Episode 7: Voices from Yemen: Delivering AID in a Conflict Zone| Dialogue with Ibrahim El Haddad from OCHA

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Hisham Allam

Hello everyone and welcome to DevelopmentAid Dialogues our new project is exploring the heart of humanitarian aid to most critical topics. Today, we are joined by Mr. Ibrahim El Haddad, a seasoned humanitarian professional with over 14 years of experience in the field. Ibrahim serves as the head of information, analysis, and communication unit at the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, OCHA, in Yemen. I'm your host, Hisham Allam. Hello, Ibrahim. It's a pleasure to have you on our podcast today.

Ibrahim El Haddad

Thank you, Hisham. Good morning.

Hisham Allam

Good morning, let's begin by discussing the impact of the conflict in Yemen. Has it had any direct effect on the delivery of humanitarian aid?

Ibrahim El Haddad

The country has been split in two due to the war with the series negative economic situation it also means we depend on cooperation of the two parties in an active conflict with each other for access. Yemen is a big country, there is a large area we need to cover and a huge amount of people in need. This comes, with a lot of challenges, logistical coordination challenges, but, in the last year, on average, we served around 8. 5 million people in Yemen in 333 districts with over 200 partners, despite all of these challenges we are trying to deliver as much as we can especially the lack of funding situation, the limited financial resources restrict any potential scale up operation to meet the needs of the affected population.

Hisham Allam

What are the biggest challenges faced by the aid organizations in reaching affected populations in Yemen?

Ibrahim El Haddad

One of them is displacement, we have 4. 5 million IDPs in Yemen. They displaced from their own houses to other areas. There's complex emergencies in Yemen, we have health education, shelter, wash, protection. Yemen, as I mentioned, is big country. So, we need to coordinate with the two authorities. The two sides of the conflict and we need to reach the needs to the affected population.

Hisham Allam

How OCHA is addressing the displacement issue for people in Yemen?

Ibrahim El Haddad

Through the humanitarian needs overview, the main document that we are working. This document reflects all the needs in Yemen covering all the clusters. Let me explain. In Yemen, there's 13 clusters active. It started from mine action to shelter, health, food security, etc. So, OCHA addressed those challenges by doing coordination. Coordination with all the humanitarian organizations, with the authorities on the ground, with the local community to deliver the assistance to the most needed people in Yemen. And as I mentioned, 333 districts over a large area, this is another challenge. But what we are doing with the humanitarian community around 200 active partners deliver some type of assistance for the affected population.

Hisham Allam

What kind of assistance?

Ibrahim El Haddad

It might be a food, general food distribution, health consultation through the health cluster and WHO, in coordination with the line ministers in Yemen. Provide shelter needs or nonfood items tens and non-food items and dignity kits for the, displaced people. As a OCHA, we maintain this coordination mechanism active. And we try to reach every area in Yemen

Hisham Allam

Do you think that OCHA's capabilities are meeting the huge number that you have mentioned of displaced people in Yemen? Or you need other external assistance from other NGOs?

Ibrahim El Haddad

Of course, as a coordination agency, we don't work alone. We work with our partners, with other humanitarian organization in Yemen. For example, for displacement, we follow up with the IOM, International Organization for Migrants, with the UNFPA, because they have rapid response mechanism. We work with local authorities with local NGOs to check what is the numbers and the needs. We are speaking about 10 years of conflict now. So many of the people displaced for more than one time. So, what we try is to reach to the absolute or to the most accurate number of IDPs and identify their vulnerabilities and profiling their situation.

Hisham Allam

Can you describe the specific strategies and approaches used by OCHA to ensure the effective and efficient distribution of aids in Yemen's conflict zones?

Ibrahim El Haddad

Let me focus again on the humanitarian needs overview and the humanitarian response plan. Those documents inform the whole humanitarian response for the year. The HNO document discusses in detail the multiple needs of communities across Yemen. For example, health assistance, water and sanitation, food, protection, among other needs. The HRB document lays out the humanitarian community plan to respond to these needs. As well as how much funding is required to do. So, those two documents, we work together with all the humanitarian community, with local communities to ensure that the needs are reflected and the response for the coming year is planned. For this reason, we know how much money and how many people we will target in the next planning year through those two documents and by this way

Hisham Allam

So, what, what is the estimated number you are targeting next year?

