

[MUSIC PLAYING] MARK: Welcome back to The Harvard Center for International Development's weekly Speaker Series podcast. My name is Mark [INAUDIBLE], student ambassador for the CID. And this week, we're joined by Fatema Sumar, Vice President for Global Programs at Oxfam America, discussing transforming humanitarian response towards local humanitarian leadership.

I'm sitting down with Fatema after her appearance in the CID Speaker Series at Harvard Kennedy School today, October 11th, 2019. Welcome, Fatema, so nice to have you here today.

FATEMA SUMAR: Thanks, Mark, it's so great to be here.

MARK: So, today you came and talked about humanitarian response and leadership here at the Kennedy School. In Oxfam you oversee both regional development and humanitarian response. I was wondering if you could discuss for a bit the differences between humanitarian aid and development, and also how the two are related.

FATEMA SUMAR: Sure. So when we say humanitarian assistance, it's meant to focus on lifesaving activities. So activities carried out in response to an emergency such as shelter, food, water, sanitation and medical care. The goal of humanitarian aid is simply to save lives and alleviate suffering. Ideally, it's a short-term response until the situation, such as the conflict or natural disaster, stabilizes, and longer-term situations can be implemented with some predictability.

When we say development, we mean a long-term response to structural and systemic issues, such as poverty or institutional weakness, issues that can prevent a country from making progress towards real equality and opportunity for all. So once a conflict is over, for example, recovering from it, improving the situation for the long term by addressing economic challenges, for example, would be the work of development actors.

Now, that's the theory. In practice, it's rare that these two areas of work can be so neatly separated. Though the funding for them is often based on the idea that they are very distinct and clearly defined activities. We know, though, in reality, there's overlap between the two sectors.

Food is a good example. Food might be provided as humanitarian aid during a famine, but eventually it's going to lead to making sure that there are systems in place for long-term development, so that everyone we know has food for the future.

MARK: I'm sure there's something to be said for humanitarian aid's role in resolving shocks, so it doesn't become a long-term, permanent inequality. So oftentimes people, myself included, think only of natural disasters when they hear the word humanitarian response, but clearly these aren't the only kinds of disasters. You mentioned conflict just when you gave that answer.

Could you talk a bit more about the different kinds of problems that require humanitarian response, and some of the most significant humanitarian crises the world faces today?

FATEMA SUMAR: Sure. So we know that natural disasters often require humanitarian response. So people think of earthquakes, tsunamis, landslides, but man-made disasters can also be equally dangerous. These are conflicts like wars between countries, or internal conflicts, that will oftentimes require lifesaving response.

We also know famine can be caused by conditions other than drought or crop failure. Famines can be caused by poor use of food supplies, as an example. And that would be a man-made disaster that would require large scale, lifesaving assistance.

Oftentimes, when we read our news headlines, we think about disasters as things that happen in faraway countries, in developing countries. But the reality is they can happen anywhere, right? We saw this here in the United States after Hurricane Katrina, where hundreds of thousands of Americans needed humanitarian assistance.

And the number of people who will likely need humanitarian assistance is going to be affected and increased by things like climate-related events, that are increasing unless we get climate under control. When we think about some of the worst crises today in the world, we know the famine in Yemen, which is the world's largest humanitarian disaster, the situation in Venezuela, and the conflict in Syria are some of the largest humanitarian crises we're facing that really require lifesaving response every single day.

MARK: So at Oxfam, the stated purpose is to help create lasting solutions to the injustice of poverty. And you mentioned a moment ago that humanitarian aid has a very immediate aspect to it. So what role do you see humanitarian aid and humanitarian response playing in reducing global poverty?

FATEMA SUMAR: So at Oxfam, our mission is simple but profound. It's to end the injustice of poverty. And I want to put the emphasis on the word injustice. This is really a rights-based approach, to thinking about rights that people are denied every single day by the choices we all make to keep people in poverty.

When you're facing humanitarian conflict or disaster, you're talking about some of the most vulnerable people in the world. People who are denied their basic rights to survive and to live a life with dignity. Added to that are people who don't really have the same chance to do basic things that you and I take for granted. They don't have a chance to feed their families. They don't have a chance to have safe shelter, sanitation, or to be free from outbreaks of diseases like cholera, or other outbreaks of diseases.

