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*Patrick Fine:* This year on the *Deeper Look* podcast, we're exploring the theme of disruption. And nowhere is disruption exemplified more than in humanitarian response, which is at its core a reaction to disruption.

*Voiceover:* *A Deeper Look*. Exploring what works and what doesn't in development and the changes we can make together to turn ideas into action.

*Patrick Fine:* I'm Patrick Fine, CEO of FHI 360, and this is *A Deeper Look*. The number of active humanitarian crises keeps increasing, in part because new crises erupt but old crises just seem to go on and on and on. Climate change, mass migration and displacement, conflict, and the interaction of a host of economic and social factors confront us with more complex and much longer-lasting crises than we've known in the past. A sign of just how interdependent our world has become is the speed at which the COVID pandemic spread to every country in the world, massively disrupting health systems and economic and social life, exacerbating existing crises and, no doubt, planting the seeds for future ones. The impact of this global pandemic will be with us for a long time to come, and I expect it will shape crisis management and humanitarian response.

A common theme last year was that addressing problems in fragile states and addressing the growing frequency and intensity of crises would be a main focus of the international community with respect to dealing with human development. My guest this episode is Heba Aly. She is an ideal person to talk about humanitarian response. Heba draws attention to the forces that are disrupting the way we think about and carry out humanitarian response through her work as a journalist leading *The New Humanitarian*. And for listeners who aren't familiar with *The New Humanitarian*, this is one of the critical resources available discussing issues and reporting on events in the humanitarian space. It's a terrific resource to draw on. She also hosts her own podcast, which is one of my favorite podcasts, *Rethinking Humanitarianism*, where she invites guests to explore the future of crisis response. Heba, welcome to the podcast.

*Heba Aly:* Thank you so much.

*Patrick Fine:* Uh, Heba, first share with our listeners a little bit about yourself and what drew you to working on humanitarian issues.

*Heba Aly:* Well, I'm a journalist at heart so I, I like to believe that I was drawn to journalism first and foremost. And that was driven by curiosity, by a desire to understand people, by a desire to travel the world and get windows into different cultures. But, I would say that social justice was always a big part of my motivation in becoming a journalist. I've always felt that journalism is an agent of change, that telling the stories of marginalized people, raising awareness about injustices around the world is one way of trying to effect change. And so, the kind of journalism that we do at The New Humanitarian felt like a, a perfect fit between those two desires of really having that tool. And I really do think journalism is a tool to connect with people and understand them, and then, the humanitarian world, which really seeks to reduce those injustices and that suffering.

*Patrick Fine:* And how did The New Humanitarian come about?

*Heba Aly:* It was founded more than 25 years ago now, in 1995.

*Patrick Fine:* Oh, wow.

*Heba Aly:* It was then called *The IRIN News*. It was right after the Rwandan genocide. The UN felt that had there been a better flow of information among the humanitarian responders, they could have saved more lives. So, it began really as a kind of information coordination tool. I wasn't around at the time but it's a good joke now that we sent out our updates by fax machine. And, it was really a kind of "who's doing what?" And then slowly, slowly over the years we, we evolved into a global newsroom with much more of a storytelling approach to our work. But, it has always had that kind of core mission of understanding what's going on on the ground, amplifying the voices of people who are affected, and informing decision makers so that hopefully they take better decisions and better policies.

*Patrick Fine:* So, I remember *IRIN News*. When did that rebranding take place and when did you make this shift from more of a reporting mechanism and sort of keeping humanitarian actors informed about who's doing what into an actual media operation?

*Heba Aly:* It's been a, a slow and gradual evolution from the very beginning. From the days of the fax machine, we launched one of the first websites in Africa at the time. What began with a real focus on East Africa then kind of organically grew and it became for many intents and purposes a newsroom long before we spun off from the UN, six years ago now in 2015, to become independent. But that

was really the moment in which we took a step change in positioning ourselves as an independent news organization and not what we were at times perceived to be, which was a UN advocacy machine. Which we never were, but people could reasonably think so given that we were housed within the UN.

