

THE CRY OF THE VOICELESS

Finding Light in the Darkest Corners of the World

By Keiko Izushi

As I reflect on my career with the UN World Food Programme (WFP), first at headquarters in Rome, Italy, and then spanning diverse corners of the globe, including Cambodia, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, and many more—I am humbled by the vast experiences woven into the fabric of my journey. Serving as a leader among a global team dedicated to ending world hunger, I have lived in and/or visited some seventy countries. Each encounter marked my understanding of humanity’s shared struggles and the wonder of triumph.

Decades ago this was a dream I dared to nurture without fully comprehending the challenges that lay ahead. Yet with each step of the journey, the depth of experience and breadth of insight grew exponentially, shaping me into the leader, advocate, and humanitarian I would become.

CAMBODIA

The bustling streets were a symphony of chaos and determination, pulsating with the rhythm of existence. Tuk-Tuks zipped through narrow alleyways, horns beeping while leaving a petro odor in their wake. Their engines echoed against weathered walls adorned with colorful murals depicting stories of victory and tragedy.

Amid the hustle and bustle, the air was thick with the scent of spices mingling with perfumes and the sweet aroma of tropical

fruits or street foods. Market vendors called out in a melodic chorus, their voices blending with the chatter of locals haggling over the day's catch or the freshest produce.

But an undeniable heaviness lingered—individuals robbed of limbs languished on pavements, their eyes imploring for mercy. Haunted by ubiquitous land mines, Cambodia bore witness to innocent lives altered by hidden terrors. Unaware of the danger, curious children approached these malevolent relics, mistaking them for toys until tragedy struck—a cruel irony echoing in distant corners.

My sojourn in 2000, through the heart of Phnom Penh, Cambodia, revealed a portrayal of despair and resilience. Walking alongside a Japanese donor to the WFP project sites, little did I anticipate the vivid scenes we encountered—a haunting display of land mine–inflicted suffering, a cruel legacy of a bygone war. The journey unveiled scars on bodies and the collective psyche of a people crippled by history.

In my tenure of nearly three decades working for the United Nations System, I've traversed the agonizing landscapes of war and disaster, bearing witness to the haunting echoes of starving children and vulnerable populations. Yet against this somber backdrop, I've glimpsed the undeniable spirit of humanity.

Tales of tragic family histories, brutal regimes, and a repeating darkness unfolded. Covered with a putrid odor from acrid, gray air and smokey fumes, "Smokey Mountain," Stueng Mean Chey, is Phnom Penh's municipal rubbish dump. Thousands work there, including hundreds of children, recycling the city's rubbish dumped there by trucks every day. I encountered orphaned children sifting through refuse, their tiny hands injured from the needles, glass, and metal among whatever recyclable material and food they found.

As we strolled toward a village on the edge of this wasteland, a baby girl in a surprisingly decent dress caught my eye. The mother thrust the child toward me, her cries echoing anguish. It was explained to me that through tearful pleas, the mother

implored, “Take this girl with you!” believing her child would have a brighter future under my care. Overwhelmed, tears streaming down my face, I pondered the unthinkable choices borne of dire circumstances.

Fortunately, beacons of light emerged amid the shadows. An NGO provided shelter, housing, and essential skills and tools needed to forge a new path of hope for a brighter future. The UN World Food Programme, a lifeline against hunger, provided food assistance and nourishment to empty bellies.

Soon after, a restaurant was built by the children of carpenters in training and painted by an art learning group. They served foods cooked by a culinary team trained by a former celebrity chef, who volunteered his time to the project. Meals were served by boys who were learning about tourism and hospitality. I remember the meals were the best I have had in any restaurant in the world, in a sunny atmosphere painted with bright colors. The children’s big, proud smiles showed their joy in serving and making their guests happy. Classes for aspiring restaurateurs, beauty professionals, and more blossomed, creating a symphony from the hands of eager learners.

In the face of adversity, the resilient spirit of Cambodia shone through, encapsulated in the smiles of children determined to forge a brighter tomorrow from the ashes of their past.

BANGLADESH

Moving to Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh, a makeshift haven emerged—a testament to ethnic cleansing and the displacement of the Rohingya people. A lifeline was woven through joint efforts with the Bangladesh government amid this somber landscape. Vegetable gardens sprouted amid rudimentary conditions, offering fragile sanctuary.

Life persisted in camps threatened by floods—families formed, and children found solace in play, oblivious to the complexities of the daily affairs of humankind.

During a visit to a stopgap structure to meet with the beneficiaries, it was revealed that one woman was pregnant, her large belly indicating she was soon to be a first-time mother. She sat silently, looking down, in the dimly lit and stiflingly humid space, her expression a mixture of confusion and sadness, haunted by desperation. Yet within the darkness her commitment and determination shone through—a belief in new beginnings, a testament to the indomitable spirit that refuses to be extinguished.

