

TARGET: Zero Hunger

FAO Podcast

Episode #1 –

“Producing food in times of crisis: a look inside FAO’s work in emergencies”

[Sandra] Hello and welcome to the first episode of Target: Zero Hunger -- a podcast that explores the food challenges of our time, brought to you by the UN Food and Agricultural organization. I'm your host, Sandra Ferrari.

[Theme music in]

In this episode, we'll speak to FAO field staff working in some of the most difficult crisis regions in the world. We'll also talk to Toby Lanzer, the United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator for the Sahel, and Vincent Martin, Coordinator of FAO's Resilience team in West Africa and the Sahel. We'll talk to them about what it's like to build an emergency response plan for a region of 150 million people.

But first, we'll take you behind the scenes in FAO's headquarters here in Rome.

[Theme music out]

[Room sound in -- people gathering for South Sudan call]

[Sandra] It's Tuesday afternoon and the staff from various departments are gathering at a round table in FAO's emergency crisis center on the 6th floor. It's a videoconferencing room where the weekly meetings take place to coordinate Level 3 Emergencies, also known as “L3” in UN jargon.

[Dialling sound]

Today's call is a briefing with the acting FAO representative in South Sudan, Serge Tissot.

[Serge] Can you hear me?

[Jaqueline] Oh, yes, we are so happy to hear you Serge.

[Serge] Haha, good afternoon. Can we start?

[Jaqueline] Yes, Please. I request you to let us know what your priorities are. Because we have security and then whatever you decide should be prioritized for the meeting.

[Serge] On micromanagement point of view, it is getting very bad. We are facing a crazy inflation. Nobody has money anymore to purchase food. It already has had an impact on criminality but I'm afraid that one day, it will have an impact in terms of demonstrations around the markets. Over to you if there is any questions on security.

[FAO technical officer #1] Do you know what is going on in the rural areas? Small cities in different states?

The situation is even worse, because transport of food from the north is disturbed by the local conflict along the road. We can say that the situation is even worse in a city like Rumbek. Prices in Rumbek are 50 percent more expensive than in Juba. Over to you.

[Jaqueline] Ok Serge, I don't see anyone here with a question. Back to you.

[Sandra interlude] these calls are a way for field staff to update headquarters about the security situation on the ground and discuss any needs they have -- from staffing to aid supplies and logistics. If a truck with seeds is held up at a border, for example, or a delivery has to be postponed because roads are inaccessible, this would be the place to talk about that.

[Serge] We need urgently a livestock officer because we need someone to support the vaccination program. The second issue is resilience. We need to explain what FAO will do in the coming years -- which types of activities? How will we assist the returnees? How we will support the people who will make rehabilitation in the villages? It's become very, very urgent. Those are my requests.

[FAO Technical officer #2] On the resilience strategy, you will get a few options either today or tomorrow morning.

[Door opening - room sound out]

[Footsteps in hallway]

[Sandra] Elsewhere in the building the FAO emergency response coordinator in Yemen, Etienne Peterschmitt, passed by headquarters on his short leave from the capital Sana'a to brief a packed room on the daily reality of delivering aid in an active conflict zone.

[Door opening to room sound from Yemen briefing]

[Etienne] ... What we're looking at right now... right now, storing is not really an option, because the storage facilities are not really available. So what we're trying to do, is arrange with the suppliers -- the transporters and the suppliers -- to deliver directly to as far as possible... eventually to the secondary distribution centres, and off they go.

It's difficult to describe Yemen, I mean, I remember Haiti, you could get very emotional about Haiti, because it's an earth quake you see. You see the human tragedy, you see buildings destroyed. Yemen you don't see it's sort of this invisible catastrophe that's happening because we don't have access, because it's chronic -- that's part of it -- because it's deep out in the mountains in the places where we don't go. The figures are staggering. I'm not going to go through it all, but production has gone down, employment is 70 percent shut down. I mean - the number of people killed, the number of people displaced, that are malnourished, that are food insecure, we're talking about 20.1 million out of 25 million or so. I mean that's huge. That's 80 percent of the country that needs some sort of humanitarian assistance. And yet when you go to Yemen, even Sana'a -- for those of you who think Sana'a looks like Sarajevo or Kabul-- in some parts it does, in some parts it doesn't. I mean you drive around and if you didn't know Sana'a before in some parts you wouldn't even notice that there is anything happening.

[Sandra] We spoke to Etienne a bit more after the meeting to get a more personal perspective on the work he does - what is it like to live and work inside an active conflict zone like Yemen?

[Etienne] Working in a conflict area is obviously very challenging for many reasons. The main one being the risk element: one has to analyze and understand and one has to accept. Beyond the risk there is this thrill and this passion to take up these challenges because obviously, areas where these hardship missions are where populations suffer the most and where your skills are required the most. I think it's very much something you feel attached to. Often people tell me, you know, why would you

want to go to another hardship duty station. Well, it's just what I'm attracted to and probably what I am good at as well.

