

Hunger Policy Podcast – International Aid  
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Interview Transcript

hello and welcome to another edition of the hunger and policy podcast from ELCA World Hunger I'm Ryan Cumming, the program director for hunger education with ELCA World Hunger and today we're going to be talking about an important topic of international aid the financial resources that countries like the US offer to other countries to address critical issues of social economic political and environmental significance international aid as we know it really kind of got its start in the post-world war ii era particularly with George Marshall and the Marshall plan and going back to those late 1940s George Marshall outlined that plan in a Harvard commencement speech in 1947 and he had this to say about international aid at the time Marshall said "It is logical that the United States should do whatever it is able to do to assist in the return of normal economic health in the world without which there can be no political stability and no assured peace our policy is directed not against any country or doctrine but against hunger poverty desperation and chaos its purpose should be the revival of a working economy in the world so as to permit the emergence of political and social conditions in which free institutions can exist obviously he's addressing the economic costs of world war ii inside a war ravaged Europe. The international aid has changed quite a bit since then but still remains an important and significant topic so to talk us through this, I'm joined by two colleagues and friends from the ELCA Patricia Kisare who's the international policy advisor for the ELCA and Kaari Reiersen, the associate for corporate social responsibility, both of whom are on the witnessing in society team working for the service and justice home area in the ELCA. Thanks for joining us Patricia and Kaari. Maybe we could start by just telling us what a little bit about those roles that you have those are pretty big terms there so maybe you could share a little bit about what it is that you do for the ELCA. Do you want to go ahead and start us?

Patricia: Sure and thanks again Ryan for having us on this podcast. My role is a very expansive one, so I do advocacy on behalf of the church on many international policy issues so in this case we're talking about international aid so making sure that programs that go to countries overseas are funded and implemented and other issues including gender justice, gender-based violence addressing that. In the church we say gender justice so advocating on behalf of the women and girls around the world and many other issues so we try to bring all these concerns that we hear from companions in our relationships with them that are important to them, to their cause to Congress and the administration.

Ryan: Fantastic, thank you. Kaari, how about you with the corporate social responsibility what does that entail? Kaari: Thanks Ryan. Corporate social responsibility is a way of talking about encouraging corporations to act justly and to protect vulnerable people what we do in in ELCA CSR, corporate social responsibility, is we look through our social teaching and kind of align it with our investments and evaluate some of the social issues and investments on the basis of our social teaching. We do this through a few different ways one is what's called issue papers and these are all online and they take an issue such as the environment and say you know here's some principles, here's what's going on, here's what corporations have done, and here are some shareholder resolutions that we could support on the basis of our ...social teaching and then we have issue papers which ... sorry those are issue papers, and then we have investment screens which say we really shouldn't be investing in xyz so we say ...social purpose funds should not be investing in private prisons, social purpose funds should not be investing in military weapons. We have a number of those as well

Ryan: Fantastic thank you very much for telling us a little bit more about that. All right so maybe Patricia we can start with you in terms of international aid ...when we say the word international aid ... what is it that we're talking about? What sorts of things does this funding help to make happen? Patricia: Sure ...so international aid particularly in this case we're talking about US international aid to other countries.

It includes humanitarian relief during times of crisis, development assistance to support political, social, and economic development, as well as to promote global peace and security. So it includes both military and non-military support. Our work particularly focuses on the non-military support. We don't do any advocacy around military support. And this aid is typically channeled to government entities or to communities through civil society organizations and in some of these areas also channeled through organizations that are known as multilateral organizations such as the United Nations, the World Bank and those kind of organizations. So that in a nutshell is what international aid is. Ryan: Great so what are what are some concrete examples of what international aid might look like? What might be a country or an example of ... support that international aid has provided? Patricia: ...So there are many countries all over the world who receive international aid from the United States but there are a few that receive significant amount than others some examples include Nigeria, Yemen, Rwanda, Thailand, Guatemala, you can add in India, Philippines, Nepal... so these are some of the countries that receive different kinds of international aid. On the military side you have Israel, Jordan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Egypt who receive a very significant amounts of military aid than ...any other countries. So like I said. we don't ... do any advocacy around that but they encompass ...some of that aid that goes to two other countries.

