

## Rapid Response Transcript – Tjada McKenna

“On the ground in Ukraine, w/Mercy Corps’ Tjada D'Oyen McKenna”

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**TJADA McKENNA:** We see people trying to evacuate and get on trains out of the country, but they're overwhelmed.

People showed up with nothing. They need a place to stay. Women and children arriving devastated. We also see men who are facing conscription trying to figure out how to navigate that.

You'll see Africans or Indians or other people of color who are students or migrant workers being completely ignored and abandoned.

The resources flowing into Ukraine are unprecedented, and they are welcome. However, what we are encouraging and actively trying to advocate for is for people to not forget what's happening in other parts of the world. We work in all these places. And Ukraine was actually part of the solution for some of these places.

The world is very fragile and very interconnected, and these things are not contained in one border or one population.

If you are a company with a technology or some other kinds of expertise, please reach out to us. What we do is we work with people who are suffering, and we help them to survive. But more importantly, we help them thrive.

**BOB SAFIAN:** That's Tjada McKenna, CEO of Mercy Corps,

When Russia invaded Ukraine, the global aid organization quickly threw itself into meeting the needs of frightened refugees.

I'm Bob Safian, former editor of Fast Company, founder of The Flux Group, and host of Masters of Scale: Rapid Response.

I wanted to talk with Tjada because Mercy Corps began scenario-planning well in advance of Russia's aggression, its people already on the ground in Poland and Romania, and now inside Ukraine too.

Tjada explains that addressing crises is what Mercy Corps is designed for, deploying analytics as well as food, cash, and social services. Tjada says aid organizations have gotten smarter about optimizing resources to help more people in better ways.

Still, the human costs in Ukraine are intense with long-term ramifications for the region — and knock-on impacts for other populations in need.

Tjada's positive spirit is reassuring and rallying—which it needs to be, to keep her team and all of us motivated to keep doing more.

### **[Theme Music]**

**SAFIAN:** I'm Bob Safian, and I'm here with Tjada McKenna, the CEO of Mercy Corps. Tjada, thanks for joining us.

**McKENNA:** Thank you so much for having me.

**SAFIAN:** So Mercy Corps is involved in humanitarian efforts all around the world through about 6,000 people in 40 countries. So addressing human needs in crisis is what you're all about, but it's hard to be prepared for something of the magnitude of what we're seeing coming out of Ukraine. Can you share with us what your team is up to, and how you're approaching this situation? What do you do first when something like this happens?

**McKENNA:** This is immense, and it's a scale that we have not seen in quite a while. We really go in and assess needs. We've had a team on the ground for weeks as this was threatened, talking to local communities, preparing in Poland, and in Romania, and in neighboring states for people to arrive. And the first thing is to really give people the immediate support that they need. A lot of people when they think of aid, they think of people on the ground handing out blankets, and that's just not how it works these days.

We are first providing to people cash. A lot of people showed up with nothing. They need a place to stay. They need a bed. So we're providing them with information on where to go. Cash to have their immediate needs met and to be able to do that in a way that also benefits the local economy.

We're also there with psychosocial support, especially in this situation in the early days when men were prevented from leaving Ukraine. You saw women and children arriving devastated, and dazed and confused. And so really helping people to get to safety, connecting them with local organizations, and get their immediate needs met.

**SAFIAN:** You mentioned you prepared for this in advance. You were doing analysis and scenario planning, and I know you've been through these kinds of crises in other areas other

times. How much does all that planning help, and how much of a crisis is sort of being reactive and having to assess what the reality is on the ground before you quite know what to do?

**McKENNA:** Obviously a lot of it's being reactive. We have a crisis analytics team that's doing things like monitoring movements of supplies or people so that it helps us to go to where we are needed most quickly. And it also helps us to identify what those needs are when you mix in weather patterns, food patterns, all kinds of things that you can know about a population ahead of time. So that's part of our day to day work — is that crisis analytics data analysis that we're able to do.

**SAFIAN:** You mentioned you had team members on the ground in Poland and other places before the invasion. Were they doing services at that time, or were they sort of setting things up?

