in the way of you and I, or three of us sitting at this table together right now, has nothing to do or very little to do with our own decisions and effort up to this point, right?

So we have been lucky in many ways and that's why we are able to be sitting at this table and having this conversation. But we easily could have been the other person going through this forgotten crisis. And if we would understand that, then, I think it changes how we think about people seeking refuge and how we think about their particular circumstances.

And then the second thing, I think, one of the things that I like to say, this came from my husband, for one of our wedding anniversaries he got me a t-shirt that says, 'we are the ones we have been waiting for', right? I don't think that at this point in time we can look fully to institutions to do what is necessary.

A lot of what I see actually giving us a lot of promise is in the grassroots. It's in people seeking refuge themselves, taking initiative, deciding that rather than watch this place turn into a desert, we are gonna regreen it, we are gonna do whatever it takes.

I will plant a tree that takes 20 years to mature, and I accept that I may not be there when this tree matures, but it's going to make a difference for whoever is gonna come after me. And trying to think about how these grassroots movements can get a bit more support, probably is going to give us much more hope.

And then hopefully when our institutions sort themselves out, you know, they will come into a place where we know exactly what needs to be done. We are ready to listen to, and have the evidence base for, trusting the local knowledge and, and relying on that knowledge to make better decisions in terms of what is going to happen.

And, and we just hope for the best, I guess. I wish I had the answers, but it's quite difficult to know which way this goes. But I think until something changes in the geopolitical landscape, we are the ones we've been waiting for. We are gonna have to pick things up and do what we can.

Paul: Well, Nonhlanhla, thank you so much for joining us and bringing us such great insight.

Noni: Well, thanks for having me. It was an interesting conversation.

[Theme music]

Paul: Have you ever been an accidental anything?

Jan: [laughing] I don't think so.

Paul: I'm, I'm just thinking 'cause Noni described herself as an accidental humanitarian. Having gone from her...

Jan: ...ah, that's a nice idea, yeah...

Paul: ...graduation, um, and looking for jobs in a country where she said they were 80% unemployment rate, which was, oh, unimaginable. Um, to Yeah. Becoming a humanitarian and becoming quite a successful humanitarian logistician.

Jan: Yes. And I, I was really fascinated, um, by her background in mass logistics. And then it takes you into the heart of, of, of human, the human condition.

Paul: ...mm-hmm, yes...

Jan: ...I mean, quite a fantastic journey across...

Paul: ...yes, yeah. Start off working for Médecins sans Frontières and then end up at Lancaster University. And yes, working all across all of these many issues and having that personal experience of having gone to the refugee camps, seeing what the issues are there, building relationships with people, seeing what they need, and seeing how this might be applied on an international, national level. There's so much there to consider.

Jan: It is. And um, I was particularly, uh, from an academic perspective, uh, thinking about John Rawls, who's a political, uh, philosopher. And he talks about you should design a system, any kind of system, with the veil of ignorance in place. Um, that is, when you design the system, you don't know what your position in the system's going to be.

And that really came through when she was talking about um, you know, sort of some of that future sort of humanitarian response. That we are, we are the lucky ones and there's no reason why we should be the lucky ones, but we are.

So, um, so that Rawlsian, you know, theory of justice, I thought was underpinning a lot of this.

Paul: And the fact that Noni said the more, the worst humanitarian crisis at the moment is what's happening in Sudan. And it isn't one that's getting that kind of coverage, isn't getting any kind of huge amount of public attention to it, but it is affecting, she said, close to 50% of the population there.

And still, we're not treating it as the biggest humanitarian issue that people should be paying attention to. And there's a whole lot there about perspective

from outside, as opposed to perspective from inside, and how we treat these situations justly.

Jan: And I was really taken by her absolute numbers versus percentage of population...

Paul: ...mm-hmm...

Jan: ...because of, of course they mean very different things...

Paul: ...mm-hmm...

Jan: ...so there, there was so many, you know, sort of ways of thinking and, and certainly, you know, turn cogs and wheels in my head to make sense of things.

So like, we are the ones that we've been waiting for, for example, you know, that really sort of, you know, hit home, uh, and, you know, can't outsource your humanity. You have to exercise it yourself. Um, it was very...

Paul: ...yes...

Jan: ...impactful...

Paul: ...going back to the importance of the individual and the grassroots. And we've discussed this many times before, whether that be an individual business can have a, a policy and push forward and do something good, even if overarching political winds, or something, are going in another direction.

Same with individuals for humanitarian issues. They can donate to the right people, they can take action and do the right things.

Jan: Well, dear listeners, uh, sorry to have taken you on that journey. I'm well, no, am I sorry? No, I'm not sorry. I think it's a very good part of the journey to come on with us.

Paul: And we're gonna be continuing in the realm of humanitarianism, refugee camps, next week when we're gonna be welcoming Dr Sophie Alkhaled from here at Lancaster University to discuss her experiences working with people in refugee camps.

There's gonna be a slightly different direction to it. We're gonna be touching on how entrepreneurship can emerge in these refugee camps. But also Sophie's experience is more in the Middle East around Syrian refugees, and people like that. So we'll get different perspectives on it from there.

Jan: That'd be excellent.

Paul: Until then, thank you very much for listening. It's goodbye from me, Paul Turner.

Jan: And from me, Jan Bebbington.

[Theme music]