

Andy Harrington: There is no “other,” there's just us and we. We live in this world that wants to other people, “those people, those people over there,” there is no “other.” I've seen what hunger can really look like in places like Northern Kenya and the Horn of Africa. places like Ethiopia, worked for a number of years in Croatia and Bosnia during the war there and saw some of the gnawing effects of hunger that can happen when there's a lack of resources. So, it's deeply, deeply important to me that we do everything we can to reduce the causes of hunger and the impacts of hunger on people that are just like you and me, Meghan.

Meghan Mast: *That was Andy Harrington, Executive Director of Canadian Foodgrains Bank.*

Right now, around the world hundreds of millions of people go to bed hungry.

Of those, 50 million people, have exhausted all options and are teetering on the edge of famine.

That's up from 27 million in 2019 before the pandemic began.

A substantial increase.

Today on the show, we're bringing you a bonus episode about 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.

Welcome Andy. And thanks for joining me today.

Andy Harrington: Thanks, Meghan. It's a privilege to be here.

Meghan Mast: *I wonder if you can start by talking about why is this work so important to you on a personal level?*

Andy Harrington: Yeah, I remember, back a few years now. It's probably about 24 years ago, I visited Ethiopia. And at the time, one of the cyclical droughts, it feels like that happens there, was happening. I was visiting with a development agency that I was doing some work with. And there were four of us there. And we visited a place about three hours, sorry, three days drive from Addis Ababa, the capital. Ethiopia is a bit more developed now. But in those days it wasn't, it was only a few years after the revolution. And we came to this village where we were meeting a group that we had agreed to support through the development agency my friends were part of when we got there, we realize that the people that we were meeting could actually walk for three days non-stop across mountains, and they come with no food, they come with no water. And they were in terrible condition. We literally came around the corner and saw 200 people, 50 families sitting in this courtyard outside of church. And it really was, it was a place we literally had to get machetes out and beat down trees to get a vehicle into, it was very isolated. And the absolute suffering of those people was deeply profound for me. In fact, I jumped back into the vehicle, when we some local people, and went to a place where they could cook up a huge

stewpot bought that food back. And, and we, we had a long-term plan to help them, but in that moment, we just had to do something in it. It was actually very distressing, Meghan, the pictures have burned into my mind of what I saw with those kids, just like you see on TV with bellies descended from malnutrition. And I remember just, you know, we we had cameras there to take pictures, and I couldn't take any pictures. It was just so disturbing. And I remember just leaving the church where people were just descending on this huge vat of food and just going to the back of the church around the back of the church and, and actually to be honest, shedding a tear and saying to God, okay. Well, I guess what I said to him was, if you want me to be more involved in this, there's the I don't want to just go back to England where I was living at the time and be the same. I want this to change me and I want to make a difference. And I think a lot of what I do actually stems from that moment.

You cannot be in those situations and not want not want to be part of it. You have to be almost inhuman. The question is where we can do it intelligently or not where we can actually end hunger in our lifetime and I believe we can.

Meghan Mast: *And so I want to talk a little bit about what's happening right now. Can you talk a bit about why we're seeing such an increase in the number of people who are going hungry?*

Andy Harrington: Yeah, and we are Meghan, we're seeing a deep increase. Back in 2019, we were looking at something like 680 million people in severe to acute hunger, and that risen over the few years previous to that. But before that, for over a decade, we were seeing the numbers decrease. It really looked like we were getting a handle on things, that we were beginning to run programs beginning to see resource distribution that was working. So the graph was going down, then around 2015, it flattened out, and then it started to tick up and really ticked up badly in 2019. We were up about we rose about 100, just over 100 million people in those few years. However, in 2020, there was a huge increase because of the impacts of the pandemic. And we're just about to add that went up to we reckon from 690 million to over 800 million bit hard to track the numbers because the lockdowns we were all in. But we're just about to see the figures published for 2021. We believe they will, they will explode even further.