So, starting in 2015, we launched a new chapter for ourselves, really, which was professionalizing the journalism. We hired an executive editor from *The New York Times*. We tried to combine that mission that we had, which remained humanitarian in some way at heart, with the real skill sets and tools of a bona fide news organization. And that's been really effective for us. Uh, we launched an investigations unit a few years ago and have been doing journalism that we could have never done from within the UN, like exposing fraud or sexual abuse by aid agencies. So, that's one piece of it.

And then, over the years we've also been expanding our distribution techniques, the way that we engage with our audience, where we get our revenue from, and so on. It has been quite a gradual process, and then culminating in our rebrand in 2019 – so, almost two years ago now. We felt we needed a name that better articulated how compelling the stories we told were and, and gave a human face to the work that we do. And, also touched a bit on disruption, in a sense. We had initially wanted to call it *The Humanitarian* along the lines of *The Economist*, and we added "New" because we felt that there was a whole current of new people, new approaches that are being injected into the way humanitarianism is conducted today that we wanted to be center to the way we covered this sector and this beat.

*Patrick Fine:*

You tell some really compelling stories through *The New Humanitarian*, and you've highlighted these human interest stories that are gripping. In terms of, uh, kind of disruption and the new ideas that you see shaping the future of humanitarian response, what do you see as the main trends that stand out?

*Heba Aly:*

I like to think of them in four ways. We have been thinking quite a bit about this, uh, particularly in the last year since COVID and since Black Lives Matter. And those, those four kinds of disruptors, as I recall them, are financial – so, first and foremost the amount of funding that is likely to be available in the sector. There are many signs that suggest that's going to drop, in part as governments turn inwards to respond to COVID, but in part because I think humanitarian funding was reaching a ceiling. There are only so many governments out there and those governments

only have such levels of budget, and as the pace of crises was growing and growing and then the available resources to respond to them was kind of reaching its limit – and so, the business model, I think, is now under a fair bit of pressure. And, the sector is increasingly looking at what alternatives could look like. So, that's number one. I think having less money is going to force different ways of operating.

The second is operational. COVID has been a great example of this. This sector is used to parachuting into crises and deploying people when there's a need, and now you've got crises everywhere all at once, including in the western developed countries that used to be largely behind the aid effort. And so, that has changed the game pretty dramatically – on two fronts, I suppose. One is in the context of COVID, people couldn't even get into countries. The borders were closed. You had procurement problems, etc. But, on the other hand, there weren't enough people. As, as one person put it to me once, there's no parachute big enough. And you're going to see that even more and more, I think, with climate change, that that model just isn't well-suited when the crises aren't individual crises in individual places. So, operationally I think there's some big disruption happening.

Structurally – that's my third disruptor – I think the humanitarian system is bound within a multilateral system because it is governed by the UN and by these states. And as, um, Antonio Donini, uh, a writer and humanitarian that I respect and who has written for us has said it in the past, you know, the threats that face us today aren't multilateral; they're transnational. If you think about terrorism, if you think about pandemics, if you think about climate change, cyber threats, these are all threats that are of a different nature and that multilateralism wasn't really set up to solve.

And then, lastly – and I think this is the most interesting and challenging one – ethically, I think the sector is really having a moment of reckoning intensified by Black Lives Matter but certainly predating it. The movement we saw last year really forced a number of aid agencies to ask themselves very difficult questions about their own power hierarchies and – as we have put it and interviewed people about – the colonial roots of it. And, I know that's something you've talked about on the podcast before. And so, a model where western powers are "out of their – the goodness of their hearts" helping people who have no agency and are just sitting there waiting for, you know, the assistance to come is just not one that is in line with the ethics and empowerment that I think the world demands today.

So, for all of those reasons, I think there's just so many disruptions happening in the sector that it's hard to believe that it will continue as it is today.

