

Public Discussion
A Fight for Food Security: Navigating Humanitarian Responses in the Middle East

Wednesday, January 23rd, 2019 | 14.00 – 16.00 WIB | Bengkel Diplomasi, FPCI

Speaker : Mr. Muhannad Hadi
(Regional Director of the Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia and Eastern Europe, World Food Programme)

Moderator : Mr. Thomas Noto Suoneto (Director for Special Projects and Institutional Relations, Foreign Policy Community of Indonesia)

Opening remarks by Dr. Dino Patti Djalal: Mr. Hadi is the Regional Director of the Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe of the World Food Programme. His career with WFP has spanned over 25 years and he has worked on some of the world's biggest humanitarian crises, wherein he had previously served as the Director for Syria during the heat of the conflict.

The World Food Programme has one of the best logistics programs in the world – second best to the United States Army. It is important to remember that for the WFP, everything is political, whether it be the challenges of sourcing donors or the logistics behind distributing food goods.

Question by Mr. Noto Suoneto: I have never been to Yemen, Palestine or Syria so I don't exactly know what the situation there is like and I assume the audience here today feels the same. Can you share a little about your role and your operations with the WFP?

Mr. Muhannad Hadi: Thank you for your kind remarks. I would first like to introduce myself from my perspective. When I first finished university I completed two years of compulsory military service and after that I began working for the WFP. This is my entire life. In some parts of the world, children are not exposed to politics but for me growing up in Jordan, this is how my career began. My personal connection to Jordan is important to remember, I am from Jordan and want to continue living in Jordan I should not have to leave my country for a better life.

Let me start with the conclusion about my work with the WFP. In my entire career, I have not seen a worse humanitarian crisis than in Yemen and Syria. I have seen crisis all over the world but the situations in these areas is beyond your imagination. Specifically, in Gaza, people go for days without food. I have visited houses in Gaza with one mother and ten children living in one room. In addition to no water, food or electricity, the mother told me that her children were being attacked by rats during the night. These children have no shoes or proper clothes yet somehow, they still go to school. To put the work of the WFP into perspective for you, there are 20 million people in need of food, and the WFP is currently reaching 12 million. So, the WFP feeds more than the entire population of Jakarta. Now can you imagine the difficulty of distributing food in a warzone where it is total chaos?

WFP's work video on Yemen played.

Question by Mr. Noto Suoneto: What are the main drivers of food insecurity in Yemen?

Mr. Muhannad Hadi: It is the worst thing to be a displaced person, there are currently 8 million people displaced. The situation in Yemen is awful, some families cannot afford milk for their babies and they are so desperate that they boil rice and feed the white water to their babies as if it were milk.

Yemen imports 90% of its food supply, so they are totally dependent on the world to feed them. So when you add in war to a country that is already so reliant on assistance, you can imagine it is a total catastrophe. The private sector in Yemen is paralysed. The central bank is almost bankrupt, the private sector is not functioning, and now when the private sector fails you feel its absence. Yemen was reliant on the private sector for their economy.

In the video we just saw, 70% of imports to Yemen come through the city in video, and now it has been totally taken over by military activities. In this city I have seen a mother, who was maybe aged 14 with a one-year old baby. Both are in dire situation. When we reached them, we asked why did they wait so long to seek help? And we find out she had no money to even get a bus to the hospital – she was absolutely trapped and alone. When I hear these stories, I think that I have heard it all, but no, my heart breaks again and again. It is so difficult to understand from a video what it is really like there. We cannot reach everybody – we have a lack of resources, funds, authority, obstacles and we have to fight against the politics.

Question by Mr. Noto Suoneto: What is the process of food distribution to beneficiaries? What are some of the challenges in getting food to the crisis zones?

Mr. Muhannad Hadi: There is no one way of doing this job. You can never do a perfect job because if the situation was perfect, then there would be no need for us to be there. We travel in armoured vehicles, we are in a war situation. Food is purchased on the international market, huge quantities of staples like oil, rice and pulses. From there the food is sent to central warehouses, then we identify the people in need. It is not an easy job to prioritise one need over the other. People who do not know when their meal is coming are our high priority. The logistics team then distribute food to the final destination. On the ground, we work with NGOs and any non-political groups to distribute the goods. None of this is as easy as it sounds when I am explaining it.

Just to take our staff into Yemen is an exceptionally difficult task. Visas are often denied with no reason given, there are a lot of negotiations that go on and this process takes a long time. Even if you get everything right and are driving on the way to cross the border you will face unexpected obstacles. Sometimes you will be met by someone for example a 16-year-old boy, armed with a gun and he says, "go back" and you cannot reason with him. There are no rules, or manuals for these situations. In Syria, you might get to the absolute final checkpoint and you can see the people waiting for food across the border, and then one random person says, "no, go back" and points a gun at your face. This is devastating when you have the medicine, food, water, and everything these people who have been besieged for months need. What do you do in this situation? Do you risk your life? This is a decision that WFP staff face on a daily basis, sometimes they succeed and sometimes they do not. And it can simply be an issue of being at the right place at the wrong time. There is no correct formula.

Question by Dr. Dino Patti Djalal: Are you able to bribe these people to let you across the border, say with cigarettes or something they would want?

Mr. Muhannad Hadi: WFP has zero tolerance for corruption. If we lose our neutrality, then what do we have left? The best we can do is to invest in intensive training for these situations. Everywhere you go, you are accused of being with the other party. Everyone is paranoid in these crisis situations, you cannot win. The only way to get through it all is to focus on the people.

Question by Mr. Noto Suoneto: What are the challenges in choosing to work with partner agencies in a politically sensitive environment? What are some of the problems WFP faces in cooperating with partner agencies?

