

OPENING SOUND OF PEOPLE SINGING AT THE ZIMBABWE EMERGENCY FOOD DISTRIBUTION

Meghan: That was a song of gratitude from people in the Mwenezi district of Zimbabwe at an emergency food distribution last year.

The global hunger rate began climbing in 2019 and grew exponentially with the arrival of the pandemic, escalating climate disasters and the invasion of Ukraine.

Today on the show, an update on the hunger crisis.

I'm Meghan Mast and you're listening to "Relief, development and podcast," a production of Mennonite Central Committee.

(MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN)

Our guest today is Andy Harrington—executive director of Canadian Foodgrains Bank, also known as CFGB.

CFGB is a partnership of 15 church and church-based agencies, including MCC, working together to end global hunger. MCC receives funding for food and agriculture projects around the world through our account at Canadian Foodgrains Bank. Last year MCC had 35 projects in 18 countries that received funding through CFGB.

You may remember Andy from when we spoke with him around this time last year. We wanted to check back in with him after a new report on the State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World was released earlier this month. He and other CFGB staff have been pouring over the report and put together a summary of the most important details. We'll link to that summary in the show notes.

Brad Quiring, MCC Canada's donor engagement manager, spoke with Andy. The two both live in British Columbia, Canada, and know each other personally. I'll pass it over to Brad now, for the interview.

Brad: Andy, hello, thank you for coming back on the podcast.

Andy: Brad, it's a privilege to be here. I always enjoy working with MCC. And it's always really good to talk with you guys.

Brad: Last time you were on, you talked about the growing hunger crisis. And that was about a year ago now already. Can you tell us how things have changed since then?

Andy: Yeah, things have significantly changed in some ways. And yet, they're the same in others. We still have a global hunger crisis. We've just seen a report released by the United Nations Food and Agriculture organizations, it's called the food. Sorry, it's called the "State of food insecurity and nutrition in the world" report. Comes out every year. It shows that this year, around 690 to 783 million people in the world face hunger. That's over the last 12 months. So it really covers 2022. It's actually a slight decrease from 2021—the way they measure the figures have changed a bit. But what's significant is still nearly 100 million people, more than what we were seeing pre-pandemic. It's particularly bad in places like Africa, right across Africa actually, even some parts of the Caribbean. In Haiti, we're seeing famine conditions for the first time in some parts of the of the country there. So, things have, in a sense, stalled out.

And there's a whole bunch of reasons for that, that we can get into in a minute.

Brad: Yeah, thanks, Andy, what are those reasons?

Andy: It is very complex. Hunger is a complex thing, Brad. There are really three major drivers, two of which had been accentuated in the last year. So, the first one is, whether we like it or not, climate change is hitting hard.

I'm reading reports at the moment that we're having the hottest year in recorded history around the world that is hitting us here in Canada with all the smoke we're seeing from the over 900 fires that are burning. It's hitting in places like the states where they're seeing some of the hottest temperatures they've ever had in Europe, but it's hitting way harder. In some of the poorest countries in the world, it's affecting the way that they can grow food. And for many smallholder farmers, which really make up the majority of farmers around the world. It's really, it's becoming almost impossible in some situations. So climate change is dramatically impacting the way that people in some of these poorest countries can actually provide food, it's dramatically impacting the food system.

Secondly, is actually conflict. You know, I remember the days when we were talking about conflict is over, it's a new world over, it's the end of the Cold War, we've got a whole new time of peace coming. They used to talk about the peace dividend. This year, or this past year, we saw nearly 110 million people displaced from their lands because of conflict. Either displaced internally, in a country, that's what we call internally displaced person, an IDP. Or becoming refugees actually needing to flee their very countries because of the conflict is happening. That impacts those who have to flee who had smallholder farms, it means that they are no longer producing food, and they're also becoming victims of hunger themselves.

And it's impacting the actual countries that are really reliant on those smallholder farmers in particular, in order to produce food. So you're seeing that, in a large way, being played out in Ukraine at the moment. But we're seeing in smaller ways, in the sense that it's under the radar, but actually really huge in places like Sudan, in Yemen, Ethiopia, in in South Sudan in in, even in some areas around Somalia and stuff, just the Horn of Africa is really struggling.