[Sandra] What are you facing in terms of the day-to-day threats.

[Etienne] The day-to-day threat, if you take now the case of Yemen, where I work is linked to terrorism, is linked to complex attack. Obviously, you have seen on the TV screens the aerial bombing, which is spectacular – for some the biggest threat, for others one of the threats. The kidnaping for foreigners like us has been a threat and remains one probably for the years to come, unfortunately.

Prior to the conflict we undertook field missions. That's when I came to realize what a beautiful country it is. Fantastic scenery and huge needs at the same time. I think today that's much more difficult. Accessing the field and doing assessment, interacting with the communities we're trying to help, is in most cases impossible because of the conflict. It was a challenge prior to the conflict because of logistical reasons, now I think it is a challenge because of security.

There are a few pockets where we can still move relatively freely, but large parts of the country are very much off limits to us – to us as UN employees but also for humanitarian workers in general.

[Sandra] And at the meeting you described the situation in Yemen as a Silent crisis – how so?

[Etienne] Of course I mentioned earlier that we have aerial bombings in Sana'a, around Sana'a. It's a city. It's a big city. You see some of it, but we don't see the suffering as a result of the bombing: which means people can't move; electricity is cut off which means that access to water is very limited; which means that fuel for people to move – if they can move - is probably five times the price from prior to the conflict and the suffering of the people is tremendous. And this is something we don't see.

If you think of the people who are totally cut off, who have lost their livelihoods, the whole education system has collapsed, commodities have triple in terms of prices, employment opportunities are non-existent...The idea that you have no idea when it's going to end, the lack of... the idea that you don't know what tomorrow is going to be made of is obviously of concern to all of the Yemeni.

Having said that, I think Yemenis are extraordinary resilient.

The few field visits we managed to do, you see communities who have kept their dignity despite sitting in the middle of rubble, in some cases, or sitting with very little to share, in the dark, talking to you with a candle and having literally no water and still, you know, explaining the situation and talking to you about the situation while living with it – that's quite remarkable.

[Theme music in]

[Sandra] For humanitarian workers in the field these perspectives are important and necessary for the work to be done. But vulnerable populations living in remote or conflict ridden communities may be rare... if at all possible.

At the start of this podcast you heard part of a conference call with the FAO emergency team getting an update on the situation and needs within South Sudan. We'll take you into the country now with a bit of field tape. But first, for those of you not familiar with the crisis in the country...

[Theme music out]

Since December 2013, the South Sudanese civil war has been an ongoing conflict between the government and the opposition.

Despite the signing of the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in August 2015, violence continues to affect civilians in Unity, Upper Nile, Jonglei, Lakes, Western Equatoria and Central Equatoria.

People have been attacked, killed... homes have been destroyed... and this has forced many to flee their communities.

And in addition to the conflict, communities are struggling with inter-communal violence, as a result of things like cattle raiding.

The South Sudanese government just released its latest figures, highlighting that the overall prevalence of emergency levels of malnutrition as an issue of big concern.

One of FAO's field officers in South Sudan, Lieke Visser, was able to go out to the remote Upper Nile Region just last week to visit the communities and assist in needs assessments.

[Nyal market sounds]

These are the sounds of a local market in Nyal, in the upper Unity Region of South Sudan, where food on the shelves is scarce. And if traders are able to procure some products to sell the market prices are astronomically high.

When Lieke returned to Juba from her mission to Nyal she sent us a short audio diary of what she saw of the assessments being made in the community.

[Lieke] Day one of my field visit to Nyal, Unity State, we took a plane from Juba the capital to Rumbek, which is about an hour flight, and then from there a helicopter took us to the river, which took about 40 minutes. Whilst flying in we saw hundreds of people lining up to get registered with the World Food Programme for a [food] distribution they were about to do. The team on the ground explained that the last distribution was in September and at the moment there's no other food to be found in town, so everybody had left their homes to get to one of the five registration points in the county.

Nyal borders a swampy area that stretches for kilometres into Unity State and joining up with the Nile River. During the fighting thousands of people fled from their homes into the swamp to find refuge and have stayed there for many months, making makeshift structures and surviving on what their environment had to offer: fish, water lilies, wild fruits.... really anything they could find. Due to recurring attacks at the large-scale impact of the conflict, they also been unable to plant in this area.

And one of the ways that FAO has been helping the community is by distributing of fishing inputs, and I'm here to find out how they are being used.

[Upper Unity – Sound chatter and of William's boat in water]

[Sandra] Lieke and her team captured sounds as they joined a fisherman named William as he was on his way to catch fish that he would later sell at the market. William was one of the fisherman who received a fishing net from FAO. It's because of this fishing net that he was able to sustain himself and his family with food and money. Here's a bit more information from Lieke's audio diary.