Ibrahim El Haddad

We will target around 11 million in the 2024 out of 17 million people in need in Yemen. So, we have a lack of support for 6 million people. It is not lack of support because that document is a brutalization documents. We need to brutalize our response. We can say that we are able to respond to all the people in need. This is a wish list or we hope to reach all people, but we try to be realistic and we try to land for the most needed people and target them.

Hisham Allam

So how do you prioritize these, this segment of people that are on the top priority for OCHA to deliver the aids?

Ibrahim El Haddad

We use the Joint Intersectoral Analytical Framework, global methodology used in humanitarian crisis around the world. So based on the JIAF methodology we can identify the number of people in need and the severity for the need.

Hisham Allam

According to what you have defined, there are 17 million people in need and out of the 17, you targeted 11 million. So, the 6 million, this is what I mean till they are integrated within your standards what's happened to them? Who, who's addressing them? What kind of aids or support they are receiving?

Ibrahim El Haddad

There's 17 million people in need and the 11 is targeted. Now how to identify or to define the six million we take in our consideration the funding trends. So, we are trying to identify the most brutalized or the most in need and try to target them as a priority. For example, some people have multiple needs and some of them have one need. So, by this coordination mechanism, we can try to support either this person or vulnerability group according to the available resources, according to our capacity on the ground, according to humanitarian partners so a lot of factors, but we are trying to deliver the assistance to most of the people in need and mainly the target. So that this is a plan, Hisham our plan is to deliver assistance for 11 million. If we are able to deliver the assistance for more than 11 million, we will do that.

Hisham Allam

Okay, I got, I got the point.

Ibrahim El Haddad

Do we have resources? The HRB, the Yemen, HRB for 2023, 40% funded so for 2024, as of today, 22%. So far, we received 596 million out of 2.7 billion. So we have multiple systems in a place to ensure the safety of staff. We analyze the presence of the armed actors, the conflict dynamics and of course we take some physical measures to, for example, to secure the offices, our guest houses and et cetera.

Hisham Allam

What you do or your team do to secure yourself and your team members? Just to make our audience imagine how dangerous the situation is.

Ibrahim El Haddad

For example, we have curfew in Yemen and we need to move from place to another place. We need to submit a bare and ensure that we have the approval from different parties. One of them is the DSS, which is the secretariat entity in charge of the safety and security of staff. And they take the lead on these issues. So, once we move to deliver any assistance or visit any location, we reach out to DSS and also, we submit approval to ensure because they have their, security officers on the ground, so they are able to advise us if it is okay or not okay to visit that location, especially if it is a within the front line or the areas that there's a clash. So, as OCHA we try to follow all the procedures to ensure that our staff is safe and we can deliver the assistance in a safely way.

Hisham Allam

What is the curfew time?

Ibrahim El Haddad

It depends. It depends from, from area to another area so as I mentioned, Yemen is big country. We have main offices in Sana'a and in Adan. We have prisons in different areas in Marib, in Ibb, in Taiz. in Haida, in Saba.

Hisham Allam

But what is the average time? How, how, how long it, it lasts the curfew.

Ibrahim El Haddad

Eight, eight 8:00 PM or 9:00 PM And DSS, the United Nations Department for Security and Safety, they are responsible to review all of these modules and updates. So, we follow their guidance in such matters it is not agency by agency. It is under the U. N. D. S. S. Umbrella.

Hisham Allam

Collaboration is a key in complex situation. How does OCHA coordinate with other humanitarian actors such as NGOs and U. N. Agencies to maximize the impact of aid delivery and to avoid duplication of efforts?

Ibrahim El Haddad

Let's start step by step OCHA, doesn't operate alone. So, OCHA coordinates efforts to develop the HRB documents with extensive consultation with all stakeholders. So, this document is not OCHA document. It is a humanitarian document which goes to the world. So, for example, 2024 Human Terrorism Plan created based on an extensive area-based consultation involving authorities, representatives of affected people, local and international organizations, and other UN agencies. So, this approach ensures a brutalized plan that reflects the actual common needs and common objective.

