

# World Humanitarian Day - August 2010

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## Belgian Humanitarians in the UN World Food Programme



**Richard Verbeeck**  
**WFP Representative in Niger**

### **When did you decide that you wanted to become a humanitarian worker?**

When I was 17 years old, I was in Bali on holiday with my father. We were in a 5 star hotel with a gorgeous combed private sand beach. At each end of the hotel-owned beach were barbed wires fences, «protecting» the tourists from the villages of poor fishermen. I remember that triggered my motivation. I wanted to spend my life on the other side of that fence.

### **How did you make the step? What finally motivated you to do it?**

I always wanted to work abroad. So, I finally studied agronomy and irrigation engineering and, with empathy as a natural skill, I decided I wanted to help poor people. My ideals were a mixture of equity, fairness, justice. I believe I also wanted to prove to myself I was able to adapt in difficult environments. I can say now that I have saved lives, what else is there to add?

### **When did you become a humanitarian and where have you worked?**

I started in 1985 as a professional officer with FAO in Burkina Faso. And then moved to the humanitarian field and first experienced Afghanistan in 1995 until 1997 as Head of Sub Office in Herat. Then Senegal as a Representative and 2 emergencies: aftermath of cold temperatures and heavy rains in the North, flooding of the Gambia River in the South. Twice in the Democratic Republic of Congo, one as acting Country Director from September 2008 to February 2009 in North Kivu, and later in January to May 2009 in Orientale. More recently in Niger, in the current food security and malnutrition emergency in 2010. Other assignments include: Madagascar, Guinea Bissau and Mali.

### **What do you find rewarding and challenging about working as a humanitarian?**

What I see as reward is to be able to grasp the complexity of the world by being on the right spot, meeting people of different cultures, witnessing despair, sadness, frustration of other people, understanding the needs, hopes of the poor... I have definitely lived some strong emotions. In terms of challenges I have unfortunately not seen any improvements to the world since my starting days as a humanitarian worker. This has personally affected me and eroded some of my ideals, while I am aware that the struggle must go on. It looks sometimes like praying to an absent God.

### **Tell me what a normal day is like...**

Most normal working days are usually from 7h00 to 18h30. Starting with a written list of priorities early in the morning before staff is in the office: documents to read; set up meetings and appointments; important messages to answer; signatories; request of actions to staff and follow-up; etc. The best days are those where I return home with the feeling I could not do more or better.

### **What are you like at work?**

My work is teamwork-based. I enjoy working with good staff who can make the difference. I enjoy providing advice being a manager. Being open when stress, anxiousness and tiredness hit is very important. The fact that you are the boss does not make you a hero or a supernatural being.

**What would you say are the most important lessons you've learned or think you will learn?**

The three lessons I consider most important are: (1) I must have the courage to change for the better what can be changed; (2) I must have the cleverness to accept what cannot be changed; and, (3) I must have the wisdom to know the difference between what can be changed and what cannot.

**What are some issues or themes around which you most frequently feel as if you struggle to find balance?**

An issue I've struggled with for a very long time has been the growing gap between family/friends remaining in my home country and myself. How to explain to them about the other faces of the world that I have seen and which they have no clue about at all? At one stage, I gave up and became more than often silent. Now, most are interested in getting my point of view.

**Looking into the future, do you see yourself still in the humanitarian world?**

In 15 years, I'll be retired. And I do see myself doing something completely different.

**What do you feel when you hear the word 'home'?**

Home is anywhere where I am in peace, relaxed and happy.