[Lieke] We set off with William on this journey to the so-called "highlands" where the fishing grounds are, at 7am in the morning. He told us the journey would take three hours there, three hours back, but in actual fact it took nearly five hours instead of three. The water levels are receding as the dry season progresses and fish are also migrating further away. For the entire 5 hours the water does not get deeper than 50cm and in some places the water is so shallow, we get out of the boat and wade

through the water. Upon arrival in the highlands we find William's brother, sitting on a 2x2 meter island in the middle of the swamp, totally isolated, but with a lot of fish around him.

Since South Sudan is facing a large-scale emergency finding accurate information is not always easy. For example, we need to know what are the internally displaced people eating allowing them to survive; what are the levels of malnutrition amongst children; and how are they coping with markets being closed, just to name a few. This week in Nyal, FAO and partners are training South Sudanese "enumerators" for data collection and are trying to understand and document the coping strategies that people are facing and to see what it means for the community and what they do when they are facing the worst levels of food insecurity.

[Sandra] Lieke has brought us inside the day-to-day realities of providing direct support to the most desperate communities, and she shows us how concrete interventions, however small, can be crucial in times of severe food insecurity. Lieke and her colleagues are guided by a national strategy that helps her team respond in the most effective ways to the most urgent food needs.

But what if you're tasked to create a strategy for a whole region – a strategy not only meant to help more than 23 million people who go to bed hungry, but also respond to long-term development needs like health care, education, and decent employment? Here to help us answer that question is UN Assistant Secretary General Toby Lanzer, who is the Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Sahel. He's joined by Vincent Martin FAO representative in Senegal, and Coordinator for the resilience team for West Africa and the Sahel. Together they'll discuss their work in the world's largest regional crisis area.

[Sandra] Toby, welcome.

[Toby] Hello, how are you?

[Sandra] Could you describe the range of crises taking place in the Sahel right now?

[Toby] I think in the Sahel we are experiencing a very dangerous cocktail, which has three principal ingredients. The first one is terrible, terrible poverty. People across the region are probably the poorest on Earth. And this has been going on for a very, very long time. The second ingredient is what I call violent extremism. It's groups such as Boko Haram, it's groups such as Al-Qaida in the Maghreb, who are wreaking havoc with people's lives in different parts of the Sahel. And the third ingredient is climate change. Something that was just recently discussed, of course, in Paris and something that touches everybody everywhere. But in particular, it hits the poorest the hardest. And it's very clear to us on the ground in the Sahel that the impact of climate change varies. But it can mean flash floods or not enough rain. And it just makes people's lives that much more difficult. So, that's the situation in the Sahel. And it's compounded in a way by a fourth factor, which makes the situation not only dangerous today but probably even worse tomorrow unless we tackle this issue - and that is known as population growth. Women across the Sahel often have six, seven, perhaps eight or nine children. And the population in most countries is set to double roughly every 20 years. So if there are 150 million people across the Sahel today it means that in just 20 years time there will be as many as 300 million.

[Sandra] With such varying circumstances and needs, what goes into planning a regional response strategy, one that adequately addresses all of the different local contexts?

[Toby] If you look at the Sahel itself, I think that our humanitarian response is far more sophisticated than just keeping people alive. We are trying to not only give them a hand out but also a hand up -- in the sense that we want to strengthen their ability to handle shocks, to adapt to situations, to weather

a storm. We want to help people built their resilience and have a brighter tomorrow. We want to help kids get into school and finish school. We want to make sure mums can have access to clinics. And to make sure that people's stomachs are full they're well fed and well nourished.

[Sandra] What are your challenges?

[Toby] We've got teams on the ground in every country and so they look at the situation and they work with the local authorities and they analyse the context – What's happening? What's driving people's needs? How do we make sure we tackle the right priorities? It's very important for the donors to come along at the right time. We know that from the planting season, for example, that if you're too late, it's lost. And if you don't plant, you won't harvest. And so tackling this issue of food insecurity it's crucial to get the right steps in place at the right time of the year and work with donors on that.

[Sandra] So planning and execution very much hinges on the donor response and the funding that you have. Can you think of a situation where the money didn't come in. What were the consequences or implications?

[Toby] Each year we struggle to get money on time or to get enough money, and so that means you have to take very tough decisions. Some clinics will get medicines. Some schools will get school text books. Some kids will get a bowl of porridge and others won't. Those are the realities that we face. Some farmers will get inputs that they require for the planting seasons and other will not. It's important also though to manage expectations and to communicate very openly with communities and with the authorities. I want to be very clear: The role of the UN and our partners is not to substitute. We are there to complement and to support. So the heavy lifting has to be done by the communities themselves and by authorities—the institutions of the states across the Sahel. Not an easy task because the countries are very poor, however, I am calling for much more engagement by the governments in the regions in basic social services, to provide schools and clinics, but also to make sure that farmers – whether smallholders or farmers - or pastoralists and their livestock can be better cared for, can be safer and can manage to earn a livelihood.