Secondly, OCHA facilitates the cluster coordination system where humanitarian organizations are grouped into clusters based on their area of expertise. The system allows effective coordination and avoid overlap in aid delivery.

For example, last year we have around 200 active partners in Yemen around 150 local organizations the rest, either INGOs or UN. So, for example 50 organization, they are working in health, so they coordinate among the healthy cluster. Another 40, they work with education so there is education cluster. They are meeting on a monthly basis or weekly basis or biweekly and they coordinate, they discuss the needs.

Also, OCHA organized the regular coordination meetings at the central level and the sub offices level, bringing together all the relevant humanitarian actors. Those meetings enabled OCHA and the humanitarian actors to discuss strategies, review progress, or identify gaps in the response and adjust plans to ensure an effective and unified response.

Hisham Allam

How can you convince or encourage the three quarters of the NGOs working in the field to follow or to coordinate with OCHA?

Ibrahim El Haddad

Imagine around 200 or 100 organizations, they are working without any coordination or mechanism. So, most of them, will support the same families or the same people but through proper coordination, a lot of organizations will avoid overlapping in the assistance delivery. Also, they will save time and they will assist the situation and share information and experience. So how to convince them? I think all the humanitarian community agreed that coordination is a critical topic and we need to coordinate among ourselves to cover the funding gaps and to respond to the needs globally. Now if we are speaking about Yemen, we encourage to put all of our efforts in one place and work together because our role is to help people. Our role is to help Yemeni.

Hisham Allam

Advocacy plays a crucial role in humanitarian aid delivery. Can you share how OCHA advocates for access to humanitarian assistance in areas controlled by various parties to the conflict in Yemen?

Ibrahim El Haddad

OCHA plays an important role in access assessments, analyzing situation, identify challenges and inform humanitarian actors of the accessibility, accessible, hard to reach or inaccessible areas. So OCHA is on our mandate coordination, engage directly with the authorities to discuss and resolve all issues related to the humanitarian access. For this reason, OCHA leads the humanitarian access working group.

Hisham Allam

If you have double authorities, a conflict of authorities, with which one do you coordinate?

Ibrahim El Haddad

With both.

Hisham Allam

With both?

Ibrahim El Haddad

Yeah. Okay so, because our main purpose is to deliver the assistance and assist the situation on the ground. We coordinate with both. For example, in 2023 or early 2024, OCHA conducted several assessment missions to some inaccessible areas, or we call it hard to reach area, enabling aid agencies to reach areas for the first time since the conflict started. So, this happened after a lot of advocacies and a lot of negotiation and a lot of discussion with the concerned authorities.

Hisham Allam

Do you have examples of failures for making this advocacy?

Ibrahim El Haddad

In the humanitarian work, we don't have something failure because once we start any work, there is a risk that we will not be able to complete that mission, but I think I don't have any example that we failed maybe it will take more time to achieve the result, but with negotiation and coordination, we will achieve, but it will take more time.

Hisham Allam

I love the optimistic approach. Can you share with me some examples of innovative solutions or initiatives implemented by OCHA to overcome logistical or operational challenges in delivering aid in Yemen?

Ibrahim El Haddad

I will give you an example from U-N-S-C-R and partners. They provided transitional shelters to IDPs in Al Hudaydah using locally environmentally sustainable materials such as wood and palm leaves. This initiative is cost effective and had the dual benefit of meeting immediate shelter needs and also offering economic empowerment to the communities in that area. So, we rely on the local NGOs we ensure more localized solution and response activities in terms of innovation strengthen the overall response, enhance humanitarian access because local NGOs are available, or they are working in all Yemen. UN agencies and INGOs, they are covering some areas.

Hisham Allam

How does OCHA ensure that AIDS reaches the most vulnerable populations, including women, children, and also, as you have mentioned earlier, the displaced persons amidst the complex dynamics of the conflict?

Ibrahim El Haddad

All of our documents are sex and age desegregated. So, you will see that women men, boys, girls, and people with disability elderly people, all of, even if our humanitarianisms were planned. So, OCHA coordinates with all stakeholders for comprehensive needs assessment and also mapping vulnerability, including the needs and locations of the most vulnerable population in Yemen. So, through the cluster coordination mechanism, we ensure the response address the specific needs of population some of the projects will cover health and education or water and sanitation, but the consequences of that project will enhance the health situation because if we fix the water, we will enhance the health and after that, it will enhance the nutrition and the food situation.