Mr. Muhannad Hadi: We run due diligence when hiring our staff and affiliates to find out if the person or company is worthy to work with us. We take corruption and accountability very seriously, we have compliance officers, internal and external audits and an extensive investigation unit. There are always mistakes but we handle them with transparency. For example, there was a situation where food was being diverted from Yemen. The second we found out we were very vocal. All of this information can be accessed on our website; our triumphs and mistakes. It is our job to find solutions and to be honest about the issues we face.

Question by Mr. Noto Suoneto: There is criticism towards WFP's operations that food aid creates a dependency culture among the poor. How do you respond to this criticism? Are there any long-term goals or are there any policies on addressing the long-term needs of affected communities?

Mr. Muhannad Hadi: I have one wish for WFP, that they go out of business because the world becomes a better place. People do not want to be dependent on the WFP, if you talk to Syrians, they all want to go back to Syria. Displaced people are powerless. It is not just about food and water. They want home, we all long for home. What drives people to leave their home is incredibly difficult circumstances. Think about the decision of a mother to take her children and risk their lives at sea. You would only do this if you feel the water is safer than the land. I do not think this idea of a 'dependency syndrome' is true, it is not our intention and not the feeling of the people we feed.

Question by Mr. Noto Suoneto: We are going to play the video of WFP's work in Gaza and please give some explanation about the situation in Gaza.

Mr. Muhannad Hadi: Would anyone like to go and tell this woman in the video that she will not get food next month? No, I did not think so. Understand that we do this, it is a part of our job every day. We always talk about the world resilience and I never understood what it meant until I went to Gaza. Despite everything, the people in Gaza greet you with a smile! They make something out of nothing, they sit next to this polluted beach and share their food around. It is unbelievable.

For the last 6 months Selly (WFP official) and myself have been on the road trying to raise money. Going to the gulf states, we are literally living from 'hand to mouth' with the funding we receive at the moment. We cannot afford to lose hope, there is no time to wait. If we have no funding, children will literally die. We need to do whatever needs to be done. For example, the program in Gaza was supposed to cease in September and we kept it going month by month because the situation was still so bad.

Question by Mr. Noto Suonto: BBC reported that 95% of the cash provided to buy food for rebel-controlled areas in Ethiopia was used to purchase weapons. In Sudan alone, IT has suspected that food aid has been siphoned of by officials in South Sudan and by armed groups in Darfur. How does WFP address the issue of corruption?

Mr. Muhannad Hadi: We are not perfect but if you go on our website you will have access to every single one of our reports and you can see where we are doing good and where we are doing bad. We have a zero-tolerance policy for corruption. Even if I get a gift for \$25, I give it back. Most of the other companies are political, we are non-political and negotiate on humanitarian grounds only.

Question by Mr. Noto Suoneto: How do you identify needs? For example, one of WFP's cooperating partners recorded people's religions. This can cause major problems in countries where religion is a key factor.

Mr. Muhannad Hadi: I will give you the most direct answer: no. We will never identify someone based on political affiliation, religion, gender or race. It is purely needs-based. It is against humanitarian principles to do otherwise. We do not even entertain this issue. This is non-negotiable. I will happily walk out of a meeting if anything is suggested otherwise. In terms of identifying exactly what is needed, we do analysis on what food is needed and consult with our nutritionists.

Question by Mr. Noto Suoneto: What are the protection mechanisms for WFP's officials or personnel to ensure their safety?

We have lost a lot of colleagues. It is undeniably tragic but, in a way, at least they lost their lives for a good reason – to save others. We take calculated risks and we mitigate danger wherever possible. We have armoured vehicles, security officers, communication equipment and we coordinate with the military. Our staffs are not allowed to enter crisis zones until they go through safety and security training. We have mandatory breaks for our staff. You cannot stay in these crisis zones for too long. It gets addictive, some people want to keep going and going. But it takes a huge toll on a person's personal life and mental health.

Audience Question and Answer

Question by the Ambassador of Afghanistan: Thank you very much for all that you do. In relation to the cutbacks, there is criticism that the administration costs of the UN are excessively high. How do you feel about this?

Mr. Muhannad Hadi: We hear this a lot. Any project that we implement goes through the executive board. Member states analyse the financial risks, structure, objectives, and tell us what is right and wrong. We report to donor countries regularly. This perception that we spend too much, I do not know where people get these figures from that our operational costs are excessively high. We are always working to reduce these costs. In Turkey, we have reduced overhead operational costs to 6.5%. This 60% operational costs figure is incorrect. I'm not even sure if any operation would reach 20%. Member states would never allow us to do that. Sometimes we use donkeys, any means to deliver food. When ISIS besieged one area, they had anti-aircraft missiles that reach 5000 metres, so we had to do a high air drop operation. We improvised by bringing guided parachutes to ensure food arrives to the people and not to the terrorists.

Question by Mr. Noto Suoneto: What kind of support can Indonesia give to WFP?

Mr. Muhannad Hadi: I am hoping to get increased political support. Indonesia has recently become a member of the UN Security Council and we are hoping to gain support for our humanitarian program. Indonesia is the largest Muslim country in the world, and people look up to you and you create expectations and accountability.

Closing Remarks by Mr. Muhannad Hadi: The problem is the crisis we are facing are manmade. The problem is manmade and when I say manmade, I mean specifically by men. I hear a quote once that said men have made these problems and women will find the solutions. We need to find human solutions, we need to end the war and put personal interests aside. One of the problems we have now is that we became experts on finding differences between each other and not focusing on our similarities. We stopped seeing how we meet as human beings and this is why people are fighting. It is totally wrong.