**Day 1 – Session 1 – Mrs Ann Encontre – UNHCR Ethiopia**

**Africa: The impact of conflicts and Humanitarian Crises**

Beautiful cobblestone streets, with jacaranda trees’ bright purple flowers lining the roads. Roads which appear to be dyed blue and white, from countless three-wheeled bajaj / tuk-tuk taxis, skillfully maneuvering back and forth to get their passengers from point A to B. Locals gathered in cafes and bars on street corners; children walking in groups to school, pen and papers in hand. This was Shire: one of the main towns in Tigray. It was a bustling and vibrant town only a few months ago, before conflict descended upon it like a dark storm cloud.

In Tigray, the northern most region in Ethiopia, local institutions were well adapted to the needs of its population and services reached the poorest and most rural in the region. Then, in November 2020, conflict flared up with a devastating and still-ongoing negative impact. Local populations have been deprived of banking services, electricity, food, fuel, health services, telecommunications, water, and they have been exposed to terrible violence and insecurity.

Today, I have been asked to speak about the impact of conflicts and humanitarian crises and consider w*hat are the most pertinent challenges faced by populations affected by conflict in Africa?*

* *What more can humanitarian actors and governments do to help prevent and address the humanitarian consequences of conflict?*
* *How can we work together to ensure comprehensive responses and interventions in conflict-affected settings and hard-to-reach areas?*

There are three key messages that I would like to share with you today:

Firstly, while women are impacted disproportionately by conflicts and crises, they can be true agents of change; and at the same time, we should listen and learn from them more.

Secondly, we cannot underestimate the importance of “listening to the people” and we need to do better to find local solutions to local problems, taking an area-based approach in providing protection.

Finally, as the humanitarian contributions are getting smaller from our donors, the UN agencies must continue to work together more effectively, with our ultimate goal to help facilitate development investments to be made sooner, to improve the lives of affected populations - even prior to a conflict or crisis.

Throughout my career, I have served in many countries which were impacted by severe conflict and crises, (e.g. in Sudan, South Sudan and Chad) and irrespective of whether it is due to power struggles, politics, ethnic tensions, natural disasters, and now a global health pandemic, I have seen first-hand, time and again, how the largest impact is invariably on the civilian population. And for the most part, most of the population who are uprooted, are displaced are women and children, as many as 70%. And so, today, I will share with you the stories of some of these women, who can be the true agents of change, even in the most dire circumstances.

We have spent billions if not trillions of dollars in providing humanitarian assistance in Africa. We have saved many lives and made a positive change for many families. However, in my 25 years working experience on the African continent, if it were not for the resilience of the women, many more lives would have been lost.

Those of us who have worked with refugees and displaced persons have all witnessed a pregnant woman with a child strapped on her back and several other children are around - while she is selling peanuts, palm oil or other small produce to get income to help her feed her family. It is these women who are at the centre of their communities, protecting their children and to whom we should listen and learn.

It is all too often that the humanitarian actors come to the populations in need with our own pre-conceived projects - designed miles away in a capital city and often times, in the West, and these do not correspond to the needs of the affected people. Yet, we are accountable to them – to render humanitarian assistance which responds to their needs. If we were to engage and listen to the people – we would be more effective and get more value for our time and money than if we offered projects like pre-cooked meals. Often, women can describe to us in detail their preferred project, that can be made and sourced locally.

Back in 1999 – 2000, I met a group of Liberian refugee women in Sierra Leone. They lived amongst their Sierra Leonean neighbours (ALL had been badly affected by Fodeh Sankoh) and his gangs who had terrorized the population. Among the group was one young lady, Jackie, a Liberian refugee. She used to come to our office all the time - to discuss what was needed to improve the lives of the Liberian refugees, and the Sierra Leonean IDPs who were living in the area, all of whom had been affected by the war. Jackie was a born leader. She wasn’t asking for money just for space for their projects. When a space was identified – (before the war it had been a school), there were some rudimentary building structures still standing, albeit badly damaged by the war. Within months Jackie, and her team of fellow refugee & IDP women started improving their situation.