There's a third thing that's driving and actually that's the thing that's really dropped out this year, to a degree in what we saw in those 2022 figures for a couple of years. We saw massive economic disruption because of the COVID pandemic. And then that was accentuated when the Ukrainian war started for the first few months. And so we saw huge inflationary prices and that drove hunger around the world in a major way. We saw supply shortfalls, we saw our own work really impacted by that because the inflationary costs of the food that we provide around the world went through the roof. That kind of dropped out in the second half of the year as things got back to normal with the Black Sea grain initiative as the impacts of COVID began to decline. Now, we've seen the Black Sea grain initiative. You know, Russia has withdrawn from that. We're seeing economic disruption continue around the world. So, we wonder what things are going to going to be like, so that was always a case, it's those three main drivers climate, economic disruption, and conflict are really driving things with climate and conflict in 2022 being the key factors really.

Brad: Thanks, Andy, I know you talk a lot about the importance of understanding that these numbers represent real people, and that we can't lose sight of that. In the last year you've done a fair amount of travel, can you tell us about the human impact that you've seen in some of these places?

Andy: Yeah, so just a couple of human examples. And I'm really glad you said that Brad, because we talk about 690 to 73 million, and they become just figures. These are real human beings. For those of you who are listening to this podcast, I want you to imagine this was happening to your family. It doesn't matter the color of our skin, our ethnicity, it doesn't matter who we are or where we come from real human beings made in the image of God that are really struggling. So I put that in my mind into the faces and the names of people I've actually met.

I recently, well it wasn't recently it was a few months back, I was in Ethiopia, and I met a woman at a feeding station. And a feeding station is something that we work with our members and partners on the ground, in order to set up in places where there's real need, where there's real hunger. And this feeding station was in Ethiopia, it was run by one of our members, Tearfund Canada, with a local association TDA as partners. I met this one woman there, her name was Geata. And she told me that she had five children, and that they had not been able to feed those children for some months until the feeding station was opened up. She talked to me about how she had to decide each day which child was going to eat. She normally reckoned she could do one meal a day if she was lucky. But there would probably be only enough food for three to four children. So every day, she had to decide which child is not going to eat today. And that's more than skipping a meal that's like, we didn't eat today. That's, that's where you're getting to hunger that gnaws at you, and you wonder if you're going to survive. So just imagine that. Imagine you had to choose which one of the children that you love—think about how much you love your children—and imagine you had to choose who's not going to eat today. Not who's going to skip food and have a big meal later on, and skip a meal and have a big dinner. But someone who's already close to starving, isn't going to eat today. That's horrific, to me, actually. And I was deeply moved, as I talked to her. Very pleased that we could help but it's an ongoing situation.

Another place was I think you were there recently yourself, Brad, I was in Lebanon, a few months back and visit, I think we visited some of the same people. So you have some experience here as well. But Lebanon is actually one of the biggest responses that Canadian Foodgrains bank has going at the moment. We thought it would be a short-term response 10 or 11 years ago, when the conflict there started in Syria. Eleven years later, we're still there. Rampant inflation. While I was there, inflation went up between I think about 15% in five days and, and just almost impossible to imagine how someone who's a refugee or someone who's out of work can actually afford to eat. And I remember sitting in one room with one young mother, she'd actually come as an immigrant from Nigeria. And she had a situation where she'd been working for a family. It had been an exploitative situation. She actually thought she was coming out to be dress designer and she ended up becoming a servant in his family's house, a maid, and they really exploited her. And they took her papers and according to her, her life was under threat. Like I won't go into details, but her life was under threat. So she fled. They still have her papers. She's not able to leave the country. She has no one there. The only thing she can be reliant on is our programs that were running through people like MCC there. Just sitting in that room and talking to her with a baby on her knee and just saying well, I have no hope other than you guys. And yet a beautiful young woman could have been my daughter, you know, just struggling to survive. I must admit, I will be honest with you, Brad. I've been doing this this work a long time and I came out of that room—I didn't speak for two hours. It profoundly affected me. And she and Geata just represent these 793 million people around the world who are really in a desperate situation.

Brad: That's a lot Andy, that can feel super overwhelming. Where do you and your team find hope amidst all of this?