*Patrick Fine:*

That gives us a lot to dig into. Financial, that we've reached a ceiling and there's just not going to be the resources necessary to cope with the scale of crises that we see. We, we know right now that there are more displaced people than ever before. Operational. We can't just parachute in aid workers into crisis hotspots. We've seen, one, that we couldn't do it because of the pandemic. And now it's caused, I think, all of us to step back and say maybe, maybe that operating, that operating model really is obsolete and we need to completely rethink what an operating model looks like that doesn't rely on sending people to specific spots. Structurally, your point about the threats and the challenges being transnational and not multilateral. And, I think migration is maybe the clearest example of a, uh, 21st century phenomenon that is transnational and that nations just aren't equipped to deal with it.

*Heba Aly:*

That's right.

*Patrick Fine:*

And, and then finally, the ethical challenges and the whole conversation that is going on has erupted around decolonizing aid and what does that mean?

Let me start with a question around the ethical challenges, or the disruption into how – in terms of the ethics of humanitarian response. When I read about decolonization, it reminds me a lot of a discussion that was relevant when I first started doing development work in the early '80s, which was around, uh, neocolonialism and dependency theory, which was an economic theory that came out of Latin America. And, I see a lot of the roots of the current conversation in, in that analysis, but – and that analysis was a very trenchant critique of power relationships and business models. You know, all of these things interact with each other. You have to have resources that your business model – what kind of business model will you use, how you use resources? But, the problem with that critique is it didn't offer any solutions. And ultimately, it kind of just ran out of steam because while the critique itself was valid – it was a very valid critique – the policies or actions that would allow you in practical terms to do something that was, uh, more, you know, more equitable or more effective in, in how you were applying resources or, or collaborating and empowering communities did not follow the critique. What's your

sense of the conversation around decolonization? Where does it lead us?

*Heba Aly:*

Right. We just actually did an episode on this recently on our podcast, and that was the question we were asking because there's been such focus around this topic. But, I think everyone is still trying to figure out exactly what decolonization means and how you turn that into policy and meaningful change, how you get beyond the kind of slogans and the emotion and the passion that we saw last year into something that's tangibly different.

And what I have been hearing from the various op-eds that we've published, from the events that we've hosted, uh, from the people we interview on the podcast and elsewhere is that first we shouldn't expect a really clear, immediate vision on that, that it's unreasonable to expect that that just comes out perfectly clear from the get-go, and that it will take time to figure it out, and that will require some trial and error and probably some messiness, and we need to be patient and willing to, to go through that. I've heard that from certainly a few people on the activist side of the, the spectrum.

But there are some ideas emerging. I think Stephanie Kimou, who works at, uh, PopWorks Africa and who has – you know, she'll say, before you go into a crisis read the history of the place that you're going to. Understand the colonial history so that you understand how you are perceived by people in that country. I've heard people saying we should insist that aid workers take language classes before they go, that they read the authors and just connect with the culture, really, of the place. So, that's the kind of, I suppose, soft side of things.

On the more structural level, I think there's a question of governance and who runs aid organizations and the extent to which they are representative of the people that they serve. And, we heard some good ideas, for example, on our podcast from Tammam Aloudat, who is, uh, a Syrian doctor, around how to change the – not only the composition of leadership teams and boards of aid agencies but also how the employees or even beneficiaries are organized. Could they be federated? Could they unionize and so on to be able to really be represented? Certainly, there's been a whole movement around so-called localization, which is really decentralizing the decision making and funding of aid to the local level so that local communities who are the ones really driving their response to crisis.

You know, we've certainly heard people go as far as to say we should be dismantling the International Military Fund in the World Bank. We should be boycotting western funding. We need to be generating our own money if we ever want to be truly emancipated. So, there's a whole kind of spectrum of things. I think it's still a hazy picture, but there are certainly routes and roads towards solutions on that front.

*Patrick Fine:*

Yeah. I think the best practices that you started with, like reading the history, studying the culture, I think those are long-established best practices. And, I don't see them as just the soft side of things. I think that they have a real material impact, both on the aid worker as well as on the communities that you're interacting with. Learning a language, first and foremost, is a great way to show respect. And humility, because if you're learning it, you're talking like a three-year old. *[Laughs]* I have found that it goes a long way towards leveling the power relationship because then you're not the person who has, uh, control of or command of the language. It's your counterparts who have command of the language.