Ryan: Thanks, now if I remember my civics class correctly in the 20th century the US used international aid in some ways as a form of soft diplomacy to help ensure agreement with other countries about various things that they're working on together. Is that still the case today or how has that changed in the 21st century?

Patricia: Yeah well Ryan, unfortunately is still the case today for better force I shouldn't say unfortunate but the US government sometimes uses aid as a soft diplomatic tool and that can be important especially when governments or leaders of particular countries are engaging in behavior that does not serve their citizens well. It's also true that the US provides it purely for purposes of saving lives especially when it comes to humanitarian relief during times of crisis a lot of a lot of aid structures remain the same but there have been some changes in different ways for example now there are more public-private partnerships in this space foundations, for example have really taken up this work, forming partnerships with governments directly or with non-government organizations, you know, to really support international programs that are aimed to uplift people from extreme poverty and such. The growth of corporate social responsibility in the last decade or so has also opened up the space to corporations who want their companies to do good around the world to kind of coming in that space and coordinating and forming partnerships with different countries around the world and Kaari will talk more about that maybe but I just wanted to make sure people understand that there's some corporations who are also doing some really good work.

Ryan: Yeah so speaking of corporate social responsibility, Kaari I'll ask you this ...There's charitable organizations all over the world who are doing this kind of work, including the ELCA and other faith-based partners. Why can't charities take care of some of this need instead of relying on governments or businesses? Why is it ... important for these other partners to do that?

Kaari: Right that's a great ... question and I think one that people often ask of their governments and let me start by saying it's really important to engage in this act in the act of service for us as people of faith. You know, we're supposed to interact with our neighbor, we learn so much from our neighbor when we approach our neighbor with humility, and that's part of our vocation. But all of these charitable organizations added up don't have the resources, the size, the scale, or the expertise of the World Bank or of a giant multinational corporation. They're, you know, a little bit disparate and scattered, and they just don't have the power and influence and the size and scale, so there are some things you just have to do through a large organization such as the UN or the World Bank. It just wouldn't work through small scale on the ground organizations.

Ryan: But you know so even if that's the case one of the arguments that opponents of international aid often use is ... we can look around the United States and we see you know hunger and food insecurity,

we see poverty, we see you know depth of need within our own communities, why aren't we using that money to address needs here you know, why is it that the US should be sending money internationally to address need in other places as well? Kaari: That's also a good question and one that comes up often too. I'd like to answer this in two parts. The first part is that we share resources internationally because it's the right thing to do. I think we see ourselves as a generous and influential nation. We have this history of providing relief in times of need, it's part of our self-identity, and it's part of how we want other nations to view us. We have a certain amount of goodwill we build up by providing that relief. And as Lutheran Christians in the US we have this particular history that comes with relief to Europe in the aftermath of World War I and continues through pan-Lutheran organizations like the Lutheran World Federation and Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services so we do it because it's the right thing to do, we also do it because it benefits Americans to work to make sure our neighbors around the globe are fed and safe. If there's anything we've learned from the past 18 month of the COVID pandemic, it's that this is a global era in terms of health. We see how a pandemic that began on the other side of the globe brought our world to a complete standstill. Socioeconomic stability makes for better political allies, and in economic terms, some of the people and countries that the US supports become global trading partners. And I'd also like to remind us that sharing resources is grounded ...in our theology in a number of ways. In the resource that I worked on most recently I focus on how our sacramental theology ties in with the ELCA understanding of accompaniment. We understand we all come to the Lord's table desperately in needs of God's grace, and we understand God's grace as overwhelming in its abundance. There's this moment at the Lord's supper where we realize both that we are in need and that we're also deeply connected to the person who is also there to receive God's abundance. Through that abundance ... the principle of accompaniment that the ELCA uses, which is how it does its work, emphasizes relationships. We're not the only ones who have something to bring, and the goal of accompaniment is to live so that we stay in relationship, so our stories become intertwined, so there's also this kind of theological implication of participating in communion that we carry through by participating in service and international aid.

Ryan: So it's a little bit of both, on the one hand, this kind of political expediency of self-interest, like even going back to George Marshall what he pointed out, you know we can't have peace if the rest of the world is in in chaos or in need, right? But then also this kind of theological identity. So you mentioned the COVID-19 pandemic, so, Patricia, what are what are the priorities for international aid now given the reality of the pandemic?