INDONESIA

During my tenure in Indonesia from 2002–2007, a chapter of profound significance unfolded, marking a pivotal moment in my journey with the World Food Programme. It was a time when the resilience of the human spirit clashed with the ferocity of nature’s wrath—a time when the Aceh Tsunami left devastation in its wake, shattering lives and communities with merciless force.

As I stepped onto the shores of Aceh, the magnitude of the devastation struck me with an intensity that words fail to capture. The once vibrant coastline lay in ruins. Nothing was left except some coconut trees and a huge steel ship in the middle of nowhere, and I wondered, “What force could bring this gigantic lump of iron to the middle of the land?” Yet amid the muddy soils and despair, there burned a flame of hope—the people in the community started to pick themselves up, helping the old and vulnerable, a flicker of resilience that refused to be ignored.

Assigned to the WFP’s emergency food-assistance operation, I witnessed firsthand the profound impact of our efforts in alleviating the suffering inflicted by the tsunami. Biscuits fortified with vitamins and minerals were provided at schools so children could return to study. Our global teams worked tirelessly to ensure that no one was left behind in their hour of need—things only humans can do for other human beings out of compassion from the very heart.

Beyond the logistics and numbers it was the human stories that

etched themselves into my soul—the tear-stained faces of mothers grateful for a meal to feed their children, the weary smiles of survivors finding solace in the midst of desperation, the resilient spirit of a community refusing to be defined by tragedy.

AFGHANISTAN

I was stationed with the WFP in Kabul, Afghanistan, from 2013–2015, shouldering the head of donor relations, reports, and communication responsibilities. Despite the precarious security conditions, I ventured beyond the safety of my office. I wanted to understand the true impact of our efforts by meeting the beneficiaries face-to-face.

Draped in a burka to navigate the cultural expectations of Afghan society, even under the scorching summer sun, I traveled in an armored vehicle—to connect with those whose lives were touched by the WFP’s food assistance. Our Food for Education and Training initiative aimed at empowering girls by providing a monthly family ration of nutrition-enriched wheat flour and oil upon completing literacy and skills training. These skills included tailoring, poultry production, carpet weaving, and tree nursery establishment.

Young women seized the opportunity to read and write within the confines of a cramped training center and against societal norms. I witnessed a poignant moment as sixteen-year-old Fatma confidently approached the whiteboard, inscribing her name. In her wake a chorus of names followed—a tangible declaration of identity, proof that they existed in a world that often overlooked their presence. Never was I more proud of the role of our food provision in empowering these girls to become proud individuals.

The overwhelming gratitude of these young women resonated deeply within me. In a curious moment of self-reflection I posed a difficult question that would inadvertently expose my ignorance. “If you like the training so much, would you be willing to attend the course for three hours a day for three months, even without

food?” The immediate response was etched with the word *impossible* on their faces. Without family support their fathers, husbands, or brothers would never permit her to attend and learn. The incentive was not for the girls but rather for the men around them. The privilege to learn was a transaction, an exchange for food and sustenance for those they represented at home.

I felt shame for my lack of understanding, underestimating the girls’ determination and the intricate complexities of their lives. These young girls, reminiscent of teenagers worldwide, reveled in the joy of learning, relishing the camaraderie forged in that small space. They clung to optimism, aspiring for a future even in the face of daunting circumstances—resilience deepening following the Taliban’s assumption of power. I hoped the girls we touched would eventually become mothers, fostering the next generation with the same patience, resilience, and determination.

As I departed from that small haven of hope, my prayers lingered with those resilient young women. Their courage, often concealed and voiceless, was the silent keystone of our shared history. Thanks to the unwavering courage of these women and others in history, humanity has not only survived but triumphed against all odds, paving the way for a future anchored in hope and resilience.

KYRGYZSTAN

I concluded my incredible journey and my final post as the deputy representative (2016–2020) and bore witness to the WFP’s steadfast efforts in spearheading poverty-reduction programs to combat climate change and ensure food security. The country gained its independence from the USSR in 1991 but had an adverse effect after independence, with the harsh reality of poverty and endless efforts to build a new nation. Despite enduring tumultuous power shifts and political changes, I witnessed the resilience of ordinary people shining through. They carried the torch of their beautiful culture and traditions within the country’s breathtaking landscapes, offering a glimpse of hope for future generations.

Amid the chaos of the 2020 global pandemic, overseeing operations while safeguarding the well-being of staff and their families was a monumental challenge. Yet our operations persisted without pause, driven by the unwavering strength of humanity to assist the most vulnerable—a humbling experience, to say the least. When I close my eyes, I can still see their faces and tears, behind which lies an unshakable commitment to carry on in the face of adversity, refusing to let go of the torch. It's a vision and a memory I will never forget.