Andy: You know, that was a subject we talked a lot about in Lebanon with some of the workers we have on the ground with our partners there. And I just I remember...so I'll tell it in two parts. I'll talk about them because I think they're way more important than me. And then I'll talk a little bit about the hope that I feel. I remember coming back from that visit and sitting in the office. It was with some of ADRA Lebanon team. ADRA Canada is one of our members. And when I was sitting there, and actually had a similar conversation with some of the MCC team, actually later that day. But I asked that team, it was quite young team, they were doing this food distribution. I don't, I think the oldest person was 30. But the average age was about 22, 23. And I said, how do you cope when you go through meetings like that? And actually, that was just one of many meetings we had that day. We'd gone into places, met a lot of people. And they were under huge pressure by the way to bring more people onto this program. There's only so much you can do. I said how do you cope? And this young girl, 22-year-old girl, just finished as a student, she said oh we just go home and cry every night.

And I thought, how do you deal with that? And actually, we're working now to bring, we already give support to our partners on the ground, we're gonna give a lot more psychosocial support that came out of that visit and other visits that have gone on.

I think we, this brings it back to how I cope with and we talked about this around there, I think we have to have hope. I think we have to have hope that A) the world is going to get better, which is not a prevalent thought in the world nowadays, especially when you look at the media, I think we have to have hope that we can be a difference. I think you feel hopeless when you can't make a difference. And Canadian Foodgrains Bank, MCC, we do make a difference. And for people who are listening, if you get involved, you will make a difference you will change the lives of these people. So I think hope comes when you act. I think it's very easy to sit back and be cynical. But even if you can impact the life of one person, which is what I tell myself all the time, you can have hope.

I think the third place is my faith in God leads me to hope. You know, scripture tells us we have this hope as an anchor for our soul. And that's what drives me we talk at Canadian Foodgrains Bank of being a Christian response to hunger. That doesn't mean we respond to Christians, we respond to absolutely anyone regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, it doesn't matter to us. You're all human beings made in the image of God. And I see hope in some of these people. So interestingly, that conversation I just told you about the young mom in that room, when we left, one of the things she said to us is, I want to make a difference. You know, I'm paraphrasing here, but you guys have helped me, I want to help others now. Can I be a community organizer? Can I volunteer with you? Can I help people? I want to spread this message, that's hope. Everybody has that spark within them. And sometimes we view people with those images that we've seen on TV of bloated, you know, children and flies in their eyes. And that's true. I've seen it. But I also stop and talk to these people. They're human beings and they want to, they want to make a difference. They want to see change in their own world and then help others. So I think there is hope. Canadian Foodgrains Bank has helped over 1.1 million people, this year, out of food insecurity. That's a lot. That's a growing number. And so every single person that we can help for me, that's a sign of hope. We talk about ending hunger. It's our global vision to end hunger in the world. But every single one of those people who gets to eat tomorrow, every single one of those

people that we build sustainability for in our longer-term programs. Every single one of them gets to eat, every family who gets to eat is one step towards ending hunger for me. That's hope.

Brad: That's amazing. Thank you, Andy. How can people here in Canada or the U.S. support this work?

Andy: Well, there are many ways you can support, right starting with us. MCC is a wonderful organization. MCC was very much at the heart of the founding of the Canadian Foodgrains Bank 40 years ago. They're a key member, key partner for us and also great friends. The first thing I'd say is get behind MCC, support MCC you can, you can be part of this movement by making a donation to MCC, by volunteering with MCC you can even do that through the MCC page or you can go on the Canadian Foodgrains Bank and tick the MCC box there. You can do it one way, support the Canadian Foodgrains Bank as well. For those of you who are listening, just be aware of what we're doing join, we talk about four things that you can do actually, we talk about give, pray, learn, advocate. So giving means that we can help more people.

Learning means educate yourself about what's causing hunger. These podcasts are great for that, by the way, Brad, I listened to the podcast regularly for all sorts of reasons. But let's learn about what's driving the conditions that you know...there are way too many people saying shallow things like oh, if they just got a job, or oh, if they just, you know, did this or did that...it's a complex thing. So let's learn about it. There's loads of resources on your website and on ours, Foodgrainsbank.ca.