Patricia: Yeah and that's a really good question and a timely one. So right now the US government, Congress specifically, is in the process of figuring out the budget for financial year 2022 and through that process, that's when we really advocate for allocation of funds for all these international programs. So then during this COVID pandemic time, one, we want to make sure that all the programs that are usually part of this process are funded, but also ensure that we accommodate extra funds to address COVID-19 needs and challenges around the world. And so specifically for COVID-19, we have been really focusing on ensuring that people around the world have access to global vaccines, whether it's ... vaccines that come out of the UK, India, you know in the US, we want to make sure that people have access to that. Unfortunately right now, the world has only vaccinated a very small percentage of the population, so the US has a big role to play in that, and we want to make sure that they do play that role as much as they can, including donating vaccines to other countries because we do have extra vaccines and, in addition to that, ensuring that people have treatment. Even ... though vaccines are proven, people are still, you know, because they don't have access to vaccines, they're still getting the disease, so what happens when they get to these hospitals in rural areas around the world? We want to make sure they have access to treatment. The other piece I just want to mention in this context also is to ensure that when it comes to debt relief, which is also part of our work, that we do, there is room for countries to

redirect resources from servicing their foreign debt so that they can address the needs of their citizens, particularly those who are affected by coverage so whether it is ... healthcare service for those who have been infected by the COVID or whether it's to address the economic challenges that may come from lockdowns, people don't have ways to find income because they are not able to do their work - they lost their job or they are not able to go to the street and do their vending activities as they used to. All those folks need some support from their governments, so ... ensuring that the World Bank and the IMF ... allow that space and say to countries, "Okay you don't have to service your debt right now, you can pause your payments and instead use those funds to deal with this pandemic situation that we're dealing right now." So those are some of the priorities that we are we are having to advocate for right now.

Kaari: And I'd like to add that in corporate social responsibility the corporate social responsibility community has worked a lot with pharmaceutical companies to make sure that vaccine prices are make them accessible to just make vaccines accessible and the COVID-19 pandemic has really pointed out to everyone how important that is to have this universal availability.

Ryan: I think that there's a couple of different things that are kind of going on you know within this. So ...I think each of us individually, you know, we feel the constraints of what individual kind of micro-economic debt feels like, and in the US we've had some programs that, while not perfect, have helped a lot to mitigate the impacts of that during the pandemic. But if you think of that on a macroeconomic level, your country is now in debt and needing to service that debt and what the effects of that are beyond the economy, certainly, and I think too, even as we're more connected here than we have been in generations past, ... around the world, it's also like, I feel the pressure of not really understanding what's going on in other countries when it comes to the pandemic. I'm really hyper focused on my local area, what are my numbers here ...in the area where I'm at and not kind of getting that broader picture. So ... you've put together a resource to help people learn about international aid within the church, a resource for congregations to use. Can you tell us a little bit about that, where that came from, how folks can access it?

Patricia: Sure, I'll start and Kaari can jump in. So basically we wanted to write this resource for people in congregations, one, to raise awareness and educate folks to whom this issue is new and, two, I would say to provide a resource that congregations can use as a topic of something like Sunday School study or in other ways that help to expand knowledge about foreign aid in general. Ryan, unfortunately as you know, there are a lot of misconceptions about international aid in general and many Americans think the US government gives way more foreign aid than is the case. Opinion polls from different years have shown that Americans think the US gives about 25% of the federal budget towards international aid, when in reality, it's really less than one percent of the federal budget. Those same surveys also show that Americans think foreign aid should be at 10% of the federal budget, so you see there's a major, major disconnect when it comes to what happens in actuality versus what Americans think should happen. So the resource attempts to tell the story of foreign aid in a very basic one-on-one way, hopefully to at least start the conversation or continue the conversation within the church and perhaps expand support within the church as well. Kaari?