These diverse country experiences have profoundly impacted me and created unforgettable memories that have shaped me into the person I am today.

A GIRL'S DREAM

Among three daughters, I was in the middle—skinny and shy. At age ten, I agreed to embark on a journey to Europe with a student group during the summer holidays. Scared but curious, what unfolded was an experience that left an indelible mark on my young soul.

In Sheffield, England, I encountered the wonders of studying English for the first time, relishing English breakfasts in the university cafeteria, surrounded by green fields and the soulful tunes of a guitar playing the Beatles song “Yesterday.” The majestic churches of Paris invoked awe, and tears flowed naturally as I gazed upon the Pieta in Vatican City. Italy brought the joy of discovering the pasta, a previously unknown taste. This adventure was a gateway that opened my eyes to the world and shaped the course of my life. I owe immense gratitude to my parents for providing this opportunity and early experience, which stirred within me a profound awakening. The kaleidoscope of cultures, the taste of unfamiliar delicacies, and the awe-inspiring landmarks ignited a passion to dream big and bold. At that tender age a seed was planted—an ambitious dream to “save the world” to alleviate the pervasive hunger that haunted so many lives.

THE HOPE OF RESILIENCE

As I sit down to inscribe my experiences, extending across nearly three decades, I find myself entwined in a delicate tension—woven with threads of tragedy and the unbeatable beauty of the human spirit. The vivid memories of the dire cry of the voiceless, the haunting scenes of anguish and hunger, cast a weight upon my heart. Yet a glimmer of hope emerges—a resilience inherent in the human condition, a light that persists even in the darkest corners of despair.

It is a privilege to carry these poignant stories to a world often devoid of the context of such struggles. Amid these reflections, I uncover a profound sense of purpose—an imperative to persist as a voice for those whose stories go unheard, to illuminate the unseen resilience flourishing amid adversity, and to aspire toward a world where these narratives aren't just tales of hardship but tributes of hope to those who struggled and overcame against all odds.

As you read through these reflections, consider the intricate weaving of *your* resilience—the strength that resides within you, capable of facing life's complexities and uncertainties. The human spirit's resilience is not just a collective lesson but an invitation to explore the boundless potential within.

These narratives of tribulation and triumph are not meant to simply inform or entertain. No, they are meant to invite you to consider how your own resilience can be harnessed for good, how your actions can ripple outward, shaping a world brimming with compassion and hope. Let these stories not merely wash over you but stir within you a fervent call to action—a challenge to step forward, to be an active participant in crafting a brighter tomorrow.

For it is in the active pursuit of positive change where the true essence of resilience is realized, not just in weathering the storms of life but in bravely charting a course toward a future steeped in kindness and possibility.

May these stories ignite a spark within you and serve as a catalyst for your journey toward making a meaningful difference around you and in the world.

About Keiko



Renowned as a two-time TEDx speaker, international best-selling author, and Effective Results Coach, Keiko Izushi is a beacon of inspiration and resilience. She spent more than twenty-five years with the United Nations World Food Programme, where she played a pivotal role in advocating for global peace and eradicating hunger.

A distinguished figure in the realm of global leadership, Keiko's dream to heal the world traces back to her childhood, where at age ten, a summer in Europe opened her eyes to the world and ignited a passion to help others. Armed with a master's in agricultural economics, poverty, and development, as well as an MBA, she embarked on a career with the United Nations, serving in diverse locations such as WFP headquarters in Rome, Italy; Indonesia; Afghanistan; Japan; and Kyrgyzstan. Fluent in five languages, including Japanese, English, Spanish, French, and Italian, Keiko traversed more than seventy countries, leaving an indelible mark on communities worldwide.

In 2018, Keiko's encounter with world-renowned motivational speaker Lisa Nichols in San Diego became a turning point. Contemplating the impact of her voice on changing the world, Keiko transformed her UN experiences into two TEDx talks, international best-selling books, and the establishment of the Harum Sari Retreat in Ubud, Indonesia. This sanctuary, born from Keiko's realization of the need for personal peace, has become a haven for healing.

In *Against All Odds*, Keiko shares the poignant stories she witnessed during her tenure with the WFP—tales of starvation, famine, and the resilience of those facing adversity in places like the smokey mountains of Cambodia and war-torn Afghanistan. Her message resonates deeply: within us lies the strength to thrive against all odds.

Recognized with an honorary doctorate from University Azteca Mexico, Keiko authored *What Grandma Taught Me: World Tribute to Grandmothers and Their Legacies*. A sought-after speaker, she addresses schools and business communities in Japan. Married with a son, Keiko now calls Bali, Indonesia, home. Her life story is a testament to the power of resilience, compassion, and the unwavering commitment to making the world a better place. Explore more about her impactful work at izushikeiko.com and harumsariretreat.com.