The things that are driving that there were really three main issues. The first one would be the climate crisis that we're in. So we're seeing climate change impact countries all over the world, but particularly impact the most vulnerable countries. We're seeing climate refugees, we're seeing resource wars, we're looking at an unprecedented fifth rainy season being affected or not happening in the Horn of Africa, which is causing the drought there so we're seeing massive climate impacts that have long term issues for the way people have grown food.

The second one would be conflict. There are there are so many conflicts around the world. And we're focusing in on Ukraine at the moment, and we can talk a bit about that. And in a way it's been kind of a tipping point, but there are many other conflicts in places like Ethiopia and Tigray in Yemen—the conflict we've seen in Syria, conflicts all over the world that have driven people out of their homes that have caused huge refugee crisis that have disrupted food systems. So that's been a contributing factor.

And a third one that we've seen over the last few years we've already talked about this has been COVID. So we tend to think of COVID as a health emergency here in Canada. But actually, in many parts of the world, it's been a food emergency, a humanitarian emergency alongside that. I was actually in Rwanda, when the lockdown was enforced back in March 2020, I was just about, I managed to get one of the last

flights out. But we saw communities that we were working with were very food secure, move into deep food insecurity within three or four days, because the lockdown was very heavily enforced. Markets were shut down, transportation was shut down, people couldn't farm their fields, people couldn't get access to food. They didn't have the safety nets that we were used to here, they didn't have freezers and things like that to store food. And so within days, people moved into a hunger crisis. So that has been echoed around the world. And so you've got these three, you know, three confluences, if you like that have come together in what we call a cascading crisis. And you multiply that with the lack of resources in many of the countries that we're, we're looking at, and that is what's been driving this. And now, of course, and I'm sure we can talk about this more in a moment, we're being impacted by the war in Ukraine, which is having deep, deep, deep consequences for those who are hungry.

Meghan Mast: *And what has, I think, a lot of people when they hear that those two things are connected, they may not they may be surprised to hear that. Can you talk about how the war in Ukraine is impacting the hunger crisis?*

Andy Harrington: Yeah so, Ukraine and Russia between them, supply over a third of the world cereal crops, and their main suppliers to over 53 countries and territories. And many of those countries and territories are some of the world's most vulnerable countries to hunger. And so suddenly, you've had this just stop in exports of foods to countries that were desperately in need. It's not just food. It's sunflower oil. The vast majority of the sunflower oil comes from that region. And we used sunflower oil and putting it in our frying pans and cooking but it's used in a lot of food preservation, and through preparation activities in the in the majority world. That has gone. And we also for longer term, and this is where we were really worried about next year, we're seeing a big breakdown in the supply of fertilizers. Most of the fertilizers in the world nitrogen fertilizers come from this area. Farmers can't get those fertilizers. Now you talk to a farmer here in Canada, they'll tell you how expensive fertilizers are. And we're seeing a little bit like we saw in the Coronavirus vaccination program. The rich countries are buying all that up. The poor countries have nothing left. So when you bring all that together, that has created massive supply shortages. So first of all, we can't get some of the supplies that we want to get. So for example, you know, in some of our work where we're supplying food directly, we don't always do that sometimes it's cash, sometimes it's vouchers, but where we're supplying food directly, there are commodities we could get six months ago, we just cannot get now. So, so some of that. So it's the food supply issue. But crucially, and critically, it's the inflationary costs associated with that. So we're seeing inflation around 8% here in Canada. I asked our logistics manager, our supply manager back last week, how much more expensive it is to supply what we call a food basket, which is the the amount of food we give to a family and a month in Kenya than it was in December, the rise has been 40%, in six months, in some parts of the world, it's gone way beyond that. So families simply do not have the ability to provide that when I was in Turkana a couple of weeks ago, a couple of months ago, we saw families that will simply could not get access to any of the foodstuffs that they have. So they're trying to find coping mechanisms, but they, they don't have access to those foods stuffs that they had six months ago. So massive supply shortages, message, inflationary costs, all layered on top of that cascading crisis of COVID, climate change and conflict. And it's tipping us into a global hunger crisis that we never expected, didn't believe what happened three years ago, and that is rushing up, it's actually exploding on us at the moment there. And that's why it's so crucial that we act now, there's there's no time to waste.