**McKENNA:** They were setting things up. So we're in Poland and Romania, we actually have people on the ground in Ukraine right now. So they were identifying local community organizations that would be prepared to support people, getting set up at the different entry points, working with government agencies. We were going to be prepared either way, although everyone was hoping that this would not come to pass.

**SAFIAN:** You have people in Ukraine now. What are they doing? And I guess: what are they hearing? What are you learning back from what's going on there?

**McKENNA:** Ukraine has 40 million people. Right now we've seen over one and a half million people leave. The U.N. estimates that up to 10 million could leave, but more broadly, a lot of people are displaced within Ukraine. They've had to leave their homes or their cities for whatever reasons. So we are in there doing some of the things I already talked about, like providing cash, providing information, providing assistance, and also trying to help coordinate with other actors. If you think about it, all the basic systems are down. So basic things like food, water, essential health supplies, cots, a place to sleep — all those things are in need. And to the extent that we can bring those supplies if we do, but where we can support the local economy and help keep people going during this, we are doing that with cash assistance as well.

**SAFIAN:** There are also other organizations that are there. How do you decide what it is that you, that Mercy Corps specifically is going to try to address?

**McKENNA:** So, there are and we coordinate very closely. I'm part of a small U.N. security assistance that coordinates with the lead U.N. agencies on emergencies. Mercy Corps, what we do is we work with people who are suffering from conflict and climate, and we help them to survive where they are now.

So our focus tends to be food, water, economic opportunities, and helping people to be in community in tense situations. We're trying to work with populations, not only in a moment of crisis, but also ultimately through to a point of resilience and strength for the individuals in the communities that we work with.

**SAFIAN:** Your team on the ground in Ukraine went in just a couple of days ago. Are there stories about people there that you've heard back?

**McKENNA:** We're hearing heartbreaking stories. A woman who escaped Kiev and made it to Romania told us that she didn't even remember what day it was. Her child was having nightmares, and she left her pregnant sister behind in the basement of a Kiev maternity hospital. Another woman sheltering in Kiev with her daughter and older mother told us that she couldn't get her next round of chemotherapy now that the health clinics are closed.

We see people trying to evacuate and get on trains out of the country, but they're overwhelmed. We also see men who have been told to stay, who are facing conscription trying to figure out how to navigate that, and how to deal with the reality of what their life is now.

**SAFIAN:** Do they ask your people should I stay, or should I leave the country? Are you being asked to advise in those situations too? Because everybody's uncertain about what to do.

**McKENNA:** Certainly people are asking all those questions when they encounter us and others, and I think our guidance is to really help them assess what's the best situation for them and where there are possibilities. That's why we have our analytics to know what's possible, but it's just such a rapidly evolving situation, and everyone has a lot of difficult choices to make. So ultimately a lot of it may be sometimes just listening as people work through different scenarios in their heads.

**SAFIAN:** Yeah. I remember Mercy Corps had been operating in Ukraine earlier after 2014 when Russia went into Crimea, and then the organization pulled back. I realize this is before you were there, but I'm curious if you can explain why that change happened, why you pulled back, and whether there are ways that having been there and having had that experience, whether that helps you now.

**McKENNA:** The fact that we had been on the ground in Ukraine before really helps. We had relationships with organizations on the ground and some of our staff who led our operations in Ukraine in the past are still with us today and are able to come back and assist.

When we went in before, I mean, it was a point of urgent conflict. We were able to reach more than 200,000 people, mostly in Eastern Ukraine by distributing cash, food, water,

sanitation supplies, helping people restore their war-damaged homes, but we also work to build long term resilience in places. And so if the government is able to take over, if local organizations are functioning well. then we move those resources elsewhere.

Many of the countries we work in we're there for long periods of time, but we always celebrate when we are able to leave. Ultimately our goal is to work ourselves out of jobs. And sometimes we leave and end up going back. This situation is very different from the last time in terms of this scale. And the fact that there isn't a part of the country that's able to operate while the other part isn't.

