



# Our Hen House Podcast: Transcript for Episode 671, Interview with Altamush Saeed

**Mariann Sullivan:** Welcome to Our Hen House, Altamush.

**Altamush Saeed:** Thank you for having me here, actually.

**Mariann:** I am so thrilled to have you because you're gonna tell us something we've been hearing about in the papers, but none of us feel like we know enough about, and you are particularly informed about, the situation of animals regarding what's going on in Pakistan.

Of course it's been a tragedy for both animals and humans. The flooding has been horrific. Can you just kind of get us up to date? We'll be a little out of date by the time this goes up, but get us up to date, kind of, on what the current status is regarding the floods in Pakistan.

**Altamush:** The floods originally started at no fault of Pakistan, that's what I would actually start with, because the global emissions, everybody understands, we're just 3-4% responsible. But on the other end, 1/3 of my country was actually underwater. And 1/3 is a huge, huge amount of people and animals. However, the only law that we have that deals with disasters is the National Disaster Management Act.

It was made in 2010 because we had these floods before, as well. Something that I found really odd, and disturbing a bit, was the animal protection scheme of the disaster management was not something that was an integral issue. And because of that, it's rather unfortunate to say these numbers, but over 1.16 (million) livestock animals have died in Pakistan. And the term livestock only references livestock animals so it doesn't refer to all otherwise animals that were affected or killed by these floods. Sadly, these are the animals that have been given that monitoring label, which we all understand needs to change.

Of course, the human travesty part is also very huge. Over 1700 humans have died. I cannot even recall, like around 14 to 15,000 kilometers of roads have been destroyed. Houses have been lost. And the government is actually trying to do its best to solve the problem because the magnitude of this issue, Mariann, was something that Pakistan actually could not ever expect. So they did have all these instruments available, but they were not enough for a disaster of this level.

So that is the current situation right now in Pakistan.

**Mariann:** It's really... I mean, I know a bit about it and hearing you talk about it really brings home the magnitude of this disaster.

Your work has predated the floods, before we get into the specifics of how your work relates to the current disaster management, can you just tell us kind of generally about the Charity Doings Foundation and its goals? Then we can get into some of those specifics.

**Altamush:** Of course. Charity Doings Foundation is a registered organization in Pakistan. We are a nonprofit. We have a really small, humble team. Our main goal is actually to empower communities. But for us, personally, the community includes all living members of the community, and that means animals, humans, and the environment.

It's just not possible, you know, to talk about humans and animals and forget the environmental part, or leave any one of these three out. So that's our bigger goal and we have a lot of projects to complete that. For example, we have a water project that originally started for human beings, but now what we do is we have installed a pond at all of our water projects, which are more than 800. Many of them are solar because we try to keep the environmental impact as low as possible. And what really happens at these magical sites is that a human being is drinking water, a child, and on the other end there's a baby goat drinking water from the same water pond. And it's all over the country.

We are trying to tell people animal welfare is important without telling them because I think that's true DEI, in my opinion. Our other projects are human centric. We have community kitchens. Because people are in need of food every day, we have them daily. We do lots of tree plantations, water projects. Those are something that connects all the ideas together. There's a lot more happening, actually, but these are our values and we try to inculcate them in everything.

**Mariann:** What kind of work are you doing? And you mentioned how you incorporate animals into relief work, they all come together. So how is that happening with disaster relief?

**Altamush:** A disaster where humans and animal victims existed was something that's not new to us. So I just want to give like a small snapshot of how it started. So in COVID...I just want to give this example because when COVID happened in Pakistan, this was March 2020, I was still a student and everything was just slogged down.

People had lost everything and we were trying to get people the food, but at the same time, we personally felt that the animals who were on the streets had the very least. They were reliant on these leftovers from the restaurants and those restaurants were closed. So we started a movement, it's called Empathy for the Voiceless. And we actually, since May 2020, have been feeding, as much as we can, to the stray animals on the streets because we thought, "let's just keep this movement going" and it originally started in COVID. And that idea always existed with us. And in the floods we saw that the animals were actually invisible from the whole situation. Because you have to understand, given the dynamics of Pakistan.

It's a poor country, the dynamics are such as that, and people are reliant, of course, to be saved first because something that's natural has happened in history. However, we cannot be a true society if we leave out the voiceless ones because they were, I think, more severely affected. I shouldn't say this, but I saw cows being drowned in the floods, in the massive torrential rain. And it's a horrible site for anybody to see.

So what we did was we worked for the human beings, of course, getting them cooked food because in a disaster zone, nobody can cook. So if you just give them food, that's not good charity. And we got them tents. Now there's a dengue issue as well because of (the) water and all these issues are going to come in. And there's a zoonosis angle as well, about keeping animals protected. Because you cannot stop those if the animals aren't protected. So mosquito nets. Helping women, especially giving them sanitary pads because in these situations I think their personal concerns have to be elevated.