Meghan Mast: *And I think it's probably important to differentiate between hunger and famine, because I know that there's specific definitions for that. So, I have here that the UNHCR definition of famine is a situation in which a substantial proportion of the population of a country or region are unable to access adequate food, resulting in widespread acute malnutrition and loss of life by starvation and disease. Can you talk about how you've seen famine impact families in this crisis?*

Andy Harrington: Yeah, I can. And if you actually want to go deeper into that definition, it's actually one of the definitions is that 30% of people are acutely malnourished, that two out of every 10,000 people are dying from starvation. But generally, it's a lot more than that. I mean, this is serious hunger. So on a personal level, in my recent visit to Kenya, the part I went to was a place called Turkana. And that's an area where famine is happening. Because it's, it's in the Horn of Africa, it's right up near the border of South Sudan, Sudan. And so we were, we were seeing or hearing stories of families that were skipping days of food, parents try and decide which child is going to eat today, parents themselves skipping so that children can eat. And this was with support. There were many families that were just not not having any support at all. We were seeing and hearing reports of livestock just dying in the fields, up to a third of livestock, just dying in an area where livestock is a critical part of survival.

We're hearing stories around the world at the moment where people are moving from one area to another just to try and find a place to graze their, their cattle or their goats or their camels in the case in Turkana. And where literally, war is breaking out in a localized context, militia, not militia. So more violence, I would say is breaking out in a context where that is happening. In the meantime, people are trying to find food to survive. And we're not talking just when we talk about hunger at this level, it's not talking like you and I weren't might think, I miss my lunch today, or I'm fasting for a day, we're talking about that gnawing hunger that says I don't know, if I'm going to be able to survive tomorrow. I don't know if I'm going to be able to feed my kids. So, terrible impacts that we're seeing around the world, and the numbers are growing, growing rapidly as a result.

Meghan Mast: *The picture that you're painting is it's you know, like you said, it's serious, and it's heavy. So what would you say to a listener? Who's hearing about this, hearing about the depth of the crisis and feeling helpless? How can people respond?*

Andy Harrington: Well, at Canadian Foodgrains Bank, we talk about four ways in which people can respond, give, which I'll come back to in a moment, because there's a very specific way on this crisis at the moment. So I'll come back to that. Secondly, is pray, as Christians, we really do believe that God intervenes. As we pray, come alongside the God that is already doing things. I think we follow his invitations. Third thing is learn. We need to learn about the causes of hunger, we need to learn what it is that would combat that. We have it within our power to end hunger. It's about resource distribution. It's about fairness, it's about equality. It's about fighting poverty. And so to learn what it is that we can do, to learn the way that we can work together to end hunger in the world is very important. And to advocate. Again, in the same way that we saw advocacy around the desire to see the Coronavirus vaccine sent around the world, we can advocate with governments, with the UN and with others to see more aid distributed.

One thing I want to come back to at the beginning as gifts, so at the moment, food grains bank and humanitarian coalition. And I know that MCC is part of Foodgrains Bank as well, you are one of our great members. We've launched a \$5 million appeal. And for every dollar given, the government has agreed to match that for this global hunger crisis. And I know you can go to the MCC website to give, also to the

Foodgrains website to give knowing that that money is going to be matched by the government, we're very pleased the government did that. They've also announced an extra \$250 million over the last couple of weeks, in order for Canadians to get behind. You know, the needs that we have to respond in the global hunger crisis. So we're very happy about that. We're very happy that MCC is part of that. And we encourage people who are listening to be part of this. We have the ability to get that funding to where it's needed very quickly, and to feed people. So yeah, give, pray, learn, advocate.