**SAFIAN:** Are there relationships that you built up during that previous time that you're able to tap into?

**McKENNA:** Yes. Absolutely. We're leveraging those relationships with governments and local organizations that we had from the past. The people that were our country directors in Ukraine are still working with us in other places and we've certainly brought them out to help us navigate.

We have been doing this for a while, and for us it's about providing smart aid. A lot of ideas that people had about aid or what happens in these situations are outdated, or we've learned as a sector to do things better. So cash is always preferred over goods, right? I heard a story of a colleague of mine who was at a border crossing, and they said a truck came in kind of clogging up the line to get in just full of winter coats sent by people across Europe. And obviously this is very well meaning, but the Ukraine is a cold country itself. People already had their coats with them.

And so cash really allows us to get what people need right away. It allows us to promote local economies and it also gives people in these traumatic situations the dignity to be able to provide for themselves. A critical part is working with local organizations and local staff. About 85% of our total workforce is from the communities where we serve. It's a smarter response. It's people who understand the culture. They speak the language. It also is part of that empowerment and letting people be the masters of their own destinies.

We also really focus on inclusion these days, right? Even in a terrible situation like now, our biases, people's inherent biases are there and we see them at play. And it's not that people aren't well meaning, but we do need to focus on people who are marginalized within societies. Our team is seeing it firsthand. What our team in Poland is reporting is they see the trains coming in with people, and the white Ukrainians are being showered with things and support right away. And then you'll see Africans or Indians or other people of color who are students or migrant workers being completely ignored and abandoned.

Same when we think about the disabled or elderly or people that can't move. So it's about being smarter, making sure that the resources go to where they're most needed and make the biggest impact that they can. Providing cash for people to shop locally, it also helps to defray the tensions from the communities that sometimes receive displaced people. Many of those communities are not wealthy themselves. And so when they see resources flowing in, they need to benefit as well for that longer term cohesion.

**SAFIAN:** And is the cash, is it actual cash or ATM cards, mobile cash?

**McKENNA:** That's part of what's great about our use of technology. Especially after COVID, right? A lot of the cash distributions were in some context, you'll still see this, people on line and getting their \$50 or \$80 or whatever. And now a lot of it is mobile money and other things that don't require contact, but that still allow us to trace and know that the right people are getting what they need.

**SAFIAN:** We have a lot of those technology companies and leaders of businesses listening to this show, how can they partner and get involved? What does that kind of partnership look like?

**McKENNA:** Part of what we do is really link up with private sector and corporations and technology companies to figure out what solutions or innovations or ideas that we can bring to bear.

We've worked with companies like Cisco to not only beef up our remote access, but also to help us with our analytics. We've tested the use of crypto in certain situations. We welcome that partnership. Just reach out to us at Mercy Corps. Because we feel like we have to keep innovating because unfortunately the needs are just getting greater and greater.

**SAFIAN:** The crypto experiment — Is it useful?

**McKENNA:** That's why we're testing now, right? That ability to be able to access money from different places is appealing. I don't have huge results to share now, but we feel an obligation to really lean into these things to figure out the best up to date tools, but also, work with their products to be more safer for people in situations where we work. So it is a very much two-way conversation that's really healthy to have.

**SAFIAN:** Before the break we heard CEO Tjada McKenna talk about how Mercy Corps is trying to meet the unfolding crisis in Ukraine.

Now she talks about what it takes to lead a team that, as she says, is running into burning buildings.

She cautions about potential negative impacts elsewhere as troubles in Ukraine pull resources from other struggling populations.

And she worries that, even in this highly publicized moment, resources won't keep up with the needs.

**SAFIAN:** Mercy Corps often works in places where others don't. You're in Yemen, in Syria. You've been very active in Afghanistan, other places. With all the resources flowing to Ukraine, how is that impacting humanitarian crises elsewhere?

**McKENNA:** The resources flowing into Ukraine are unprecedented, and they are welcome. However, there are geopolitical reasons why Ukraine is getting so many resources. The fact that a nuclear country is involved, and it's very close to the west.