After painting the walls and making a flower garden, they started small: selling tea & beignets; the women started sewing & selling the things they made. Jackie gave talks to groups of women in the area, inspiring them to become part and parcel of the initiative. Soon it became a very attractive place where everyone wanted to be – especially at mealtimes. The women formed a cooperative: cultivating a vegetable garden, chickens, and goats. The men did woodwork nearby. With a little seed money from UNHCR to expand their activities they made and sold school uniforms. The women made benches and black boards and eventually enlisted some men to join them too. They set up a child-care space so that mothers were able to work. And ultimately, they used the proceeds from their cooperative to start a school for the children in the area. What was once a war torn and desolate space was transformed into a vibrant, welcoming, and profitable multi-purpose community centre. This school centre became their haven amidst the insecurity; Jackie and the community managed to revive it, with minimal humanitarian support.

Initially, UNHCR and our partners had other ideas of implementing projects for SGBV activities. While there was a need for such activities among the displaced population, these women wanted to be self-employed and focus on re-building their lives and keeping their children in an educational programme. The focus on identifying the most vulnerable to give quick impact projects (QIPs) to is not always effective because sometimes individuals or groups do not have the capacity or propensity for business or making good use of seed money to become self-reliant. However, responding to the requests of such resilient women like Jacky, I have seen some truly impressive outcomes.

Over the years, and in every country where I have worked, the priority of mothers is to educate their children. Investments in education lasts for generations and have more long-term value than years and years of handing out non-food-items (beans who have to boil for a whole day before they are edible).

Investing in the health sector and decent health care is another priority and when I highlight the resilience of women as agents of change – we must remember that the by-products of the conflicts include rape; arranged marriages of women and adolescent girls who become victims. Many who end up being battered or suffering from other forms of cruel and degrading treatment. During flight from their homes, or in exile, if humanitarians have not listened to their requested needs, and created a “safe haven”, women could suffer enormously.

In eastern Chad, between the two camps of Bredging and Tredging, in Hadjer Hajid, with our partner HIAS, we built a centre for women ‘by day’ but the main purpose was a place where female victims could seek cover and safety by night for a short period - until a longer term solution could be found to ease her plight. The Centre (a safe space for women) was constructed as a direct response to the requests of affected women. And at the same time, we supported them to get access to justice and redress.

My moto is “listen to the people” and within our limited resources give them what they want. This is tantamount to extending a helping hand. Within conflict and crisis scenarios, there is understandably an emphasis on life saving support – food, water, shelter – however, amidst all of the competing needs, **I would like these women to stand as a reminder for us** not lose sight of what is most important to the people themselves, especially those most affected, and the need to take decisions together with them, **not for them**.

It is also important for us to recall that conflicts and crises have a different impact, depending on the context, they happen in places, exacerbating existing challenges and inequalities.

Shire was a well-functioning city within Tigray prior to the recent outbreak of conflict, there were existing challenges, lack of capacities and they had their own development priorities. Their priorities, however, understandably differed significantly from those in Gambella, in western Ethiopia, and of course, even more so from Juba or Damascus. With an understanding of the local context before the conflict, leading to a genuine ear to the people affected by the conflict, and with a collaborative approach by both development and humanitarian partners, the goal needs to not just be to survive, or to get a place back to what it was, but to ultimately ensure that investments and ‘rebuilding’ achieves something even better than before. From the outset of any emerging crisis and as part of emergency responses, we know that it is preferable for development and humanitarian partners to be working together. Rather than continuing to work in silos with different beneficiaries, I truly believe our responses can be far more effective by taking an area-based approach, where we look at the place and its people, informed by the local politics, history and cultural dynamics, & understand its specific challenges and opportunities.

In conclusion, on a more positive note, while the impact of conflict or humanitarian crisis is often devastating, there can also be opportunities among the challenges. For instance, there can often be opportunities identified to support the role of women and their increased leadership and education in their communities and beyond. Identifying born leaders such as Jackie and working with community-based entities that already exist, and supporting them to change their own lives, is what the work we do is all about. Not only do we need to make sure that no one is left behind while responding to conflicts and crises, but we should be working together with the people, towards a better life for them, a future that they envision, not one that we decide is best.

While we have been in this business for many years, and after my close to two decades of experience in this field, I still believe that we can do better, we can get out of our offices and get to know people we are working for more closely, and we can work more effectively together, to ensure that our investments are as sustainable as possible and genuinely respond to what affected people need.

I am looking forward to hearing the presentations on a variety of related topics over the next couple of days, and to engaging in discussions with you all on these very important issues.

Thank-you.