But at the same time, for the animals, what we did was two very simple things. Things we have never done before because we have never seen a disaster of this kind. So we started with animal feed and we got them this feed, it's called silage. And it's basically highly nutritious. It's made of wheat and maize. All these ingredients that cows normally love to eat.

Our first consignment went in for seven tons of animal feed last month, and we have received a good donation to keep this on. So I'm targeting at least 50 tons of animal feed within the disaster zone for these livestock animals. And on the other end we are basically providing them emergency vet care.

This is new, personally, to me, but I just keep telling myself, "Why didn't I do this sooner?" So emergency veterinary care is something we're providing right now. We have a team of small vets. It's not a huge system because this is a disaster zone and we have not done it before. We are learning. So what we are offering as an incentive to the people is that they can bring their livestock animals with them.

We'll give them food, we'll get them checked and cured if there's any issue. So we've been doing this since the start of August, but the animal welfare part actually started the end of August because I was personally fundraising for that, and it's just kicking up as we speak.

**Mariann:** I mean, I think the answer to this may be obvious to most people listening, but I still want to talk about it.

Why did you choose to incorporate animals into work on behalf of people rather than doing something totally separate? Rather than having one organization for animals, one organization for humans. Why are these issues, specifically related to disaster relief and to Pakistan, why are these issues that should be addressed together- the welfare of the animals and the welfare of the humans?

**Altamush:** Actually, it started from a very personal belief, but now I think it's much more common. It's just that the animal welfare movement is also human welfare problem. And there are some things that the animals cannot do. For example, they cannot tell you that they're in need of help.

They will cry, they will do everything that they can to tell you, but you have to take action. So you cannot actually help the animals if they are not also helping the humans. But this is a very specific context situation, so I will firstly try to analyze this in the way of Pakistan.

So Pakistan is a poor country, we have to accept that. And the human beings who are working with these animals who are part of their lives, they have to firstly take care of their families themselves and then they take care of these animals. So we don't want to actually create a divide between the two.

We have heard this on many occasions, I'm sure you've heard this, and now I think it makes some sense...I don't completely agree with this. People say that, "Why are you working for animals when you're seeing humans suffer?" I don't agree 100% with the situation, but there is some logic to it. While my actions are not in any way based on this situation, I just feel that a true community is somewhere everybody has a good life. And the fact that if we empower human beings, they can empower these animals themselves.

I just feel that this movement can combine all of its powers, (rather) than just being two separate movements. A better community, a better society, is something I'm sure all animals and all humans want.

**Mariann:** Yeah, and I think it really brings light to the fact that the answers to how one should approach these issues depend on where you are and the situation you're dealing with.

You cannot judge what's going on in Pakistan with what's going on in the US. I mean, the goals may be the same ultimately, but the ways to get there are obviously going to be very different. And so what kind of animals are we talking about? Companions, farmed animals, working animals, strays? Is it all animals who are involved in the kind of work that you're doing, to one extent or another?

**Altamush:** In the flood is primarily livestock animals because the flood actually affected most of the desert-like areas that were villages. In Pakistan, we have so many villages that don't have even have electricity, so the concept of roads does not exist there. And these (communities) are actually reliant on their farmed animals. There are not like CAFOs, these animals live with these families, so they're part of them.

And they really want to take care of them, however, because of the economic angle, they just have to prioritize their families first and then they take care of these animals. So in the floods it's all kind of livestock animals. We have goats, we have cows, we have oxen, on some occasions we even had camels.

But the water projects that we are targeting, that we have placed all over Pakistan. We have like around 800 plus now. They target all kinds of animals. So many of the travelers have camels with them, so they come to drink. There are goats. There's even, in the suburban areas, when there's like an urban setting, these water projects are used by dogs and every kind of other companion animals.

But our work is primarily for the animals that are on the streets, because I think they are in a much deeper need of protection than the animals that are inside people's homes. While I do respect those animals as well, we should do everything we can for them, but we are primarily targeting on the street animals.

**Mariann:** Okay. We all expect climate disasters. Let's face it, we're not at the end of this problem. We're barely at the beginning. You have, probably in Pakistan right now, more experience with incorporating animals into relief programs, particularly in countries that are not entrenched in factory farming, but have people who have livestock animals and who have their own animals.

You might know more about this than almost anybody. Sadly, you have developed expertise in something very, very quickly because of this disaster. So what are your thoughts about how animals should be incorporated into disaster relief going forward? Inside Pakistan, but everywhere. Why is this important?

**Altamush:** I mean, I think the why part is actually, it's a nonsensical question. Of course, it's very important because you cannot expect to protect humans... let's just think from a human angle, if you're not protecting your animals, you can cause all sorts of climate disasters and other kinds of disasters, COVID was an example.

However, given the special context situation that we just talked about before, I definitely think because of Hurricane Katrina, things changed in the US and Hurricane Ian is actually a good example of how things have improved. But there were needs, for example, the PAW act that was recently passed last month, I think it's an excellent act. But countries like Pakistan have yet to consider animals being an integral part of being protected in disasters.

