



**Transcript of IMF podcast:**

## **ICRC's Peter Maurer on the Scourge of Fragility and Partnerships to Fight it**

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Peter Maurer:

As humanitarians, we may understand how fragile societies and communities work, but we can't innocently bring into a context, just humanitarian aid without knowing about the economic purchasing power of the respective war economies. And I think that's where I see complementarity unfold of a great potential.

Bruce Edwards:

In this episode, the president of one of the world's largest humanitarian organizations on the problem of growing fragility worldwide and how a new IMF strategy that ramps up its work in fragile and conflict-affected states could help.

Peter Maurer:

The big mind shift, which is so critically important is to shift from these prefabricated boxes and concepts in which we were all comfortable, either as humanitarians, economists, or peace and security operators, into a more integrated landscape of needs. And put the concern of people at the center and not the logic of the mandate and the institution at the center.

Peter Maurer:

I'm Peter Maurer. I am the president of the International Committee of the Red Cross, ICRC. And I have been in this position for the last 10 years. Beforehand for 25 years, I have been a Swiss diplomat and I have worked in and around the UN, but also in negotiations between Switzerland and the European Union. I've been in the state secretary's office. And at the end of my career at the Swiss, I have been also State Secretary for Foreign Affairs, but then moved to become a humanitarian diplomat and the head of the ICRC.

Bruce Edwards:

So tell me a little bit about how you came to make that move from this, essentially a world of careful diplomacy to this world of full-on conflict relief, or disaster assistance.

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Peter Maurer:

It's indeed not, I think a usual trajectory for diplomats, and in Switzerland, it's a little bit different, I would say, because having seen 25 years of diplomacy, when I got the offer, the perspective to join the ICRC as a president... it's interesting for two reasons. On the one side, it's a continuation of diplomacy, because as a president of ICRC, you are not delivering assistance or you're down to the prison visits, and you are not necessarily immediately functional in the battlefields, but-

Bruce Edwards:

But you make sure it happens.

Peter Maurer:

You make sure it happens. You are a humanitarian diplomat. And in that sense, you have a continuation of work between national diplomacy and humanitarian diplomacy, just that you unfold your skills of negotiation and creating a space for humanitarians now for a humanitarian organization and not for your own country. And then, of course, there is the attractiveness of being Swiss and being able to be a president of such a great organization. And it comes probably with the promise and perspective that in your job, as a diplomat, you deal with issues which are relevant and meaningful and eventually impactful. And I think that's when you have to make a choice, do I continue to work- what I have done for 25 years, or do I join an organization in order maybe to have a different sense of immediacy of impact and relevance of your work? It was an easy choice for me to say yes to the offer 10 years ago.

Bruce Edwards:

But it can't be easy, to be exposed to so much hardship on a daily basis. The ICRC work in virtually every conflict zone in the world, Ukraine, of course, but Afghanistan, Syria, Ethiopia, the list goes on, it takes a certain type of person to do this kind of work, no?

Peter Maurer:

Indeed. And to be very frank, at the beginning of the tenure, you don't know exactly how you will react when you are exposed to those hardships. And I must say I made it also a priority that wherever employees of the ICRC are, I wanted to be there as well, and I wanted to understand what my colleagues would do in the field. And that's the reason why I have certainly done a number of visits to harsh field conditions, to places of detentions, to refugee camps, to military front lines in conflict. And even though I would be very conscious that it was not me at that moment who would really make the difference, but what I thought was always important is to be a translator of problems in the field and at the front lines of where humanitarian needs emerge into the hallways of policy and diplomatic decision making.

Peter Maurer:

And I think that's the reason and to give the sense of immediacy. And one thing I found out over time is that even belligerent and even leaders in belligerent countries very often have a biased, or to be very frank, not an accurate sense, on the hardship that their policies and their decision of going to war have on a huge number of civilians in the context in which we work.

Bruce Edwards:

So it's a question sometimes of perhaps digging that humanity out of these people, or at least to present them with something that they might get a better sense of the damage that they're doing.

Peter Maurer:

I think it's one thing which is of critical important. So you have to have stood in a overcrowded detention facility and in a bombed neighborhood of a country to convincingly argue why you think you need this neutral, impartial, humanitarian space, why you need political decision makers to take certain decisions, which give you a license to operate in those difficult circumstances. And having seen it myself is a continuous motivation to bring these issues to decision.

Bruce Edwards:

And since you've taken this on as head of the ICRC, how have you seen things evolve, in terms of fragility and conflict out there in the world.

Peter Maurer:

That's a really interesting question that you are bringing forward. And indeed, I think over the years, I got a much more complex view on what war would cause. When you are the first time in a war type of situation, you see first and foremost, the wounded, the destruction, the immediacy of the needs. And that's where also you orient the response of your organization towards to. When you are over the years of being in those contexts and situations of violence and war, you realize the multifaceted character of fragility, you see that it's not only the artillery going into the resident building.