Oftentimes these people are denied opportunities to find employment, or have any social and political influence. So these are rights that people are denied all around the world, but are especially exacerbated during a humanitarian crisis. So when we look to work as a humanitarian agency, really addressing the needs of the most vulnerable all around the world, we know that we have to have a rights-based approach, that puts their rights at the center of that if we're going to succeed.

MARK: That's great. You talked about the importance of partnership with

local leadership today when you're speaking, in terms of coordinating humanitarian response, and who should take the responsibility for it. I was really struck just a moment ago by your comments on natural disasters in the US, because it forced me to think a little bit about how would I feel if someone from overseas came to the US, and said, we know what's best for you to deal with Katrina, or the flooding in Houston, or something like that. So, since that was sort of the core of the talk you gave today, what are some of the dangers of neglecting to take that type of local needs first approach.

FATEMA SUMAR: So I loved how you started with thinking about yourself, if you were hit by a disaster and needed help. Would you want to have your voice represented, and what your needs were? What if your needs first were really safe housing, because you already had food stock somewhere that you could get access to? Or your needs were sanitation, or education, to get your kids quickly back in school.

At the heart of it, local communities know what they need. They know what they need, and every day they are the first responders, in times of both minor and major crises. When we don't put them at the center of our response, when we don't empower them, and when we don't fund and listen to them, we actually don't save as many lives as we could.

The simple math is we would save more lives if we fully empowered local actors to lead during humanitarian emergencies. Sometimes, the very power of being from a community means you speak a language that international actors would not speak. You may understand cultural practices in a way that really would not resonate to those flying in for a short-term assignment. You would understand the needs of your most vulnerable whether that's women and girls in the community, the disabled, or other communities that would need special assistance.

So when we don't actually empower local leaders to lead, when we don't put communities at the heart of what their response needs to be, we can design interventions that actually are wrong. They may not actually fulfill the needs of the communities we are supposedly trying to serve.

So we've all heard these stories, right? We've heard these stories of people who need clean drinking water, but instead what we give them are winter coats. Right? We see that all the time in terms of the type of interventions, where we think we're trying to do the right thing because we want to help. So it's really, are we actually giving people what they need? And the easiest and simplest ways to do that is to actually let them tell us, and for us to support that type of response.

MARK: So, you mentioned just a moment ago about the problems that face the most vulnerable groups in society. And it's kind of easy to see how, when you're prioritizing problems, international actors versus the local actors are probably going to see it in a completely different way. So could you maybe elaborate a little bit more, how disasters and humanitarian crises tend to disproportionately affect these most vulnerable groups? And how should you account for this when you're planning humanitarian response? And maybe you could give some examples about where this was an especially important consideration.

FATEMA SUMAR: Sure. So we all know that women and girls face heightened vulnerability during times of crisis, but oftentimes their specific

needs are overlooked. Right? We may have responses, or interventions, that don't really acknowledge the skills, the knowledge, and the agency, the power that they need to be able to actually control their own lives. Whether that's a safety situation, it's in a hunger situation, in an education situation.

So we know that it's not just about having a gender strategy, for instance, in terms of our response, or acknowledging that women and girls have special needs. It's really about shifting our power, voice, funding, and agency to women and women-led organizations, and women's rights organizations, to really drive what it is they need.

We see that all over the world, whether it's situations in Central America, that are some of the most dangerous for women all around the world because of the security, political, and economic context that women face. When we don't put women at the heart of those strategies and solutions, whether that's in those countries, or as they're traveling on caravans to try to migrate out of those countries and seek shelter and refuge, then our responses aren't really as effective as they need to be.

So, we're seeing heightened vulnerability for women in Syria today, in Yemen, especially for how they feed their children. And Yemen, again, the world's largest humanitarian crisis, and largest rates of hunger and famine. We're seeing that in the Northern Triangle, where a woman is murdered every 19 hours in countries like Honduras. So the special needs and situations that women are facing are perilous in so many countries every single day, and that's only heightened during a humanitarian disaster.

MARK: Every 19 hours, that's kind of shocking, actually. You talked about shifting agency to drive what is needed. And in an earlier interview that I saw on YouTube that you gave, you mentioned a major cause of systematic poverty is that the poor, or even vulnerable groups, typically don't have a voice in the political process. So I'm curious, from that perspective, how is Oxfam advocating for people that are vulnerable or in poverty, and how do they create those platforms so that those groups have a voice in the political process?

