

Humanitarian Work

An Interview with Susana Raffalli, Humanitarian Expert, Advisor to *Cáritas de Venezuela*

EDITORS' NOTE *Susana Raffalli is a Venezuelan nutritionist and activist who has received a number of honors including being nominated among the 100 Inspiring Women by the BBC in 2020 for her work in alleviating hunger in Venezuela and in particular during the coronavirus pandemic. In 2016, Raffalli designed a tool that revealed the detail behind the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela at the suggestion of Cáritas de Venezuela. Sentinell*



Susana Raffalli

Site Monitoring System of Acute Malnutrition (SAMAN) is one of the few sources of intelligence on the emergency. In 2017, she received the National Human Rights Award from the Human Rights Platform of Venezuelan civil society and is recognized as one of the 10 women whose work stood out at the national level by the EfectoCocuyo communication portal. In 2018, Raffalli received the Franco-German Prize for Human Rights for her humanitarian work. In 2019, she was awarded for her public service with the Woodrow Wilson Awards. During the coronavirus pandemic, she helped to keep food supplies going for many including people with HIV, youth in prison and those with low incomes. She studied at the Central University of Venezuela and completed her post-grad studies on Child Nutrition and Food Security in The Johns Hopkins Children's Hospital and in Guatemala with the Panamerican Health Organization.

Will you highlight your humanitarian work and your role with *Cáritas de Venezuela*?

I have been a humanitarian practitioner since 2004 and have been working with *Cáritas* for the past five years. *Cáritas* has a few mandates and I am involved in its humanitarian work. I approached *Cáritas* to offer my skills and expertise in the humanitarian arena since I have deep experience in this area. My focus is on saving lives and bringing comfort to people who are suffering, as well as providing advocacy towards human rights and protection.

How is Venezuela addressing the challenges caused by the global pandemic?

It is sad for me to answer this question and it is not only Venezuela, it is all of humanity that is suffering. There are so many lessons from pandemics in the past, especially HIV and Ebola. There are at least three lessons that we haven't used for a better performance

with COVID-19. First, even though the pandemic impacts health and is a public health emergency, it should also be addressed as a humanitarian emergency which has not been the case with COVID-19 in Venezuela and many other places. The focus of course has to be on health, but it also has to be on food security, nutrition, poverty and other factors that have resulted not from the virus, but from the dynamic around the pandemic. These other factors are not receiving enough attention. Second, in

approaching a public health emergency, it is an issue for the government, and in Venezuela where the government together with the army control everything, civil society has been put aside. This is very sad because civil society and community-based organizations were in a good position for identifying the risks and organizing people and promoting good health behaviors in the face of the virus. Third, the pandemic is not only about hospitals, and the solution needs to also be about addressing the problem of equality outside of hospital settings and other social risks that need to be managed. In Venezuela, I feel that we are losing many opportunities focusing solely on hospitals and the UN system and having it be solely with the government, and without the input of civil society.

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Humanitarian access in Venezuela has been very limited, especially over the past few months, as the government has not seemed open to work with humanitarian agencies and NGOs. The Venezuelan government feels that these organizations are working on human rights issues and receiving funding from other governments that are against the political process in Venezuela or supporting sanctions, which is in fact true in some cases. However, while a large percentage of NGOs and humanitarian agencies are receiving funding from Europe and the United States, this does not mean that we are against the government or that we are doing political work. This is a big problem since it is limiting humanitarian access from civil society.

How do you measure success for your efforts when you are addressing such long-term, complex problems?

It is overwhelming at times as you experience frustration and sadness. For example, in 2016 we started our work focused on nutrition for children under five years old and we rescued approximately 15,000 children from severe malnutrition, but when you see that there are so many more children facing this problem, it can make you question what you are doing. Our mission is to keep working and to not only focus on the output, but also on the process. Our work is not only about the possibility of saving lives, but also about giving a voice to these issues so in regard to our work on nutrition for children, while we may not be able to reach every child in need, we are advocating for all of them.

Did you always know that you had a passion for humanitarian work and that this was where you wanted to focus your life's work?

I have a passion for working on public issues and enjoyed working in Central America for the development agenda which focused on poverty reduction, nutrition, education and other issues. I did this until 2002 and worked on major emergencies, the first being Hurricane Mitch in Central America in 1998 that destroyed all of our projects and we were not prepared for this type of risk. Another emergency was when I was working with UNICEF and we lost a team that was killed in an attack on their convoy in Burundi. I realized that it was my mission to use my expertise and knowledge to work on big public issues and major emergencies. While I am not optimistic about the situation in Venezuela at this time, I plan to continue with my passion. ●