On the more structural issues around control of finances, I think localization is happening. We're seeing it evolve. There's so much more local capacity. And institutions, even if we call them weak, are so much stronger than they were in the past. There's just so much more capacity in places than in the past that naturally acts to respond to the crises or respond to the events that are unfolding. So, I think we'll see that continue to evolve and it won't be necessary to parachute people in, because the real experts are going to be people who are already on the ground or who are in a neighboring country in the region who have language and cultural and other skills that will enable them just to be more effective. So, I see that as kind of a natural extension.

But on the localization front, we often talk about it as the international community to the national partner, but there's also from the national partner to its regions and municipalities and communities. And there, I hear much less discussion around how do nations that are grappling with conflict, how do they localize their responses? Is that something you've dug into?

*Heba Aly:*

To be honest, it hasn't been as big a part of the conversation, because I think that's the kind of micro level that you can get to once you've addressed the macro problem. Certainly, I have heard discussion around how we define "localization" and it has tended to be very much defined around local NGOs and not the whole local ecosystem, which also includes municipalities, governments,

private sector, and so on. So, that has been a rather simplistic portrayal, I think, of the discussion.

I think there are efforts at that level. As just one example, we had on the podcast a woman named Sema Ginel, who's the head of, uh, a Turkish NGO and they – she was describing to me in the wake of, uh, an earthquake in Izmir recently a kind of local coordination platform that they had that really brought together civil society, government, private sector companies, and so on to mobilize resources and then coordinate amongst themselves who was best placed to respond where.

So, I think there are increasingly those kinds of models of local level collaborations which are quite separate from the whole international system and the international channels. But, I think the degree to which governments, for instance, are distributing resources equally within countries, of course that's a huge topic for debate and there will be many contexts in which different parts of the pie feel like they haven't gotten their share. And, it's not to say that the local part of the picture is perfect and they just need more resources and then everything would work smoothly, but there is no perfect. I often think about it as kind of one imperfect solution compared to another imperfect solution and which of the imperfects is slightly better. And, I think that's been part of the challenge with this whole debate. Particularly international actors will say, "But yes, if we localize then you're going to have –" and I don't share these views, but – "you're going to have corruption. You're going to have a bias in terms of distribution because local groups will give the aid to whoever they're aligned with, etc., etc." And that's suggesting that these problems are in comparison to a system that's working perfectly well today through the international channels, which it isn't. And so, let's just be a bit more honest about that.

*Patrick Fine:*

I think the takeaway there is there is no perfect. And, it takes me back to what we were just saying about decolonizing aid, that at the heart of the relationships around foreign assistance, there are some conundrums and some dilemmas that just don't have solutions. What you have to do is manage them in a way that is respectful, that shows humility and that seeks to get the best outcome you can get, but understanding that it's not going to be a perfect one and that it will almost always entail some downsides.

Let's move to the structural issue you raised about the nature of the human development challenges facing the world has become increasingly transnational versus multinational. And, I think



migration is a, uh, good example of that. Our global political system of nation-states is not equipped to deal with mass migration because of climate stress on environments, because of manmade conflict or just because people now in a globalized world are seeking opportunities to fulfill their potential. What is the disruption that is going to allow the international community to better manage the mass migration that is, that is occurring?

*Heba Aly:*

That is such a difficult question in the current context, because so many countries are feeling threatened by so many things at once that there isn't really the spirit that is needed to shift the game on this. You know, there are all kinds of arguments that refugees can be an economic boon to society, and we certainly know that some Eastern European countries, for instance, need more people to be able to drive their workforces. And, there's all kinds of logical arguments as to why countries should be more open to receiving and making an asset of people coming from elsewhere. It's such a tricky subject because you can fall into potholes really easily.