FATEMA SUMAR: Yeah. So, you know, it's really amazing, we take things like voice for granted. Right? That we have an opportunity here in the United States, for instance, to have a voice, whether that's writing to our local paper, reaching out to our local representative, joining a protest that we have that right to voice.

Well, when we think about our own agency, sometimes it's about transferring that voice to others. So at Oxfam, we've had a couple of different ways that we really think about this. So, for instance, we bring women's rights activists and peacemakers from all around the world to Washington D.C. So, for instance, we had a delegation of women's rights activists from South Sudan, some who had never left their country before, all of a sudden showed up in D.C., and in some of the offices of the most powerful members of the House of Representatives and the Senate, with members of the State Department, USAID and White House, who are now speaking directly to power brokers in Washington about their communities, about their needs, and what they're asking the US government to do.

We don't always need to be an intermediary for others. Sometimes, the best role we can play is to actually let others occupy those spaces, support their journeys so that they can have full voice to those power brokers. Sometimes, that's not here in the United States. That's in countries like in Malawi, where Oxfam has been working with female members of parliament as part of this 50:50 Elect Her campaign.

And this is a national program that looks at increasing the role of women's participation in politics in Malawi. So in 2018, Oxfam launched a media-based campaign profiling women's political leadership. And we compiled 32 documentaries depicting each of the 32 current women MPs in Malawi. This has been so successful that other countries are now looking at this model, as well, to say, wow, look at the voice and role that women parliamentarians in Malawi can have, and the ways that they can actually advance the very types of policies that we want to end the injustice of poverty.

MARK: Yeah, I know for myself, personally, you don't really know what's possible in your life unless you have a role model. So that sounds really fantastic. To build off a little bit more from the empowerment aspect that you're just discussing right now, you also wrote an article for a website called Cognoscenti titled, Want to End the Migrant Crisis? Work to Make Life Better South of the Border.

And also during your talk, you had a theme of strengthening capacity in your approach. So what sort of balance should IGOs, local national actors, take in terms of policies when it comes to providing that immediate humanitarian aid, or response, or whether it's providing aid for refugees, while also trying to improve the lives of people in their countries of origin.

FATEMA SUMAR: So the situation on our southern border, and what we're seeing in the Northern Triangle, is one of those heartbreaking situations that I have ever seen. We know that we have been working in Central America for decades, and we work with local communities. And we hear their stories firsthand. And we know that they're leaving, so many are leaving right now because of a confluence of insecurity, lack of economic opportunity, climate-related drought that is affecting farming opportunities, political violence, family violence, gang-related warfare.

In Honduras, almost 80% of the population lives in poverty. Right? So, when you think about the role organizations can play, the first is thinking about, what are the root causes driving issues like migration? Why are people feeling like the only way they can survive is to leave? If we don't understand those root causes, we can't solve either a humanitarian problem, a political problem, an economic problem, with Band-Aid policy solutions.

So, at Oxfam we really think about root causes and drivers of poverty, and looking at a systemic approach. Then we partner with local communities, that start really in these home communities, to understand where they're coming from, what are the types of interventions that they need? Sometimes they're from a development perspective, sometimes they're economic policies, sometimes they're political, including putting pressure on their local or national governments. Sometimes

that's putting pressure on the US government to do better and to do the right thing.

We know the Trump administration, for instance, has taken a very hard line with respect to governments in Central America, really discarding the root causes and the drivers of poverty that are making so many wanting to flee. We know they've cut hundreds of millions of dollars of foreign aid to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

So whether the intervention point for an INGO, or other organizations who want to help, is humanitarian assistance for those along the border. Whether it's back in their home communities, to think about the types of interventions that could actually help address and strengthen communities, so they don't have to flee, so that they can stay at home, and safe, but live a life with dignity, right? Not just to survive, but to thrive.

Or whether it's to raise awareness about the human empathy of all of those who are struggling. I'm struck, when you read the newspapers here in the United States, and looking at the headlines, we're treating the people fleeing as if they're the criminals, instead of understanding that they're fleeing the criminals, and are fleeing just to survive.