Peter Maurer:

It is also the social economic environment in which you operate, which causes fragility and conversing with the victims you understand that their day to day problems is that there is no water coming out of the tap, that there is no heating coming out of the pipes, that there is no school for the kids, that the hospital is dysfunctioning, that the health system, the social systems are dysfunctioning, that there are no jobs around, and that there is no income, and that there is dependency- and with dependency comes self-esteem and self-assertion, which is questioned.

Peter Maurer:

And so I think I have done a huge journey since my first visits to the neighborhoods of Damascus in 2012, which became battle grounds of the Syrian war into understanding the complexity of fragility in today's world, and also the expansion of this field of fragility in so many countries and for so many populations.

Bruce Edwards:

So economists have a pretty clear set of criteria to determine whether or not a country is fragile. It looks at things like institutional capacity and ability to deal with economic risks and that kind of thing. What is the humanitarian's definition of fragility?

Peter Maurer:

Well, actually it's not so far away from what economists would look at as well. And I must say the first groundbreaking thinking I was confronted with was actually not the thinking of humanitarians, but rather of economists. And I think I did recognize that in the work of the Bretton Woods institutions, the metrics of fragility that economists were bringing forward were resonating in the experience that I made. You see as a humanitarian organization with the mandate, you have, you look at violence and at the impact of violence, you look at the basic infrastructure. You look at health, water, sanitation, shelter, nutritional security aspects, which are maybe of bigger immediacy than some of the macroeconomic and macro-financial data that economists would use in order to determine fragility in a country. But I think that's nuances at the end of the day, because we all look at the same problem just from slightly different perspectives.

Peter Maurer:

And I think today I deeply appreciate the skills and the knowledge and the evidence, which is coming forward from big institutions, like the IMF and the World Bank in order to help us think and have also an idea of the larger economic environment in which we are operating. While at the same time, our key factors of fragility would be health data, mortality data, nutritional data, entries into hospitals, weight curves of kids in the first two years or five years of their lives, all these more social and basic social need determined components, which define fragility in the humanitarian context in which we operate.

Bruce Edwards:

And so you're familiar with this new strategy for fragile and conflict affected states that the IMF has put together. In fact, I think you've contributed, or you've had some input into it while they were developing it. From where you're sitting, what do you think of this effort that the IMF is taking to step up its work in these difficult places?

Peter Maurer:

Well, indeed I have followed with the utmost interest, the discussions at the IMF, at all the Bretton Woods institutions, which increasingly took on board this concept of fragility, I have supported and engaged with bilateral development agencies, with regional development agencies. And I think the IMF has been really great in moving this issue also forward and also bringing something to the table, which was immensely valuable for us as humanitarian actors on the ground.

Peter Maurer:

And let me just explain now, when I think the biggest journey I made during my time as president of ICRC, is also to understand that our humanitarian fragility work, or counter fragility work that we were doing, was happening in an environment and in an ecosystem, which was heavily determined by economic and financial developments. And seeing the fund now with the fragility strategy first recognize that the macroeconomic and macro-financial environment is a determinant factor in fragile context for fragile populations has definitely added to the sharpness of the analysis, but has also confirmed intuitively what we increasingly felt. And what we increasingly felt as humanitarian front liners is that we are not operating in a closed environment of humanitarianism. We are operating in an environment in which economic development was absolutely critical also to fulfill our mandate of stabilizing societies through humanitarian work.

Bruce Edwards:

So there are certain aspects of working in these fragile and conflict affected states that financial institutions like the IMF are not necessarily very comfortable with like dealing with peace and security, for example. How do you think, or how do you see this strategy perhaps helping to overcome some of the difficulties at least to a certain extent of working in these difficult environments?

Peter Maurer:

Well, look, I have to say that nobody is really comfortable to work in fragile context. And I think the very essence of this concept of fragility is that it is an integrating concept, which brings peace, security, governance, economic, financial, short, medium, longterm needs landscape of populations into a more integrated framework. And when you apply these more integrated frameworks, if you go beyond the comfort zone of your mandate and your clear core issues that you are comfortable with, and in which you have competencies and skills in an institution, then you are always out of the comfort zone. And so I think we have to recognize that it is something which is not specific to the IMF. We feel uncomfortable as well in fragile context, because as a neutral and impartial organization, we are constantly confronted with highly political issues on which we are hesitant to engage.

