

Empowering communities

Emily Hough speaks to Dr Martina C Fuchs of the Real Medicine Foundation about her passionate belief that a paradigm shift is required in humanitarian development to empower people and communities



Dr Martina C Fuchs is Founder and CEO of the Real Medicine Foundation (RMF), which has worked in 20 countries on four continents. RMF currently has 47 active programmes in 16 countries, including disaster relief, health systems strengthening, maternal child health, psycho trauma support, economic/livelihood programmes, and health education outreach using innovative approaches such as mobile health solutions and institutionalisation of Respectful Maternity Care (RMC) practices. Dr Fuchs spoke at the AIDF Africa Summit 2016 in Ethiopia this February. See events pages for more AIDF events

Real Medicine Foundation (RMF) is a US-based non-profit public charity with branches in the UK and Germany and offices and partners all over the world.

RMF provides humanitarian support and development to people living in disaster and poverty-stricken areas, focusing on the person as a whole by providing medical/physical, emotional, economic and social support.

"RMF's vision is to move beyond traditional humanitarian aid programmes by creating long-term solutions to healthcare and poverty related issues, implementing sustainable models and leveraging existing resources through partnerships with local governments, health systems, and local staff," says Dr Martina C Fuchs.

"We utilise a comprehensive integrative healthcare model," she continues, explaining that once survival and immediate healthcare needs have been addressed, RMF establishes mobile and stationary health clinics employing regional medical doctors, other healthcare professionals and supporting staff, tailoring them to local needs.

Programmes such as maternal child healthcare, malnutrition eradication, HIV/AIDS care, malaria treatment and prevention, mobile health, and vocational training and livelihood projects are introduced to build upon existing infrastructure.

RMF has also developed and implemented strategies for access to secondary and tertiary care, support and upgrade of hospitals and training of medical personnel, to build healthcare capacity and to strengthen health systems on a larger scale.

"Staying for the longer term, working with local staff and resources, and implementing flexible and sustainable in-country strategies, all ensure long-term sustainability, local ownership and capacity building," Fuchs explains, adding that the ethos underpinning all this work is the belief that people in developing and disaster stricken areas are the most capable of creating solutions to their particular challenges. "We are turning aid into empowerment and victims into leaders."

Fuchs was spurred into action after the South Asian tsunami of 2004. "I was a paediatrician at a hospital in Los Angeles and when the number of fatalities kept climbing it was clear to me that I had to do more. I had never been in a disaster before and had no idea what to expect, and was seriously scared. But in the first week of January 2005, I made the decision that I was going to do more than a monetary donation to help those affected."

It became clear to her that efforts needed to be focused on Sri Lanka, specifically the southernmost tip, Tangalle. "I prepared my own vaccinations, medicines and medical supplies and worked on creating a network of support. One of the amazing things I discovered was this network, people I had never met before offering their help."

She ended up working in one of the refugee camps in the

south of Sri Lanka, close to Tangalle. The Mawella camp gave refuge to about 100 families: "They were the lucky ones, because they had shelter, food and other supplies. We found many children being apathetic and sometimes catatonic, just sitting in the ruins of life with expressionless stares."

The villagers asked Fuchs to set up a clinic, a daunting prospect for her, having only worked in "well-equipped hospitals and clinics in Europe and the US." Unknown to her at the time, this was laying the 'Let's just figure it out' cornerstone concept of RMF.

A two-room building in the Mawella Camp that had been hit but not destroyed by the tsunami was identified; the Sri Lankan Navy and volunteers helped to put the room together into a small, working clinic. "And then I started seeing patients, 70, 80, 90 per day, children, adults, and pregnant women," Fuchs says.

No typical day

"The great thing about what I do is that there is no typical day. My work involves a lot of travelling, which I love. Just in the last three months, I have been to Uganda, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Serbia, Germany and Nepal, mainly visiting RMF's work and teams, and also meeting with partners, including governments and ministries of health.

"During my time abroad, I have also been able to participate as a speaker in conferences to address relevant issues and highlight what doesn't work with the way humanitarian aid and development are being delivered, and how RMF is at the forefront of a paradigm shift, implementing programmes that allow communities in the developing world to take the lead and take ownership, building capacity and eventually self-sustainability."

Her work requires multi-tasking, handling numerous items in several countries simultaneously; a spectrum of conference calls and meetings, following up on new and existing funders and getting updates from the ground.

Fuchs admits to occasional frustration: "I see how humanitarian work as it has been done for decades is not working, and the change to programmes that allow communities ownership with respect and dignity are very slow." She laments the growing wealth ratio between the richest and poorest countries and the fact that despite billions of dollars of investment in aid, global poverty is getting worse.

Talking about the future, Fuchs repeats her emphasis on the need for a paradigm shift in humanitarian aid and development. "My overall big vision is to be part of that shift during my lifetime, making humanitarian development about empowering people and communities, allowing them to take the lead and ownership of rebuilding and developing. We want to liberate potential on a large, human scale."

■ www.realmedicinefoundation.org