Thirdly, advocate, you know, figure out ways in which you can come alongside us and talk to your members of parliament or your state senators or your representative, see your MLAs if you're here in Canada. We have lots of resources on our website, where you can actually go on and there's a letter writer that will help you build that. In October, if you're listening to this and you want to come along, we're taking people to Parliament Hill. Every year, we do a thing called "hunger on the hill," and we'll take you, we will train you how to do advocacy. And we'll introduce you to your Member of Parliament. And we'll sit with you as you ask them to get the Canadian government more involved in helping with overseas development, aid, helping end hunger. And we also talk about prayer. So give pray, learn, advocate.

Pray. There is a God. He is concerned for this world. Pray, pray about what you can do, and pray about the solutions that God can bring. As we come alongside him, I have regularly gone to places in the world and thought, oh, okay, I've got answers here and found I don't have answers. But God is already there inviting me to join what he's already doing. And I think many of us experience that. So give, pray, learn advocate, you can make a difference. Don't let anyone tell you that you can't. Don't be bullied by the big voices on social media or media that say, oh, the world is over. No. You can make a difference if you get involved.

Brad: Andy before I let you go, is there anything else that you wanted to say that I didn't get the chance to ask you about today?

Andy: I think the only thing I'd want to say is and it kind of weaves through everything I always say when I when I when I'm being interviewed or when I'm talking to people in general, Brad. And that is that every human being is a human. And unfortunately, we've moved into a time of our history that absolutely perplexes me. When you see the history that we've had, we thought everything was getting better. You know, you think of Martin Luther King talking about the long arc...it's a troubled world, but

the long arc of justice, you know, it always it always bends toward justice. It feels like we've gone backwards in many ways. And it feels like we have othered people. It feels like we've said those people are different from us. That political party is our enemy, that that race is our enemy, that sexuality is our enemy. We just other people and we sometimes as Christians, we can build really good theologies around that. And basically, the question I always ask myself is, would Jesus be proud of this? Would Jesus be happy with what's going on here?

You know, is this grace, is this love? And so I really want us to remember that every human being in the world is a human being just like you or I. And I want us to remember that there is no "other" because when we talk about "other" we objectify people, it's easy to, you know, have a fight or blame an object, it's easier to say, that object is a bad thing than it is to say, Oh, that's a person just like me with my feelings and everything. So we other people, there is no other. There's just us. All of us in this together. So please remember that when we talk about hunger, please remember that when we talk about war and conflict, you know. I see the lines being drawn up on one side or the other way too many times, there's just remember that we are human beings, all made in the image of God, all worth the same dignity, justice and respect that we will want to be treated with ourselves. Let's remember that when we talk about these big figures, or we watch these news stories. And let's think, what can I do? What one thing can I do that will make this situation better, even if it's a nice passing word to someone you wouldn't normally do. Humans are humans. And yeah, I think that's what I want us to remember.

Brad: Andy, thank you again for coming on the podcast. Once again this year. I always learned so much chatting with you and really appreciate the good work that you and your team do it's, it's our privilege to be working alongside you so thank you.

Andy: Thanks Brad, it's a great privilege to be working alongside you and all the team at MCC thanks very much.

(MUSIC TRANSITION)

Meghan: *That was Andy Harrington, executive director of Canadian Foodgrains Bank, speaking with Brad Quiring, MCC Canada's donor engagement manager.*

This episode of Relief, Development and Podcast was produced on Treaty 1 territory, the original land of the Anishinaabeg, Cree and Dakota peoples, and the homeland of the Métis Nation.

This episode was hosted by Brad Quiring and produced by Christy Kauffman and by me, Meghan Mast. The head producer is Emily Loewen.

A lot is happening in the world right now. This is a difficult time for many. May you experience God's provision and protection as we work together to share God's love and compassion for all in the name of Christ.

Thanks and take good care.

(MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN)

Show notes (take action!):

- *Learn more about MCC's Climate Action for Peace campaign [here](#).*
- *To donate to help people around the world navigate the impacts of climate change, visit [here](#).*
- *To donate to Canadian Foodgrains Bank (through MCC), visit [here](#). Remember to choose "Mennonite Central Committee Canada" under the "member account" dropdown menu.*
- *Learn more about "Hunger on the hill," visit [here](#).*
- *To support stronger adaptation responses to climate change by writing a letter to the Canadian government, visit [here](#).*
- *To support stronger mitigation responses to climate change by writing a letter to the Canadian government, visit [here](#).*