

UNSUNG HEROES: THE IMPACT OF HUMANITARIANS



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ABOUT VOICES OF SUSTAINABILITY

Voices of Sustainability is a thought leadership platform launched by the Zayed Sustainability Prize to explore the challenges and opportunities of the global transition to an inclusive and

prosperous future. Each month, the series hosts the world's leading experts to discuss the latest trends and themes in the sustainability agenda.



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INTRODUCTION

On 29 August, the Zayed Sustainability Prize aired its 39th episode of the 'Voices of Sustainability' series, featuring Tjada D'Oyen McKenna, CEO of Mercy Corps. The discussion focused on the critical role of

resilience in humanitarian efforts, highlighting the importance of empowering local communities to adapt and thrive amidst challenges such as climate change, conflict and poverty.



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SUMMARY

In the 39th episode of the 'Voices of Sustainability' series, titled 'Unsung Heroes: The Impact of Humanitarians', the focus was on the critical need to build resilience in vulnerable communities across the globe. The episode featured an in-depth discussion with Tjada D'Oyen McKenna, CEO of Mercy Corps, a leading global organisation dedicated to humanitarian and development assistance in regions afflicted by climate change, conflict and poverty.

Tjada began by sharing Mercy Corps' overarching mission: to provide timely and effective assistance in over 40 countries worldwide. She highlighted that the organisation's work spans across the Middle East, Africa, Asia and the Americas, directly reaching communities most in need. What sets Mercy Corps apart is its commitment to grounding its efforts in the local context, ensuring that the solutions provided are sustainable and that the communities are equipped to continue thriving long after the initial intervention.

One of the key points Tjada emphasised was the importance of empowering local communities. She explained that 95% of Mercy Corps' nearly 5,900-strong workforce is composed of individuals from the very regions they serve. This approach ensures that the aid delivered is culturally relevant and sensitive to the unique challenges faced by these communities. By investing in local leadership, Mercy Corps fosters a sense of ownership among the people, which is crucial for the long-term success of any development initiative. This strategy also aims to build local capacity, with the goal that one day, the leadership of Mercy Corps in each country will be entirely composed of local nationals.



The root causes of humanitarian crises in the world are conflict, climate change and poverty. The reality is that the populations that are most affected negatively by climate change are the ones who did the least to contribute to it, and the ones who may have the least resources to sustainably adapt.

Tjada D'Oyen McKenna
Mercy Corps
CEO



Innovation and partnership were also central themes in Tjada's discussion. She described how Mercy Corps leverages technology to enhance its operations and increase the resilience of the communities it serves. For example, in Guatemala, the organisation uses satellite data and weather predictions to anticipate crises, enabling communities to prepare and respond more effectively. In one instance, Mercy Corps collaborated with remittance providers to encourage early cash transfers ahead of a predicted hurricane, reducing transaction fees and ensuring that people had the resources they needed to cope with the impending disaster. This anticipatory action, Tjada noted, is a powerful tool in mitigating the impacts of climate-related emergencies.



Partnerships play a pivotal role in Mercy Corps' operations, as Tjada highlighted. The organisation collaborates with a wide range of partners, from local community groups to major financial service providers, to deliver comprehensive support in conflict and disaster zones. For instance, in Afghanistan, Mercy Corps has worked closely with local providers to ensure cash assistance reaches those in need, even when traditional systems are disrupted. This approach not only enhances the effectiveness of aid but also strengthens the resilience of local organisations, leaving a lasting impact beyond Mercy Corps' involvement.

Tjada also underscored the significance of awards such as the Zayed Sustainability Prize. She explained that such accolades offer vital resources that allow organisations to innovate and scale successful programmes and explore new approaches. The visibility and credibility that come with winning such a Prize can also attract additional funding and partnerships, further amplifying the impact of the

work being done on the ground in the communities that need support the most.

Throughout the episode, Tjada reiterated the interconnected nature of the challenges facing vulnerable communities. She argued that addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that integrates immediate humanitarian response with long-term development goals. Mercy Corps' model of combining short-term relief with efforts to build resilience and promote sustainable development is a testament to the effectiveness of this approach.

In this impactful discussion for World Humanitarian Day, Tjada called for sustained investment in innovative solutions, stronger partnerships, and deeper community engagement to tackle the intertwined challenges that face the world. Her message underscored the vital role organisations like Mercy Corps play in driving transformative change and building a more just and sustainable future for all.

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BIOGRAPHIES

Tjada D'Oyen McKenna

Mercy Corps
CEO

As Chief Executive Officer of Mercy Corps, Tjada leads a team of 5,900+ humanitarians, who provide immediate relief and help communities forge new paths to prosperity in the face of disaster, poverty, and climate change, reaching 38 million people in 40+ countries.

Tjada's previous work includes roles at CARE, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the U.S. Agency for International Development's Bureau for Food Security and McKinsey & Company.

Tjada earned a BA and MBA from Harvard. When she's not working, Tjada enjoys reading and spending time with her husband and two sons.



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OUTCOMES



Building resilience in communities is essential for long-term sustainability, especially in regions affected by climate change, conflict and poverty.



Empowering local leaders and ensuring that humanitarian efforts are community-driven increases the effectiveness and sustainability of interventions.



Partnerships and innovation, including the use of technology, are key to addressing complex humanitarian challenges.



Awards like the Zayed Sustainability Prize play a crucial role in fostering innovation and enabling organisations to scale successful models globally.



Collective action, continued investment, and a focus on inclusivity are necessary to create a more resilient and equitable world.

Watch the full episode on the Zayed Sustainability Prize's YouTube channel

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