So OCHA, in summary, works with all partners on integrated humanitarian programming that take into account the vulnerabilities, including all gender and age sensitive gears, throw this, and all of this information is public online. So, you can see and compare what we've learned. Or what was the needs according to the HNO and what is our target and what is our reach as of March, 2024 or average 2024 through a dynamic and public dashboard. Because in our transparency, we can enhance the response. We can see where we need to target

Hisham Allam

And you follow up yourself or your local partners?

Ibrahim El Haddad

We collect that information from all the partners working on the ground.

Hisham Allam

How can you guarantee that this information and the feedback are realistic? Maybe they are over exaggerating just to get more funds or to get good feedback from you or to be a strong partner?

Ibrahim El Haddad

There is a monitoring mechanism in Yemen. So, the cluster work closely with the partners and they have their own monitoring mechanism and they have their own meetings that they discuss the needs and the reach and the response and the plans on a regular basis.

So, and by this way, we enhance the accountability toward affected people. So, we are accountable, we do some field visits, we review the situation, the numbers and we look into that. On monthly basis, we have the monthly humanitarian update document, which we reflect the humanitarian situation and what is the response and what is the challenges.

So, this product is a monthly product and it covers all Yemen. So, exaggeration, the last point I think still we didn't reach to the target. As I mentioned that last year, we reached only to 8.5 million so the number is not exaggerated. And by the way, we have some aggregation rules to avoid duplication because we don't do summation process like what organization reached to 100 and Y organization reached to another 100 maybe those the 100 and 100 is the same, so once we publish our reports, we apply some aggregation rules to avoid double counting Okay, so if those we call it as inter cluster reach that those numbers reached by different clusters and different partners on the ground.

Hisham Allam

Do you have in mind any examples of how the humanitarian situation is and also if you can share with us some positive examples of progress that took place in the field?

Ibrahim El Haddad

Okay, let's start from the achievements and progress. Recently, we published a document called Stories of Inspiration. And this document includes around 23 success stories from local NGOs, INGOs, and UN agencies covering different clusters. It is available online. And this document, the main idea is to reflect that despite the current situation in Yemen and the changes in Yemen, but the humanitarian community they are continue and willing to deliver more and more. This example is only covering success stores from 2023 Plan. Education, building a new two classrooms in one of the schools and after that, the students in that village, they start to receive a proper education because before they used to have their education in the tent with the hot weather, et cetera. So, they are not focused, but this enhanced the education mechanism for the students. And we have a lot of stories. There's a lot of good stories

Hisham Allam

Do you have examples of how bad is the humanitarian situation? Example that reflects the situation?

Ibrahim El Haddad

I will go back to the, my previous point about Yemen. Yemen is a big country which needs which there is a lot of needs and there is a lot of challenges face the humanitarian community to respond, for example, IDPs, migrants, refugees, health crisis, education, WASH, etc. So, what we are doing is we are doing is we put all of our efforts to respond to this crisis. But what we ask is for more funding for Yemen, as I mentioned now, until this moment, 20 percent of the required fund to respond to the humanitarian needs is secured. 20 percent out of 2.7 billion. And we are in almost in, in the, in the second half of the year. So, what we are calling is to call all the donors and to continue and support us to deliver the assistance to the most needed people.

Hisham Allam

The humanitarian needs are constantly evolving. What are the key priorities for humanitarian assistance in Yemen in the coming year? And how is OCHA adopting its strategies to address these evolving needs?

Ibrahim El Haddad

For the next year, we actually will start the planning for the next HNO and HRB in early July, but what is it? The action or the humanitarian needs overview and the humanitarian responsibility plan for the next year, for 2025. But as OCHA, we invest more and more in localized response strategies based on consultation with various stakeholders, including the affected population and to understand what is the specific needs of districts and communities. Last year we did something called area-based approach. We visited almost all the governorates in Yemen with humanitarian community and with the line ministers and we listened from the ground we hear the needs. What are the needs? What is the situation on the on the ground? And we reflect this in our HRB last year. So brutalizing multi sectorial and integrated programming to ensure the interventions to address a wide range of needs from health and nutrition, shelter, livelihoods.