Peter Maurer:

But at the same time, I think the big mind shift, which is so critically important, is to shift from these prefabricated boxes and concepts in which we were all comfortable, either as humanitarians,

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economists, or peace and security operators into a more integrated landscape of needs in which we would share knowledge, we would exchange, we would try to analyze, try to understand the dynamics of fragility and then see what kinds of responses can we offer, and how can we align and bring these responses into a more credible and impactful action of the international community. And I think that this mind shift is difficult somehow to get our head around, because we have all been created in the post World War II period as international extensions of national administrations, humanitarian, financial, economic, political, and we had built institutions and credit lines and people skills around those concepts.

Peter Maurer:

And what we have experienced over the last 10, 15 years in particular is that there is much more interconnection and interaction pushing us from the real problems in the field to work together, and to have a more fluid understanding of our mandate. And I understand that this is complex, it's complicated in any institution, but it also is great that there is strategy and vision, which allow us to be more flexible in looking at how we read situation, how we respond to situations, and how we can put the concerns of people at the center and not the logic of the mandate and the institution at the center. And I think this is the big mind shift, which I think is also contained in the IMF's fragility strategy.

Bruce Edwards:

Oh, that's wonderful. I was going to ask you why for so long, the world of development and the world of economics have not really spoken that much to each other, or worked very closely together... And given that there are so many commonalities, it's always surprised me why that wasn't happening to a greater extent.

Peter Maurer:

Well, look, in history we all know institutions, loss, credit lines, skills, capacities. These are all concepts which have a great strength and they are important also to maintain. And I think we have seen over the last decades that there is also a huge advantage to build skillful organization in certain fields. And the more you segment your knowledge, the deeper you get in understanding. So it's more a question of rebalancing the connectors between the different disciplines, with the professionalism of digging deep in our specific professional understandings. And I think that's a balance to find, and that takes time. And what is new, I think is the pressure from fragility itself, from communities, from people, the number of conflicts, the displacement, the people living outside of state control, which are in the hundred million plus. The bottom billion that we have talked about for quite some time and which reappears as the kind of a figure we all agree that we are looking at a huge amount of people.

Bruce Edwards:

That number is growing by the day.

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Peter Maurer:

The number is growing by the day. Actually, sometimes we start talking about the billion and a half, and eventually soon the two billion, which are really outside of credible responses of the international community. And I think this pressure from community and people whom we have insufficiently serviced through a mandate-based approach of focusing international institutions on our traditional core, that's the problem which shifted, I think, the dynamics, the discussions, the thinking, and I think that's what we have seen in so many institutions, including recently in the IMF.

Bruce Edwards:

Yeah. And just to conclude here. So with fragility increasing, as you just said, pretty dramatically, are partnerships like this one that the ICRC and the IMF are building together, do you think that this is the way forward, really to try and keep up with the increasing number of human tragedies out there?

Peter Maurer:

I am deeply convinced that we need to build connectors, bridges, an economist would say value chains, where we connect the institutions, skills, capacities in new forms of partnership to deliver impact. I like to think at these situations and at partnerships with the IMF and other institutions, as exploring complementarities of work in order to have better impact for people. And I do strongly believe that in the way we are organizing our thinking and our partnership around, that there is really interesting pathways of cooperations which are emerging. I mentioned a minute ago, the importance of knowledge and knowledge exchanges, and getting to grips with the complexities. We are not good in metrics as humanitarians. We may understand how fragile societies and communities work, and where eventually to intervene and how to intervene in order to have impact. But when we need metrics to understand, and to sharpen our views, we need the IMF, we need the economists, we need the financial experts. We can't innocently bring into a context, just humanitarian aid without knowing about the economic purchasing power of the respective war economies. And we need analytics, which help us understand these contexts.

Peter Maurer:

And I think that's where I see complementarity unfold of a great potential. I think that's really the core of what we should aspire for, and where I do believe that unlikely partnerships are the most promising partnerships at the same time today. Even three, four years ago, I wouldn't have imagined that I would sit here at the IMF, and a Washington visit almost obligatory would contain a program component at the IMF. Today it's almost average currency already. When I come to Washington, I visit the US government, yes, but also the World Bank, also the IMF. And I think that's what is so interesting, but it's also necessary because I do believe, as you mentioned rightly so, we live in a time of expanding fragility. And unless we cooperate in a different way, and we align our tools differently in order to have better impact, we will do a disservice to the population, which so badly need our different way of working together.

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Bruce Edwards:

Peter Maurer, President of the International Committee for the Red Cross. Thank you.

Peter Maurer:

Thanks a lot for having me.

Bruce Edwards:

The International Committee of the Red Cross is an impartial, neutral, and independent humanitarian organization that works to protect and provide assistance to the growing number of people across the globe who are victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence. Look for more on the IMF's work on fragility, including its new strategy to strengthen its support in fragile and conflict affected states at [imf.org](http://imf.org).

Bruce Edwards:

I'm Bruce Edwards. Thanks for listening.