I think one of the approaches that the international community has taken is to say the way to manage this is to invest in the countries from which these people are coming so that they stay there. And, you suddenly saw a whole lot of European Union investment into countries in Africa, for instance, as a way of preventing migration. Right? Is that ethical? Is it a policy that should be encouraged? On one hand, yes, it's great that, you know, we're finally seeing some of those development investments that people have long been calling for. On the other hand, the motivation behind it is quite scary and the right to asylum is shrinking. Right? And, and the space in which asylum takes place is much smaller than it used to be.

I think the challenge that organizations like the UN Refugee Agency face today is that the work they needed to do some time back to manage refugees or to get governments to manage refugees was, you know, better building camps and, you know, the logistics of it. Now, the work is really in the mindset. Right? Shifting people's mindset towards refugees and what they stand for, what place they take in society. And that's much harder to do.

The obvious answer, in a sense, is moving away from a model in which refugees are ghettoized and become a burden on society and are thrown away into camps for years and decades on end and really moving towards a model of refugee self-reliance, as some are calling it. And there are several initiatives to that end, including even from the private sector that is now engaging in hiring

refugees and integrating them into society much better. I'm not sure that that in and of itself is going to be a long-term solution given what we're likely to see in terms of climate-related migration and displacement in the years to come. So, I think this is going to be a massive challenge and will really depend on a different conception of what in the age of COVID has been seen as, you know, the interconnectedness of, uh, people around the world and what that means in terms of how we respond to these kind of transnational challenges.

So, I haven't answered your question, but it's because ...

*Patrick Fine:* No, you have. Actually ...

*[Crosstalk]*

*Heba Aly:* I'm not giving a very good answer.

*Patrick Fine:* ... I, I think it was a very good answer because you touched the heart of the matter, which is to deal with what will certainly be an increasing challenge facing the world community. We need a different spirit, a different kind of political will. And, right now we can see that that political will is – not only is it absent, but you have people in many nations who feel threatened, they feel like their own identities are threatened, and so they're pulling back as opposed to reaching out and seeking to extend a hand. They're pulling their hand back. I think you're right that displacement will almost certainly increase as a result of climate change and some of the other demographic factors we see, where you've got poor countries with rapidly growing populations and you've got wealthy countries with shrinking or stagnant populations. Those mega forces may get us to a point where we can gain that political will and get that spirit so that we do see the value and maybe the humanity of helping each person fulfill their potential, and that by doing that, it helps everybody. It reduces the threat that people feel to their community or to their nation-state. But, we're a long way from that right now.

*Heba Aly:* I think the, the question for me is if you look at COVID – and, and somebody said this on an event we hosted just recently – the response by governments has been very inward looking but the response by individual people has been much more in solidarity. And so, the question is who's going to win out in terms of influence? Will it be the people and the vision that I think many people have of wanting to help each other and being connected and creating a different world, or will it be governments that are much

more competitive in nature? And as, I think, the center of power globally shifts away from government, we might see a different balance in that regard, and that may be a very small sign of hope.

*Patrick Fine:* I think there is hope. I think the conditions right now are not at a point to really allow that kind of political will to express itself. But, I can envision a world where conditions change, and it will take governments and multilateral organizations and thought leaders around the world to come together to help people shift their mentality. That disruption will be around seeing the value of helping every person achieve their potential.

*Heba Aly:* I'm not sure that that's going to come from governments and multilateral agencies. I think it's the other way around. I think it's, it's certain people that will be pushing those institutions to change their ways of working. I think the institutions are probably lagging behind in terms of mindset and openness.

*Patrick Fine:* When you talk about people power, on one hand it, it makes me think of technology. So, you're in Geneva, I'm in the United States, and we're having this conversation and we're connecting and sharing ideas, and that's a powerful thing that didn't exist 20 years ago. On one hand, technology could enable that kind of people power you're talking about to push governments and institutions to change the mindset and to muster the political will to really address and make progress on these transnational issues. On the other hand, we see technology also used in very nefarious ways, and the U.S. is a good example over the last year of how social media has become an engine of disinformation that has fueled nativist sentiment. For me, the jury is kind of out. It's not clear to me whether these tools that enable this people-to-people connection will be directed and ultimately used for good or whether they'll get misdirected for malign purposes.