Meghan Mast: *And that makes me think back to the beginning of our conversation where you said that you believe that it's possible to solve global hunger. I'm wondering how you see that happening?*

Andy Harrington: Well, I think I think there's a number of ways to answer that question. I think the first one is resources. So, we need to see more resources. But I think what people tend to think of is that those resources are taken by people like the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, like Mennonite Central Committee, and we just go to places where there's hunger, and we see people and we leave, and then the hunger comes back again, and we feed people and we leave. Now, that is part of our job in terms of emergency response in emergency situations. But a large part of what we're doing is actually building long-term sustainability and resilience as well, so many of our programs and multi-year programs to help people helps people like smallholder farmers to build climate resilient food systems. You know, we use a process called conservation agriculture, for example, that allow people to grow more crops, in places of drought and in places of soil erosion, through a number of processes and techniques that we're we're able to teach that really, really benefit, not just those who are growing the families who are doing that, but the communities as a whole. So, we need to see more action on immediate urgent exist as citizens at the moment. We also need to see more action on funding programs like climate-resilient food systems. And we're glad the Canadian government is doing more of that. Canadians can come on board that they can look at our websites and see what's happening. So, when I answered that question about we have it within us, we know what to do, the programs exist, there are numerous programs out there, we need more capability and more funding to do that. Because in the end, we want to be in a place where we're not just going to where the emergencies are, in order to feed them, there'll always be a place for that. It could happen in Canada. You know, it could happen anywhere. But we want to be in a place where people have the long-term ability to sustainably survive to be resilient in the face of a changing world. We believe that can happen.

Meghan Mast: *Can you tell us how CFGB members are responding?*

Andy Harrington: Yeah, so, so we have 15 members, we're an association of 15 members and our members actually run the programs through their local partners. And we're active in 34 countries in both short-term responses, and longer-term sustainability and resilience building. And actually, we're active, of the top 10 countries where hunger is most prevalent, we're active in nine of them, including some of, all over the Horn of Africa, in every one of those countries where the drought is, we're active. So, members are responding all the time both in that sense of needing to respond to the emergency situations that are there but also working to build that long-term sustainability by working with farmers, by producing more food, by allowing people to know that their future is going to be better because they are more food secure because of the work that's been done. So, our members are amazing in doing this. We're rated by, Canadian Foodgrains Bank is rated by Charity Impact as a top 10 charity in terms of the impact we can have. We're only able to do that because of our members and our members also have their own programs as well outside of the food grains being so We represent a huge amount of

development work that's going on around the world. And it's a great privilege to see that work. I'm actually heading out tomorrow to Ethiopia, to the frontlines of this crisis to see for myself, and I'm going to meet with a number of members and partners there that are doing incredible work.

Meghan Mast: *Well, thanks for squeezing us in before you head out on your trip, Andy and all the best as you travel to Ethiopia tomorrow.*

Andy Harrington: *Well, thanks so much, Meghan. It's been a privilege to be with you.*

Meghan: *That was Andy Harrington, the Executive Director of Canadian Foodgrains Bank.*

For a limited time, the Canadian government is [matching donations](#) from individual Canadians to emergency food for children and families facing extreme hunger in places like South Sudan, Kenya, Ethiopia, Malawi and Zimbabwe.

You have until July 17th.

For MCC supporters in the US, your donations won't be eligible for the match, but they're still so important.

If you'd like to help, you can [designate your donation to "Global hunger crisis"](#).

We'll put a links to the donate links in the show notes.

We're already seeing people respond with such generosity across Canada and the United States. Thank you for your care and compassion. It does make a difference.

That's it for this episode. Next time, we'll share an update on MCC's response in Ukraine.

Thanks and take good care.

(MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN)

Show notes:

Canadian MCC supporters donate link: <https://donation.mcccanada.ca/hunger-crisis/?where=22HUN-homepage>

US MCC supporters donate link: <https://donate.mcc.org/cause/global-hunger-crisis>