Blog



Emtithal Mahmoud, a Sudanese American slam poet, social activist and a goodwill ambassador for the United Nations' refugee agency, UNHCR, was a featured speaker at the Conrad N. Hilton Humanitarian Symposium and Prize Ceremony on Oct. 26. (Jordan Strauss/AP Images for Conrad N. Hilton Foundation)



by Chris Herlinger

View Author Profile
cherlinger@ncronline.org

Join the Conversation

Los Angeles — November 17, 2023

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Let's reaffirm the idea of common humanity.

That's something I heard echoed numerous times during the recent Conrad N. Hilton Foundation's 2023 humanitarian symposium and prize ceremony in Los Angeles, and it bears repeating.

I understand that that is an idea that may seem elusive given our present moment. As many attendees, Hilton Foundation staff and others acknowledged, these are extremely painful and difficult times, with at least two major wars — Israel-Hamas and Russia-Ukraine — raging, causing extreme polarization.

(And there are, of course, many other conflicts and crises raging, too, getting some but generally far less attention — among them in Haiti, Ethiopia and Myanmar.)

More than one person said during the Oct. 26 event that it can be difficult in polarized times like these for people on either side of a conflict to acknowledge the humanity of those "on the other side."

Just as this is true, it is also true that finding a place of security and safety may be difficult for communities feeling that they're mired in seemingly unsolvable challenges.

Yet, as Sr. Jane Wakahiu, a Little Sister of St. Francis of Kenya, and the Hilton Foundation's associate vice president of program operations and head of its Catholic Sisters Initiative, told me in a follow-up email: "Despite our diverse appearances, cultures, and backgrounds, we share a common humanity."

She added: "Our families, communities, and continents are all impacted by global issues such as climate change, conflicts, displacement, and socio-economic challenges."

(The Hilton Foundation is a major funder of Global Sisters Report.)



Raj Kumar, the president and editor-in-chief of Devex, moderates a panel on the power of narrative in humanitarian response at the 2023 Hilton Humanitarian Symposium and Prize Ceremony on Oct. 26. (Jordan Strauss/AP Images for Conrad N. Hilton Foundation)

Somehow, Wakahiu said, we must find ways to collectively contribute to solutions, "recognizing that our world's systems are interconnected beyond geographic borders. In this interconnected system, climate, health, education, and socio-economic issues are intertwined."

In order to address these challenges, she said, we need "a holistic perspective," and must break down superficial boundaries and find new ways of thinking about problems.

One way to do that is to become more empathetic and see the challenges facing the world from the perspective of those made most vulnerable by long-standing injustices.

"People who are vulnerable are rarely vulnerable in one way," said Emtithal Mahmoud, a Sudanese American slam poet, social activist and a goodwill ambassador for the United Nations' refugee agency, UNHCR, and a featured speaker at the Hilton event.

As an example of the multiplicities of challenges, those most affected by climate change are also living with economic poverty and are usually the first ones facing displacement, she said.

Yet, Mahmoud and others underlined that even in seemingly difficult times it is important to pay attention to hopeful outcomes. "There are problems," she said, "but problems have solutions."

I liked that balance of idealism (needed) and practical spirit (also needed) that animated the Hilton event — a spirit noted in the theme of the day, "Roots of Resilience."

Raj Kumar, who moderated a panel on the power of narrative in humanitarian response, caught that spirit well when he acknowledged, yes, the world may in some ways feel like it is spinning out of control.



Rajiv Shah, the president of the Rockefeller Foundation, speaks at the 2023 Hilton Humanitarian Symposium and Prize Ceremony themed “Roots of Resilience,” at Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles on Oct. 26. (Jordan Strauss/AP Images for Conrad N. Hilton Foundation)

But, when you surround yourselves with people committed to (and working for) a better world, "you see the world in a new way," said Kumar, the president and editor-in-chief of Devex, a media platform for the global development community.

That undergirds a point that Phillip Picardi, a Harvard Divinity School graduate and the chief communications officer for the Los Angeles LGBT Center said — that the commitment to a better world shared by humanitarians is an antidote to present tensions.

He added: "I want us to hold on to our humanity," and argued that "the closest we'll get to God is in helping each other."

Helping also means, however, viewing the world through a critical lens. Alicia Ely Yamin, a lecturer at Harvard Law School and senior adviser to the humanitarian organization Partners in Health, said the global community must recognize the many burdens faced by the Global South.

These include the fact, she said, that poorer countries are spending more on debt servicing than on needed social programs — underlining a belief by Yamin and others that the global economic system is in many ways rigged, requiring a change of rules so that poorer countries can get out the many "polycrises" they face.

She and others on the panel, including moderator Peter Laugharn, the president and CEO of the Hilton Foundation, said funding local projects — those "closest to the people," as Yamin said — is better practice for those seeking sustainable change. "To fund local is for the long haul," Laugharn said.

At the same time, though, those seeking change must not lose sight of "thinking big," said Rajiv Shah, the president of the Rockefeller Foundation and the former administrator of the United States Agency for International Development, or USAID.

Shah has recently written a book on the theme — Big Bets: How Large-Scale Change Really Happens — and while lamenting recent reversals in achieving the United

Nations' ambitious sustainable development goals, or SDGs, said global progress on tackling challenges like HIV/AIDS shows that when governments and humanitarian groups "work together, we can achieve extraordinary things."

And when that happens, he said, "we can be optimistic."

Advertisement

Doreen Ndishabandi, an officer with the One Acre Fund, a group supporting smallholder farmers in Africa. and which was awarded the 2023 Hilton Prize — affirmed that idea. She said humanitarian groups and governments can "learn from previous crises" and take advantage of past experience. "Let's start with what we know now and the tools we already have."

And, Ndishabandi added, use the expertise of those at the grassroots with the lived experience to know what can and should be done. "African women farmers are on the frontlines" in the fight against hunger in countries like Rwanda, she said.

That is something that Catholic sisters in Africa know well, Wakahiu told me, adding that the symposium theme of Roots of Resilience "has so much interconnect with how sisters are resilient, working with the poor and staying in these spaces helping one life at a time."

She added that sisters "lead initiatives such as tree planting, promoting better agricultural practices, responsible investing, and raising awareness on climate issues in schools and communities and serving the most vulnerable — for example, the Cabrini Sisters."

Whether it's the work of Catholic sisters or non-religious groups like the One Acre Fund, humanitarians are doing important and needed work in a broken world, and a day spent with some of them was renewing and hopeful.

I wasn't alone in feeling that. Andrew Youn, One Acre's CEO and co-founder, told me in an email that the Hilton symposium "was a day of inspiration and shared humanity."

"It was terrific to feel a sense of renewed energy and learning," he said, "in a community of change-makers in so many different fields of work, all working towards the common goal of a better world."