*Heba Aly:* Yeah. I think that's the battle that is underway. And particularly when it comes to things like artificial intelligence, you know, you can see the people who, who see the potential in these tools but are very conscious of the harm that they can have and who are just really fighting to try to get those tools into the hands of the people who want to do good instead of those who want to do harm. And even, in the humanitarian sector in particular, even if you're not setting out to do harm those tools can also be quite dangerous. And, an example of that is a project that was launched by the World Bank to predict famine using AI, and what we found in some of our reporting was that the algorithm was picking up some of the bias in the human declarations of famine in the past that was

just replicating the worst sides of things rather than necessarily serving the sector in a positive way. So, there's risks with all of this stuff. I think the point is that it's happening. You know, technology is a part of our everyday life and it's up to the sector to then figure out how they use it in a way that advances the cause rather than hurts it. It's not good enough to say we're just going to kind of ignore it. And it's also not good enough to use it in a way to just kind of prop up activities without really seeing its true potential for transformation.

And a lot of technology in the aid sector, I find, is a kind of buzz thing, which is what we see in a lot of aid agencies, I think, where you, you know, you can now be the really progressive, cool aid agency because you've done this, that, or the other thing, but you haven't transformed or fundamentally changed the way you operate. And, and technology in many other sectors has been – technology can operate entire industries, and we haven't yet seen that happen in the aid industry, for better or for worse.

*Patrick Fine:*

Yeah, I couldn't agree with you more. We've seen a lot of new technology being applied, and maybe the one that is closest to having a transformative impact is mobile money. That really has changed operating systems. It's actually been very positive in many of the places where it's used in terms of helping improve people's lives. Workers don't have to travel for eight hours on a bad road to get to a bank or get to a payment center. They can access the resources where they are in their community. So, that is having, I think, a profound impact and will continue as those tools are refined and become more and more widespread.

But I agree with you that many of the other technologies, they have that kind of buzz effect without being transformative in how the work is being done or even transforming the results that are being achieved. Do you see technologies that have the potential for being transformative?

*Heba Aly:*

Well, I'd say even the example you gave, which in the humanitarian sector the equivalent would be cash programming, where instead of delivering jerry cans and mattresses you're giving people cash and they can buy what they want and need with it and that stimulates global markets and all the rest of it. That was meant to be transformative and everyone in the sector was talking about how this was going to just change the power structures. You were putting the agency in the hands of the people who were affected. You're giving them choice. You're creating less need for the intermediary. All of that. And, in the end aid agencies are

distributing cash the way they distributed jerry cans. It's not been a fundamentally transformative thing because aid agencies have maintained – or tried to maintain their control in that process. And I think where the real transformation potential lies is in using those kinds of technologies in a way that dislodges power structures.

So, for instance, a senior member of Mastercard was on the podcast talking to us about the digital technology that exists in the private sector and she kept saying, "I don't understand why these aid agencies are going and trying to build their own infrastructure when we've got it right here already ready and you can have money going from any country in the world to any beneficiary in the world in a matter of seconds, and yet what we're seeing is aid agencies fighting over who's going to control the cash programming industry and not channeling it through these kinds of efficient systems that are already out there." So, I think it is incredible how the power structures and incentives in any system can be very powerful blockages to the transformation potential of technology.

*Patrick Fine:*

It could be in the case that, that you gave that we just aren't there yet in terms of realizing the transformative impact. Take, like, global money as a way of doing direct cash transfers. I remain hopeful that as that becomes more widespread and as we get better at it, as those systems and tools get more refined, that we'll see that that does start to have the kind of transformative impact in terms of shifting the power balances, you know, that we hoped for when those programs were first being rolled out.

