

On disaster's frontline

Emergencies are a near daily diet for Oxfam's vetal field worker Carlos Calderon. On World Humanitarian Day in August, he talked about his work for an organisation that specialises in water and sanitation work.

Over the past 16 years, Oxfam Humanitarian Manager has witnessed the impact of tsunamis, cyclones, radioactive spills, bloody civil wars, devastating droughts and floods across all five continents. In a recent Q&A, he talks about his work – and how he got into it.

HOW DID YOU BECOME A HUMANITARIAN WORKER?

I have always worked for NGOs, it all started when I started working for the volunteer fire-fighting brigade in Peru. I would volunteer eight hours a day, four days a week. So far, I have clocked up to 3000 emergencies. As well as firefighting, I worked as a hazardous materials technician and a paramedic – 80 percent of the call-outs were for medical emergencies. I worked with chemical spills and a radioactive spill at the local hospital – the whole gamut; so I was well prepared to move into this field. After finishing my degree in Communications for Development, I worked with Firefighters without Borders as a rope technician which is a fancy name for using ropes to rescue people from trenches and cliffs. After completing my Masters in Humanitarian Aid, I became an intern at Oxfam in Spain. Since then, I have worked for a variety of agencies and across a number of countries – South Sudan, Somalia, Palestine and Japan after the tsunami.

WHAT DO YOU FIND MOST HEART-BREAKING?

I think one of the hardest things to deal with is the fact that you can return to a country again and again and in the long term, it still remains broken because there is no traction from the government or international actors to address its problems. I have worked to return refugees to South Sudan only to see the country erupt into violence again. It's heart-breaking because you have all these international organisations working hammer and tongs trying to help out in one of the world's worst humanitarian situations even though all of that work amounts to zero.

AND SURPRISING THINGS THAT YOU HAVE LEARNED?

Well, it's critical to consult with the community to find out their needs, otherwise things can go awry. You hear heaps of stories of 'fails'. I think one of the most interesting of these was a seed distribution drop that was done, I think, in Africa. This particular seed variety was sourced from a neighbouring

country and the recipients were unfamiliar with it, so they ate the seeds instead of planting them. In this situation, you really need to consult with the community.

THINKING ON YOUR FEET MUST COME NATURALLY?

Oh yes, I primarily work in the Pacific and in the past few years, the cyclone season has ramped up and the storms are becoming more frequent and more ferocious. One of the biggest problems with the Pacific is that the community maybe scattered across hundreds of islands and yet there is only ferry services and air travel is prohibitively expensive. Often that means empowering and training locals so they can do the job. For example, in the past, we've had the option to fly an engineer out there to service desalination units but this really isn't cost-effective, so we have trained up locals to use this complicated equipment. So when disaster strikes, they can switch into engineer mode, like they did when Cyclone Ian Winston struck in 2014.



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HOW IS CLIMATE CHANGE AFFECTING YOUR WORK?

We are already witnessing the impact of climate change – it's creating more intense cyclones throughout the Pacific. And for many low-lying islands, their only source of water is rooftop rainwater harvesting and what gets lopped off in a cyclone? Roofs. So it's a matter of creating cyclone-resistant houses, so that families aren't left without this important water source after a disaster. Climate change is also causing droughts and if you're a family that's harvesting rainwater, then this can greatly reduce your water supply, so we're also working to encourage smart use of water and, in critical situations, we'll look at installing a temporary desalination unit.

WHAT ARE SOME INNOVATIONS IN THE FIELD?

Oxfam specialises in water and sanitation, so in an emergency we're the ones handing out water, installing portable desalination units, water tanks and working to build pit latrines or sketch out pooh maps. This work is often critical because after a disaster, you have a secondary crisis caused by open defecation and people drinking unclean water. Our nifty buckets and water tanks are the gold standard, so many NGOs order our sanitation products in emergencies. We're not an organisation

that looks to fix-n-dash, we look for long-term solutions to sanitation problems. It is estimated that one billion people still don't have hygienic toilets, so we're working to ensure that people have access to low-cost toilets in their homes such as tiger toilets and bio-digesters. This is especially important for women who risk getting sexually assaulted if they have to use a government toilet at night.

CHALLENGES OF WORKING ACROSS THE PACIFIC?

The top one would have to be accessibility – you have two million people scattered across thousands of islands and these islands aren't well served by flights or public ferries. For example a return flight from NZ to the Marshall islands costs \$4000. That said, there have been some innovative solutions to this problem, such as an NGO that works with super-yachts. These yachts often contain desalination units, so they were deployed to the outer islands after Cyclone Winston in Fiji. The second biggest problem is the fact that many of these countries don't have a cash-economy, so you may install a desalination unit but they work on a bartering system, so it's hard to find parts to keep it maintained. Also you can't 'pay' an engineer to maintain this unit because the money is useless. **WNZ**