But what we are encouraging and actively trying to advocate for is for people to not forget what's happening in other parts of the world. You have Afghanistan on the brink of economic collapse, which puts a lot of people into poverty through no faults of their own. We have droughts in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia, after a few seasons of no rain. We think up to 14 million people could end up in extreme hunger needs there. And you also have existing crises in Yemen, Myanmar, South Sudan. We work in all these places. And Ukraine was actually part of the solution for some of these places. So Ukraine was a major exporter of wheat, sunflower oil, and corn. And in fact, I've seen some estimates that Ukraine was providing like 80% of the wheat that was available in places like Yemen and Lebanon. So the ripple effects of this are quite great in terms of food insecurity in other places we serve.

The world is very fragile and very interconnected. If anything good were to come from COVID, I would hope that it is that we really realize that this is a bigger us. These things are not contained within one border or within one population. I've heard stories of Ukrainian tourists being trapped in other countries, now needing support in those countries because they can't go back home.

We saw that with COVID, with global supply chains, with a virus that moved. So I really hope that people see all of these, not just Ukraine, as part of a bigger us and a bigger global community that we are a part of, even when we don't want to be. And really see that it benefits all of us for economic and security and humanity reasons to be addressing these situations on all fronts.

**SAFIAN:** As you describe the situation, as poignant and important as the challenges are in Ukraine, in terms of the number of people who are impacted. Aside from the geopolitical issue, there are just as many people in other places that...

**McKENNA:** Exactly, and sometimes, even more. I think the danger is that we get fatigued. So I can imagine a year from now, I hope this doesn't come to pass. We'll see how things resolve. But it's not outside of the realm of that a year from now that we're begging people to keep paying attention to the Ukraine and the needs there. Our attention spans on these things are sometimes short or something feels like it's intractable. But that's not true. A lot of individuals have been able to thrive in places that you hear about a lot, like Afghanistan and Yemen, and there are organizations like ours trying to help them do so. So we just cannot let up anywhere.

**SAFIAN:** You joined Mercy Corps in a time of crisis for the organization. It was during the pandemic. Before, you were Chief Operating Officer at Habitat for Humanity and at CARE, and you worked at the Gates Foundation and government. But you hadn't been a CEO before. What's different about being a CEO?

**McKENNA:** So the COO role is fun if you are a bit of a nerd like I am, because you get to do all the technical stuff to make things work. I love the CEO role as well, because as a CEO, your job is not only to make sure things work, but your job is also to provide that vision and inspiration for people.

There's definitely more stress that comes with it. But I also get to experience more of our staff. I'm so inspired by the work that they do every day.

Mercy Corps is very adept at running into burning buildings, and knowing how to help, and being agile. I'm just so immensely grateful to be able to be colleagues with this team.

**SAFIAN:** A crisis by definition can be triage. You talked about running into burning buildings. Near term, quick responses, but not necessarily always long-term solutions. How do you think about that when it comes to the role Mercy Corps plays?

**McKENNA:** One of the things I love about Mercy Corps is we not only address immediate needs, but we address the underlying conditions and really work for that long term resilience. So in our parlance, that means we do immediate humanitarian work. We do what we consider longer-term development work.

We also do a lot of peace building work. Like doing things to train youth, to make sure that they don't get lured in by extremist groups. Or, for instance, in the Horn of Africa, we've worked with nomadic populations there that cross the borders between Somalia and Kenya to develop land and water rights so that there's not that tension with local communities and then we also go in with the modalities that help to promote peaceful thriving economies. So what's different about the Mercy Corps response in emergencies, not only do we provide the immediate needs, but we're constantly thinking about the medium and long term.

The fact that we have a lot of skill and expertise in all three dimensions of that, the immediate crisis, the medium to long term, as well as the community building aspect, is what I think makes us uniquely served to help people and communities to live peaceful, thriving lives.

**SAFIAN:** When you say they run into burning buildings, are there particular people on your team who you're thinking about in Ukraine who have done that?

**McKENNA:** One of our ... I won't tell you how long she's served because she might be embarrassed, but our head of security is a fabulous woman named Diego Luba. A gift to anyone would be to spend an hour talking to D as our lead of security.