*Heba Aly:*

I, I think what is transformative, though, just to give a fuller picture, is what someone named Paul Currion calls the network humanitarianism. And, if you look at the way several crises have been responded to, whether it's Tahrir Square during the Arab Spring protests or the response to the "migration crisis" in Europe – and I say quote-unquote, because the numbers were relatively small compared to the numbers of people hosted by many African countries, and so it didn't really merit becoming a crisis. But anyway, I digress. In those responses, there was a really networked approach driven by volunteers using the kinds of tools that have become normal for most of us in day-to-day life, which is Facebook and Twitter and, and the networked society and using that in the way that they organize and mobilize aid.

And so that, I think, really creates opportunities for anybody to be involved in humanitarian response by connecting through all of these networked opportunities and – to other people who want to

help, to other people who need help, and through, as you were saying, companies like GiveDirectly, GlobalGiving you can be connected right away to people on the other side of the, of the world. So, there's, again, a kind of people-to-people empowerment there that has been made possible by technology that I think changes the game in terms of who has a seat at the table when it comes to humanitarianism.

*Patrick Fine:*

So, before we close – we talked about ethics, we've talked about structure, we've talked about operational models. That's been woven through our conversation. I want to get to your, your first point, which was finance, and your view that we may have reached the ceiling and that looking into the future you see declining resources, which actually is different from my view. Looking into the future I think more and more of, uh, assistance resources will be programmed to address crises, because that's what will be the most pressing matter and that's where the real human development issues are going to be located. I'm expecting we'll see a shift of resources away from the development side of things, the long-term sustainable development, and that will be expected that national partners and others will meet those demands through their own resources and you'll see more of the international community's resources focused on crisis.

*Heba Aly:*

I don't know if you're misreading what will happen, but I don't think that's how it should happen. I think that inevitably the model of putting the money into humanitarian response is just going to be unsustainable, because there will be so many crises that no amount of money will ever be enough. And so, by necessity, everyone is going to have to start turning to "Okay, how do we prevent these crises from happening, because we can't keep up with responding to them." And when climate change – I won't say hits because it's already hit – but when the impact of that starts to scale I think that's really going to hit home for people. Just out of pure desire for survival, I think there is going to have to be a shift towards saying, "How do we address the root of these problems?" because responding to them is just no longer viable.

Is human nature capable of making such enlightened decisions? Probably not. And we've known for ages that, you know, whatever the stat is – although I think it's also been disputed – that one dollar invested in prevention is seven dollars saved in response. I, I just think it's going to get to the point where the system is hitting a wall and has no choice but to think a bit more strategically about where it puts its money, where at the very least, as Hugo Slim put it recently in a conversation I had with him, that everything you do,

even as a humanitarian, you should be investing long term while you respond short term. So, the idea of pure short-term response, I think, will eventually go out the window because it just won't be an efficient way to work.

*Patrick Fine:*

So, do you see this, the vision that has characterized the way the international community and national partners think about addressing human development needs as crisis response which is an urgent and immediate short-term effort versus sustainable development which is medium-to-long-term and aimed at being a system effort? Do you see that as a false dichotomy?

*Heba Aly:*

I think already they're just blending so much. And the so-called nexus, which everyone loves to make fun of, is in many ways becoming a reality. And, if you look at COVID, of instance, the funding isn't "Is this humanitarian or is this development?" It's just COVID funding and it's both at once. Right? You're responding to the people who are in the hospital while you're also trying to rebuild the health system and rebuild the economy and so on. So, I think those lines, whether people like it or not, are increasingly blurred and that the future will be – and I hear this over and over from people, a real frustration with these silos of "This is humanitarian, this is development, etc." – the future, an enlightened future, shall I say, would be "How do we improve the situation for this group of people in this situation?" And, that may involve some short-term; it may involve some long-term. And, on the whole it will be – I hate to use this word because everyone is tired of it as well – but building our collective resilience to these transnational threats and figuring out how we do that.

And, the challenge really is you've got, you know, crisis after crisis hitting while you're trying to build up your resilience. It's a really tough thing to do. You don't have the space and time to do so in the way you might like. But that's going to be, I think, the trick, is figuring out how do we – in everything we do and in every crisis we respond to, how are we building resilience for the next crisis, which we know will be hitting?