Kaari: ...It was a surprise for me, too, who major- who actually has a Masters in international relations, to see the disconnect between "this is how much we really give" and "this is how much people think we are giving," so yeah, we wanted to get some basic facts and understanding out there because that's really important to come from the proper starting point of "this is the reality," and then we wanted to lay a foundation for understanding why we give international aid as individuals privately and as citizens in a democracy, you have the opportunity to support a government as they give international aid. So it was also kind of like, "What's our philosophy here? What's our theological grounding here? What does our social teaching say?" And this was actually a great excuse to talk with really passionate, dedicated, brilliant colleagues across the Service and Justice unit and understand where they draw their inspiration

from and what's the philosophy by which they operate. The center of this philosophy is the principle of accompaniment, which I mentioned before. It emphasizes the mutuality of the work, and the goal is to live into an intertwined story. So rather than seeing one party as the rescuer and the other party as the neighbor in need, accompaniment drives home this fact that everyone in this relationship has something to offer and so I really tried to remember that as I'm writing this resource and searching through stories and seeing how people are so resourceful even without that much in the way of material goods. The resource is called "International Aid" on the ELCA website and it's posted on the Advocacy resources page, but the easiest way to find it is to go to the ELCA website, [www.elca.org](http://www.elca.org), and search in the upper right corner for "international aid."

Ryan: Excellent, so ...I do that with some of our World Hunger resources, too. It's just easier to use the search bar there, but of course, we will post a link to that in the World Hunger blog as well at [blogs.elca.org/worldhunger](http://blogs.elca.org/worldhunger). So just one last question for you, how does this fit kind of within the larger priorities of the ELCA's witness in society? How does this fit with some of ... the other pieces that we're all working on?

Patricia: Yeah, I'll say witnessing in society, you know our work to address injustice within governing political systems and that is really the focus of our work for each one of us, in this case, with the DC office, we focus on the federal government, and then you have the state offices who focus on states' governing structures, but all of us really our mandate is to pay particular attention to how policies affect people, especially those on the margins of society. So as a global church with companion relations around the world, we are witnesses to the challenges facing many, many communities, including hunger, extreme poverty, lack of health care, conflict and wars, and so forth and US aid provides relief and support to many people who are, like I said, on the margins of the communities. So, for example, you can think of refugees and internally displaced people in different contexts who are pushed from wars and forced to be displaced whether within countries or within their communities in different spaces, or you know, to other countries. You also have women and girls living under very difficult circumstances in some contexts, so foreign aid that we support and advocate for has some programs that are very targeted for women and girls in those situations. Then there's so many other populations that are benefiting from US foreign aid, so we want to ensure that ... like I said before, the US continues to fund these programs. But the other part of it which you don't often hear about is ensuring that programs are implemented in a way that eventually leads people out of such circumstances, so South Korea is often used as an example of what aid can do, and Europe, as you mentioned, the Marshall Plan was also an example of what it can do. So, you know, we eventually see success stories where, in some cases you don't have to use aid anymore because people are lifted out of difficult circumstances. Unfortunately, we still have wars, we still have fragility, we still have disasters happening, so sometimes it feels like this is a non-ending thing. But because we have so many root causes that continue to affect many, many people in different communities, we definitely need to continue this kind of aid to other countries.

Ryan: Yeah, most certainly, I mean, we can even just look at the ... decline in hunger and poverty from their peaks in the late 20th century to now, and they've gone up a little bit in recent years, but they really came down. And why was that? Mostly because of an intense, international focus on addressing these issues. I keep going back to the dictum of "budgets are moral documents." They reflect our values, and while our faith may not give us the particular perspective on or particular information on economics and the science of economics, it does give us part of that values conversation to add about the kind of world that we want to see coming into being. And that's ultimately what these podcasts are about, so I want to thank you, Patricia, thank you, Kaari, for your work on that resource. I'm looking forward to sharing it, looking forward to seeing it in action with congregations, and we'll put the link up in the ELCA World Hunger blog. Like I said, there's also on the website, while it's easier to search for the international aid resource, there's also a ton of resources at [elca.org/advocacy](http://elca.org/advocacy) that are about ... issues

related to policy and a lot of things that we talked about. Now, if you are interested in learning more about these issues please subscribe to the ELCA World Hunger blog at [blogs.elca.org/world hunger](https://blogs.elca.org/world-hunger) or the ELCA Advocacy blog at [blogs.elca.org/advocacy](https://blogs.elca.org/advocacy), and you can find more information there. Until then, thank you both very much for this and for the work that you're doing and many continued blessings.

Patricia: Thank you so much, Ryan. Take care.

Kaari: Thank you, bye.