

**MAY
2021**

THE GLOBAL
PEREGRINE



INTERVIEW



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Tahir M. Nour is a recent retiree of the United Nation's World Food Programme (WFP). He joined WFP in the late 1990's and worked in various duty stations and capacities for the next 30 years. He started his career as an Assistant Project Officer in Sierra Leone and ended his UN career as Chief of the Cash-based Transfers Unit of WFP's Programme and Policy Division. He has served in over nine duty stations, including Ethiopia, Ghana, Gaza Strip, Somalia.

Q. Please tell us about the work you performed at the WFP

I worked for the WFP for almost 30 years, starting as an Assistant Project Officer in 1990 and ending as the Chief of the Cash Based Transfers unit in 2014. As such, my work varied as I progressed in my career and as I took on higher level responsibilities. To give you an idea of the spectrum of what I did, at the beginning of my career I was supervising the implementation of various projects, from the design of such projects all the way to evaluating their impact and determining the extent to which they met the WFP's expected outcomes. As I assumed higher level responsibilities, my work became more managerial in nature, supervising other staff members always relating to project design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. At the end of my career, my responsibilities shifted to policy design, engagement with donors and other development and emergency partners and contributing to WFP's strategic direction.

Q. What were some of the most challenging years/moments at the WFP?

The WFP has a dual mandate to engage in development projects as well as responding to emergency situations (precipitated by natural or man-made disasters). Development projects are slower paced operations starting with a thorough food-security problem analysis (why are people facing food insecurity and what can be done to alleviate this through the provision of food assistance). Emergency operations are much more reactive and require a quick design and implementation process given that the causes of such emergencies usually happen with little or no notice. As such, some of the biggest challenges faced by the WFP have been responding to large scale emergencies that happened with no notice. The Tsunami of 2004 is an example of a huge challenge that the WFP faced across a large geographic area and that affected a large number of people. Conflict is another challenge that continues to face the WFP as it leads to the displacement of the populations in the conflict areas. Yemen has, and continues to be, a very challenging situation for the WFP. The same applies to other countries such as, to name a few, South Sudan, Somalia and the Sahel region.

Q. How has the WFP changed over the years you have been working there? Is this the same for all UN bodies?

I will narrate three major changes that I witnessed. The WFP came into existence in 1961 with the purpose of redistributing food from surplus producing countries to countries facing food security challenges. Countries would make a donation of, say, 10,000 tons of rice to the WFP and we would then 'program' the food - deciding which country was a priority and then arranging to move the food from the donor country to the recipient one(s). This created some challenges: rice might not be eaten in that priority country; WFP needed to seek the cash funding it needed to pay for the cost of moving the food to the recipient country and then to the points of distribution within the country (as well as to secure the necessary funding to cover staff and other costs). As such, in the late 1990's, the governing board of the WFP (which consists of 36 UN member state representatives) approved that donors had to make a cash contribution of x\$/ton of food donated in order to cover those other costs. This made it much easier to quickly accept the food donation and move and distribute it much more efficiently.

Another major change that I witnessed was that the WFP urged donors to provide cash instead of food contributions. This was because, as mentioned, the donated foods were not always appropriate in many recipient countries. More importantly, even countries which faced food insecurity, in many instances we would find that there were areas of a country that produced foods that were surplus to its requirements; in these instances, the

importation of the same foods (or similar) would negatively affect the markets for those products, an action that was totally the reverse of what the WFP aimed to achieve - we wanted to strengthen markets not undermine them. As such, the advent of local food procurement has gained much more prominence within the WFP.

The third change, which I was very much involved in, was the shift from food distribution to the use of cash and cash-like instruments. So instead of us buying food locally and then distributing that food, WFP started providing people with cash that the people then used to purchase the food they needed in their local markets; we also use coupons (either simple paper ones to more sophisticated digital ones) and the WFP contracts many shops to accept these coupons. We would pay the shops based on the number of coupons that that shop had redeemed. Again, these cash and coupons enabled people to make their own choices of which foods they wanted and, importantly, enabled them to purchase things like fresh vegetables which the WFP would never be able to distribute given shelf-life issues.