So how we tell a human story around dignity and empathy, that we should always keep our borders open to be the beacon for those just struggling to survive. There's many different intervention points along that journey, and I think it really will require a collective effort from the international community to help provide those communities with safety and security.

MARK: Yeah, I mean, you hear all the time about trade deficits. And maybe there's a little bit of an empathy deficit in the US today? It's perfect that you brought up this change in attitudes for US policy vis-a-vis aid and immigration, because you've had a very long career in the US government prior to coming to Oxfam, including serving as Regional Deputy Vice President in the Millennium Challenge Corporation, as well as a Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Department of State.

So from that perspective, can you talk a bit about your opinions on the recent lowering of the refugee cap in the US and, among other policies, and what effects that might have on global attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers, when the US has for a long time been a leader in this space?

FATEMA SUMAR: I think this decision that was just announced for the fiscal year by the Trump administration to cap refugees, the new ceiling, to 18,000 a year, is one of the most heartbreaking decisions by this administration. When you think that today, we are reaching a crisis where almost 71 million people have fled their homes worldwide.

And those are just the ones that can afford to leave, and afford to flee. So many are stuck and not able to actually leave the conflicts that they're facing. When we know that conflict, violence, persecution, poverty, food insecurity, and climate-related challenges are at their all-time high, and only going to get worse, unless we take the right kinds of policy steps.

We know that now, more than ever, we need to open up this country, our homes, and hearts to people in need of refuge. And that's really a fundamental part of the US national story, and that's been a bipartisan national story from Democratic and Republican administrations for so many years.

And when I had the privilege of serving in the US government, it was also the heart of our own mission. To not just protect American citizens, but to care for others, as well, and to design policies and interventions that would support the moral fabric of who we are as a country.

So when we know that we are at the height of some of the highest displacement rates in the world, and we know that we've had a historical annual target of around 95,000 refugees for admittance, the decision to cap the number of refugees this fiscal year to an all time low of 18,000--

And that doesn't even guarantee that we would have 18,000 even enter the country. We know from Central America alone, only a few hundred were allowed to enter, as an example. We know that we're going backwards, and we're going in the wrong way.

At Oxfam, we are speaking out very vocally with our partners, here in the United States, and Central America, and all around the world, to make sure that the Trump administration really understands the gravity of the situation. And to really put pressure to understand that we are going backwards. And looking at how we can raise the ceiling during this unprecedented crisis.

We're also asking every single presidential candidate for the 2020 election to make this a central pillar of the, policy to admit in their first year of the presidency alone, 125,000 refugees. And the ask Oxfam has is for every single presidential candidate to accept that pledge, to raise the cap and accept 125,000 refugees during their first year of office.

MARK: Yeah, I think that the stance the United States often takes can be permissive for what other countries decide to do afterwards. So I 100% agree with the idea of pressuring political candidates to raise it to 125,000.

So I've asked you a lot of questions. Do you have any closing thoughts, or would you like to share with our listeners how they can learn more about Oxfam, or get involved in some of the issues that you've talked about?

FATEMA SUMAR: So I think we're in this really unprecedented moment in history right now, where we're facing such a complexity of challenges at the local, national, and global level. And it's going to take many years to rebuild the kind of country we want to be. So I would urge everybody to not get overwhelmed when they read the newspapers, when they read the headlines.

We all have a part to play. And we all need to work together to do this. We have a lot of resources on our website, if you go to oxfamamerica.org, of ways you can get involved. Ways you can learn more

about the issues, understand the different types of partners all around the world that are fighting every day for communities to survive and have a voice, so many ways to get involved.

And I want to go back to one of the points you said earlier, which is it starts with human empathy. It starts with caring about the other, even if the other feels far away, or is voiceless, nameless, or faceless. But that we're all in this together, and that we all have a part to play. So at Oxfam, we want people to join us in this cause, and to really know that it's going to take a global community to help end the injustice of poverty.

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MARK: Well, thank you so much, Fatema, for joining us today. And you can find more information about Fatema Sumar's work at Oxfam America at oxfamamerica.org. And you can follow her on Twitter at @fatemadc.

And of course, to learn more about the Center for International Development's research, events, and upcoming Speakers Series lectures, you can also visit us online at cid.harvard.edu. Thanks for listening, and we'll see you back next week.