*Patrick Fine:*

I like to end my podcasts by asking my guests, when you think about the future of human development and you think about these challenges, uh, that we've been discussing today, do you count yourself as an optimist, that we're going to be able to meet these challenges, or are you more pessimistic?

*Heba Aly:*

Oh, I'm definitely a pessimist. I think it comes with the trade. Yeah.

*Patrick Fine:* [Laughs]

*Heba Aly:* I don't have much faith in humanity. I think the world has proven itself incapable of really learning lessons from the past, and we just keep repeating the same mistakes and the same tragedies over and over. So, sorry to leave on a negative note, but I, I think all we can do is keep trying, but I don't have that much hope that it gets much better.

*Patrick Fine:* Maybe that's the journalist in you. You described this – a vision of people-to-people connection and of, uh, this bottom-up action that will lead to a more enlightened future, and let's hope that that's what we get.

Now, Heba, as you think about where we are right now and these challenges we've been discussing, what advice do you have for, uh, young people who want to work in the field of humanitarian response or international development?

*Heba Aly:* My advice would be to approach everything you do with humility. I think a lot of the debates that have been playing out in this sector come from a perception, whether it's true or not, among affected people, that there is a certain arrogance to the way aid is delivered and the whole industry is conceived of. And if a new generation of aid workers can be thinking a little bit less about "What is my role in solving this problem?" and a bit more about "How can I support what's already happening?" I think that would be a fresh and exciting way to test new models of solidarity.

*Patrick Fine:* That's great advice, Heba. Thank you. Heba, thank you so much for a terrific conversation.

*Heba Aly:* My pleasure. Thanks for having me.

*Patrick Fine:* You've given us a lot of food for thought, and I want to encourage our listeners to share their thoughts about this conversation by leaving a comment and rating the podcast. Listeners, I've talked about what a terrific podcast Heba has with *Rethinking Humanitarianism*, and if you stay tuned, we'll play a snippet of that for you.

Thanks for listening. Tune in again next month for another episode of *A Deeper Look*.

[Music plays]



*["Rethinking Humanitarianism" podcast plays]*

*Female:* The United Nations is warning millions now face famine.

*Male:* We can avoid the unmanageable impacts of climate change.

*Female:* How much do we know about this COVID-19 virus?

*[Chanting]*

*Female:* The humanitarian toll of the crisis is enormous.

*Heba Aly:* We live an era of crises. The world is facing the highest levels of humanitarian need in a generation. Crises are happening at a bigger scale. They're more severe. And they last longer.

*Male:* But here's the thing. It's not just that the world is increasingly full of crises. It's that the way it responds to those crises is under a lot of strain, and some are arguing it's not viable.

*Male:* We are facing arguably the biggest humanitarian emergency that our generation has seen and the response has been pitiful.

*Heba Aly:* International aid is reactive instead of preventative. There is never enough money and it's rife with unethical power dynamics.

*Male:* And when it comes to those power dynamics and many other challenges, there's been a lot of talk about reform but not nearly as much change.

*Female:* Crises are moments of change. It's only after these crises that flaws in aid's approach are revealed.

*Heba Aly:* But in recent months COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter have really reenergized some of the longstanding critiques about how the sector operates. So, if there was ever a time to seriously reexamine the future of aid, it's now.

*Male:* And I think Black Lives Matter is a, is a wakeup call around building the next generation of institutions that put equality, inclusion, racial justice at their heart, particularly in, in the development or humanitarian sector.

*Male:* So, in this podcast we're going to explore the future of crisis response at this time of potential but still mostly unrealized

transformation. Will the current model survive? Can it even change itself? And if not, what might take its place?

*Heba Aly:* Welcome to *Rethinking Humanitarianism*, a podcast series cohosted by *The New Humanitarian* and the Center for Global Development.

*Male:* I'm Jeremy Konyndyk.

*Heba Aly:* And in Geneva, Switzerland, I'm Heba Aly.

Search for *The New Humanitarian* wherever you get your podcasts.

*[End of Audio]*