[Sandra] Within this larger humanitarian plan for the region, FAO has its own component that focuses on agriculture and food security. This goes beyond helping farmers cultivate their land. FAO also works together with other agencies like World Food Programme, the United Nations Refugee Agency and the international organization for migration to address larger problems plaguing rural areas.

Vincent, what are your thoughts on the conversation so far?

[Vincent] Hello, thank you very much.

We've been discussing about all the challenges we are facing in this region factors in this region, and all these aggravating factors -- such as climate change, such as demographic, such as insecurity. But one element which is important is also to look at the structure of the population and the youth population that is coming up in the next years. You've got something like 10-12 million young people which are arriving onto labour market every year. And just 1/5 of them can get access to decent employment, so it leaves so many people on the margin. So, the question is - apart from responding to these emergency needs in these countries – what is the future of these generations which are arriving on the labour market. What can we offer in the rural or agricultural sector that can be attractive enough so in the end they don't go and choose the quick solution, the easiest solution, with everything that is offered to them -- terrorism, drug trafficking and so forth. So we need to

provide the tools for the governments, to work with the government to make sure we develop strategies for youth employment.

[Sandra] How do you mobilize people and donors around crises that are recurrent and seemingly endless, selling it to them and bringing back in their support? A lot of crises are competing against each other in a sense so, how do you do that?

[Toby] I often ask people, “Why should I expect you to care?” The fact that people are poor or that they’re down and out should be enough. But it can’t be enough, can it? Because, actually, there are lots of people who are poor and lots of people who are down and out. And so, what I try to do is listen to people in these communities – What is it that has struck them? How is their life? And how can I mobilize attention? Or resources? So that we can make their lives a little bit better. And I think that at the moment, in the case of the Sahel, this dangerous cocktail that I described of climate change, of abject poverty, and violent extremism, well it so happens that those three topics are hot topics. Well, that will continue. It’s not something that we can simply put a stop to. And I think that managing the inevitable makes much more sense than trying to stop it. The fact that you’ve got the population growing so quickly, and that some of these structural issues are so difficult to overcome in the next five to ten years, there is every chance that we will see more people from the region that want to seek safety or a better life elsewhere.

[Vincent] “Sahel”, I think, it comes from the Arabic and it means shoreline or border. It’s a transition. An ecological zone between Sahara and sub-Saharan Africa. And a long time ago, the Sahara was almost impossible to cross. You would have difficulties to cross the Sahara and arrive in sub-Saharan Africa and vice-versa. And you have this buffer zone which is the Sahel. Today this has changed completely, dramatically. There are no borders anymore. And whatever happens in the Sahel, and we have seen that there is this very dangerous cocktail... whatever happens there... the next day it is in many other different countries and has immediate repercussions in the very long term, not just now with what we see with migrants, but what will it be in 20 or 30 years if we are not able to respond to that? To respond to the needs of these migrants but also to respond at the source where they come from? Viruses travel in no time all over the planet. Conflicts are exported and imported everywhere.

[Toby] My word on donor capital is we have to engage on all fronts across the Sahel, because it’s the right thing to do for so many different reasons.

[Sandra] For countries and communities dealing with the instability of a crisis-situation, there are undeniable immediate needs that must be met. Beyond that, shocks due to conflict or natural disasters too often destroy people’s livelihoods and derail countries long-term development efforts. And for that reason they can have great effects on the future, not only for the countries directly affected but for the whole region as well.

Coming up with strategies that provide direct relief on the ground but which also build opportunities that help better whether shocks in the future... well, that’s an ongoing struggle for governments and the organizations that support them.

[Theme music in]

Guests in today’s episode of TARGET: Zero hunger provided a bit of insight into how those intertwining and overlapping challenges are met.

Next week... we will go deep into the laboratories of the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna. The IAEA and FAO are partners there in a different battle: the fight against Food Fraud.

Food fraud is a 50 billion dollar a year business for those involved and it has big implications for consumers and governments trying to mitigate the dangers there.

In that episode, we will explore the role of the unlikely hero in that fight.... but more on that next week.

This episode of our new series was produced by myself and Kim-Jenna Jurriaans. If you have any questions or feedback for us please write to FAO-audio@fao.org. I'm Sandra Ferrari, thanks for listening.

[Theme Music out]

If you would like to hear the full interviews from guests in this episode, visit our webpage at FAO.org/media/podcast for more information about this series.