Okay, so this multi sectorial and integrated programming, it will enhance more and more the situation. And this is one of the priorities that we are doing. Also utilize the cash-based assistance, provide the affected population with the flexibility to address their most pressing needs by buying something from the local market and also to support the local economy.

Hisham Allam

And it, it is, it's on monthly pay. The cash,

Ibrahim El Haddad

It depends on the criteria and eligibility. We have cash market working group in Yemen. And all the cash actors, they are members in this working group and they coordinate among themselves. But this is the top picture. What we will do also to continue working closely with the authorities to address the security situation, to ensure safe access and timely assistance to people in need.

Hisham Allam

How do you build trust with the authorities?

Ibrahim El Haddad

By coordination.

Hisham Allam

Only coordination?

Ibrahim El Haddad

Coordination, negotiation, meeting with them.

Hisham Allam

How do you convince them to cooperate with you?

Ibrahim El Haddad

I think we work in Yemen and what we need is to ensure that we work to support the people in need to respond to the humanitarian needs.

Hisham Allam

Part of your work is to coordinate or to deal with militias, people that have different mindsets. How can you convince them to find a common ground to negotiate mutual benefits?

Ibrahim El Haddad

OCHA led last year the area-based consultation workshop and discovering all the governance in Yemen. And these consultations were mainly to ensure localized response tailored to the specific needs of each community. Line ministers were there, humanitarian community were there, local community, the people from the ground, they participate in those consultation. We are, we will continue to ensure that the voices and from the people is here and listened and we will continue to advocate to respond to their needs and try to support the Yemen Yemeni people. This is our rule. So, we will continue to do that.

Hisham Allam

I would like to ask you about technology. What is the role of data and technology and improving the delivery of aid in Yemen conflict zones and any notable success or challenges in this regard that comes in your mind?

Ibrahim El Haddad

When we started this area-based consultation, it was based on analyzing the data. So, as I mentioned, we received the 4W data, who does what, where, when on monthly basis. Okay, but by analyzing this information, we look what we need to do more, what this data tells us. What about this IDB, for example, so what we are doing is try to analyze all the available data in Yemen and to review our response, review our plan based on the available data in Yemen assessments is by the end of the day, is a data. So, we need to analyze this assessment data or collected and try to build synergies between this data set and the other data set to see what is the full picture.

So, this involves a regular feedback consultation with all the stakeholders with the communities and to enhance our decision-making process, to see what is the feedback they will provide us on the effective of our aid intervention. So, we will utilize all the available resources, either technological, community engagement, data, et cetera, to achieve the main outcome that we have a proper and effective response in Yemen.

Which respond to the people in need and we will target the most people in need according to the available resources. Because I mentioned we have another crisis in the world so we need to ensure that Yemen is still on the map.

Hisham Allam

As an UN officer, it is expected sooner or later to move with another mission to another place. What will you keep in mind and in heart from your experience in Yemen?

Ibrahim El Haddad

I think it will strike my heart that Yemen is a beautiful country, so they deserve to have some peace without peace, Yemen will continue to suffer. So, we called in Arab countries Al Yaman Al Saeed, Happy Yemen. So, I hope one day we will see Yemen again happy country without war, without any humanitarian crisis. And go and visit the nice places in Yemen. There is a lot of nice places. So, what really stuck in my mind to be honest with you, the people in Yemen. They are very kind people in Yemen. Their hospitality is amazing. And I hope one day after leaving Yemen, go back to Yemen and visit those places without any humanitarian crisis there.

Hisham Allam

That was a truly insightful conversation. Ibrahim, thank you for sharing your expertise and the important work OCHA is doing in Yemen. The situation in Yemen remains incredibly complex, but thanks to dedicated professionals like yourself and your team, there is still hope for Yemen people. For our listeners, stay tuned for another enlightening conversation on DevelopmentAid Dialogues. Until next time, this is your host Hisham Allam signing off. Goodbye.