She's been in and out of every country we've worked, every conflict. So she has been there in Syria, in Turkey, and Afghanistan she knows really well, Yemen. She's right there on the ground, in the region right now in Ukraine and Romania.

We have the teams that are the first to enter, and we have a network of people that come join us. We try to keep them in the safest positions possible, but they do take risk every day, and it's sobering.

**SAFIAN:** What's at stake in the Ukrainian refugee crisis for all of us and for Mercy Corps?

**McKENNA:** On a bigger level for all of us, just that the inhumanity of the situation. We are an impartial and independent aid organization. So we always work in both government-controlled and non-government-controlled areas where possible and try to serve people's needs. But this kind of mass migration and displacement has ripple effects: huge loss in culture and community. When you think about the importance of the Ukrainian economy to the world and the fact that it was a big exporter of food, that also will cause short to medium term pain for a lot. And then the ripple effects of resources to Ukraine at the expense of other things is certainly a huge factor. And we're still living in the midst of COVID and a global pandemic. So it all compounds, and that's why I am really seized with this idea of a bigger us, and people understanding all the ways that we are wrapped up in this together.

**SAFIAN:** Do you think there are things that people misunderstand about the humanitarian situation?

**McKENNA:** I think some of it is unintentional bias. I think we've seen a lot in this situation. We've seen newscasters or people say things like, "Europeans aren't supposed to be refugees." And I don't think people are consciously trying to be racist. They may not be used to seeing people in those situations. So bias is one and the other, I think people don't realize how evolved humanitarian assistance has become and how

smart aid is really working to be most efficient with every dollar used. And so I think sometimes that contributes to fatigue. Like, well, you've been in this business all along, why haven't these things ended? But we're humans and humans are going to fight, and we're also in this world of great climate change. So I think the needs will always be there.

**SAFIAN:** I noticed that the New York Times listed Mercy Corps among its suggested places to give for Ukraine, and I imagine when these high profile troubles hit, it leads to a burst of giving. Are the resources coming in commensurate to the need?

**McKENNA:** The resources never come in commensurate to the need, and so that's why we do always have to encourage people to give more, and those are resources from government as well as individual and private foundations. I really worry sometimes about the longer term resources needed, and we definitely grapple with that in places like Afghanistan or Yemen and Myanmar. When I sent an email to our team about what we were doing in the Ukraine, I got a note back from a staffer in Myanmar that basically was saying, "Don't forget about us." And we haven't forgotten about them for one second. That's what I worry about, is kind of some of the long term and the knock on effects of that.

What's really helpful to us is when people give... Yes, we have a Ukrainian response fund, but when people give us money that's more flexibly earmarked either for disasters broadly or other things. It really helps us to invest in the infrastructure that holds up the support for all of it, like our crisis analytics teams that support multiple countries across the globe. I encourage people to think broadly about it as a system.

**SAFIAN:** And if our listeners here want to go help Mercy Corps in your efforts, how do they do that?

**McKENNA:** Please join us, our website is, [www.mercycorps.org](http://www.mercycorps.org). And that's M-E-R-C-Y C-O-R-P-S.org. And if you are a company with a technology or some other kinds of expertise, please reach out to us. The website will tell you how to do that as well, and we'd love to chat.

**SAFIAN:** You continue to lead with a smile and positivity in the thick of this serious crisis. What advice would you give to a CEO or a leader trying to lead a team through crisis?

**McKENNA:** I am smiling and I have gotten the energy, but I think self care is really important. People read your moods, they know what's going on. They're kind of looking to you to signal that everything's going to be okay. So making sure as a CEO that you have those outlets.

There's so much greatness in the people that work for us and with us. We lead, but we couldn't lead without all those people doing what they do well, and really taking time to absorb that and marvel at the talent and to appreciate it, I think also energizes me tremendously.

**SAFIAN:** Well, this has been great, Tjada. Thank you so much for doing this.

**McKENNA:** It was a pleasure to meet you. Thank you so much for having me.