Q. Tell us about the country/countries you were focused on during your career and how you helped them

WFP implements a system of staff rotation whereby you are assigned to a country for a number of years (longer in countries that are relatively stable, shorter in countries where the levels of insecurity are high). I started my career in Sierra Leone in 1990 and was subsequently reassigned to Ethiopia, Ghana, our HQ in Rome, and finally Palestine. In addition to these longer term assignments, I was also deployed on shorter assignments to the Gaza Strip, Somalia, Libya, Lebanon and Turkey. Each of these countries faced food insecurity challenges but the underlying reasons for this insecurity were quite different. For example, Sierra Leone enjoys an abundance of rainfall, ample land but rudimentary systems for agricultural food production, so our focus in this country was to improve the agricultural systems. With rice being the staple food, our work focused on swamp rehabilitation and improvement to increase yields, using improved seed varieties and the provision of improved tools.

Ethiopia is a chronic food deficit country mainly because the majority of the population inhabits the central highlands and, with time, more and more of the highlands were cleared of forests to make room for agricultural use (and to make charcoal as a source of supplementary income) and as result the highlands became victim to tremendous soil erosion. This results in lower and lower soil fertility and water retention capacity. Crop yields then drop and people produce less and less from their holdings. Any erratic rainfall patterns (i.e poor rainfall distribution) could spell the loss of entire crops. The WFP's interventions in these areas focused on soil and water conservation activities, providing people with food for work they performed to build terraces, dams, to plant trees. The eastern parts of Ethiopia are prone to droughts and floods both of which can lead to adverse food production patterns.

Common to most of the countries that I have worked in were school feeding programmes. When families are poor and food insecure, the education of their children is second to survival and so a large number of children are not sent to schools, they are sent to work on neighboring farms instead, or to engage in some kind of income generating activity. This is especially the case for girls. The provision of nutritious school meals not only encourages parents to send their children to school and to do so regularly, but the education of a population is known to generate one of the highest levels of economic return on that investment; an educated population is by far more likely to get onto a path of economic development than a poorly educated one. To stimulate the enrolment and regular attendance of girls in particular, in addition to the meal that the girl gets at school, she is also given a take-home ration if she attends regularly and this ration benefits the entire household.

Q. How has the global pandemic affected the WFP? Has it aligned closer with other UN bodies to tackle problems more holistically?

Like any other organization, the pandemic has posed serious challenges for the WFP, from the basic adaptation of distance-working and at the same time having to respond to the additional needs that the pandemic has generated. Those who were already food insecure became even more so, and even those who were able to just meet their food needs became more vulnerable as food prices soared and economic opportunities shrank. As such, the number of food insecure people is rising and it is yet to be seen whether donors will respond to these additional needs with additional resources at a time when they themselves are having to fund huge economic recovery programmes in their own countries. An example of such challenges that Covid-19 generated was when countries stop movement between one region and another; the WFP has had to seek exemptions for these restrictions in order for the WFP to move food to areas where it is needed. Country A had the port that was used to receive food for road transport to country B. Country A closed its borders with B and, again, the WFP had to seek solutions for such bottlenecks.

On closer alignment with other UN agencies, the pandemic has indeed lead to closer collaboration particularly with the WHO in that the WFP has supported the movement of medical supplies and equipment; this is not unprecedented. In 2014 when Ebola hit west Africa, the WFP supported the WHO by erecting mobile hospitals and providing meals for the in-patients. Most recently, you may have heard of a letter signed by dozens of humanitarian agencies urging the humanitarian donors to respond to the needs of the Yemeni people who faced the dual crisis of conflict and the pandemic.

Q. Where do you see the organization a decade from now and why?

I will focus on two aspects, the first global and the other practical. On the global front, the WFP has and will increasingly call for conflict resolution as a key aspect of eliminating food insecurity. Supporting poor people to become increasingly economically self-sufficient is impossible in contexts of conflict. Again, South Sudan and Yemen are prime examples. Advocacy for, and action on, conflict resolution is key to the work we do. So we, and other humanitarian agencies, will pool our voices in calling for peaceful resolutions of conflict, not at all a small task yet a critical one in trying to eliminate hunger. On the practical side, the world is already seeing huge leaps in cash transfer technologies, from 'simple' use of money transfer using mobile phones to the use of cryptocurrency. The WFP is already using mobile money to deliver cash to the people we support and as these technologies are rolled out in more and more countries, and as network coverage reaches wider and wider areas of countries, the WFP will be able to widen its use of these tools. The WFP is already in partnership with some private sector entities to ensure we stay abreast of this fast changing sector.