So our current law, which is called the National Disaster Management Act, it only protects human beings. And I think based on, I mean, I know for sure based on the floods that have happened right now. There is going to be still some resistance on the government's part to put animals into protection in that law because of economic reasons.

However, there are moral reasons and scientific reasons available. For example, the loss of biodiversity and just livestock. You know, livestock is economic livelihood for these people as well. So you just don't have to protect animals for animals' sake. Of course they have their own intrinsic identity. They are very important.



But in these situations, you can protect animals as economic livelihood of the people themselves. They have lost everything and they need something to feed their babies, their wives, their elderly, they need something. And these animals, even though they contribute a lot, for example, in form of food, milk and everything, they're also precious company for these people.

And they have lost these things. So there's also this emotional angle that has not even been addressed yet after the floods. and based on all these developments, I'm actually working on a document trying to amend this act that I just talked about before, that animals would be included as a vulnerable community, as a member of vulnerable community and be part of that act.

And the system already exists, so I'm not changing anything. I'm just making the animals a part of the law and all these commissions that are supposed to be formed will be formed. But to do that, there's also another need. So, we have a commission that basically deals with these disaster management plans, such as FEMA does for the US.

At this point, there's nobody representing the livestock or the federal department that deals with animals in these commission plans. So we also need to include members who could talk about and advocate about animals and have expertise. And then they go into the plan. But we will be able to make something that's effective because, I don't wanna get into other problems, but this is how it can start and I'm working on it.

**Mariann:** You mentioned that, and it's obviously true, that a lot of the animal farming in Pakistan is small holders and they have their own animals and it's a very different situation from the US, where almost all animal farming is factory farming. I mean, I assume factory farming has found its way into Pakistan because it's found its way, in some ways, into virtually everywhere in the world.

But how far has it found its way? Is most animal based food in Pakistan raised by small farmers or are there factory farms?

**Altamush:** There are, but it depends because there's a huge divide in the urban and the rural areas in Pakistan. So all these small animal holders, they're actually not part of the workforce of these CAFOs or factory farms.

So they will always produce for themselves and take care of these animals as a part of their own families. And I think this is something that the US would ideally want. Cause I think that's animal welfare and the human welfare, of the animals and themselves. But that is only limited to the rural areas.

While the urban areas, for example, where I live, normally in Lahore and Punjab and the other major cities, most of our food production does come from these, multi (national) corporations. For example, like Nestle. Most of these people would actually want that milk because they think that it's safe. And on the back end, Pakistan is actually not there yet in terms of how things are changing.

For example, the Smithfield farm case that just came up, that was amazing. But, those things have yet to like...you know, the veil has yet to be taken off yet in Pakistan. But it is there.

**Mariann:** So you are really working on two very separate fronts of different kinds of animal farming. I know you are yourself vegan and most of our listeners are vegan.

I'm just wondering how does that intersect with this work that you do to protect farm animals and respect the lives of both the people and the animals who are living together in small holdings and living a different kind of farming. How does that intersect with veganism?

I'm not sure there's an answer to this question, but give it a try.

**Altamush:** Well, that is a very tough question and thank you for ending that part. But, veganism is something that's very new to Pakistan, I think I would be probably in the 1-2% of the entire country who's vegan. My concerns for animal welfare are very different from the people that I currently work with.

However, given...if we shroud this question in a realistic sense, given the economic angle that exists in Pakistan, while I really want animals to be free, the best solution that currently exists for me on the table is that the animals, especially the livestock, is living directly with the farmers and they're taking care of them.

So there's nobody taking them to these slaughterhouses to be killed, but rather they're just used for milk. It can actually happen, but not through veganism. So I would say humane education and giving these people tools to know why the animals are important. We can actually teach these people how to take care of those animals.

And something that just popped up in my head, this is something that I'm currently working on as a measure of adaptation, which is something, sadly, nobody's working on. We are actually trying to establish a school in these



disaster zones. So we are going to be teaching these kids who don't have anything left for themselves and their families. We are trying to create jobs, specifically teachers, who are going to come in and the children of that community who will learn there. But the other component that we're trying to add in, as an adaptation measure, is teach people how to respond to disaster measures in emergency spaces. And at the same time how to take care of their livestock animals while in a peace time in a war time...sorry, a conflict time, like a disaster time. So we are trying to develop some courses and teach these people. Especially on the angle of humane education because, if I tell them be vegan, that is something aspirational. I would want them to accept it. But I think the first step would be humane education. Teaching them these things first.

**Mariann:** Yeah, no, I understand that people are just, are suffering at almost unbelievable levels and to go in there and start doing vegan education would certainly not work. At the same time, we know and it is increasingly accepted, at least among intelligent people, that moving towards a vegan diet is good for the world...Like looking at this in a really global sense, and in a long term kind of solution, moving towards a vegan diet is...not that Pakistan, as you pointed out, is hardly in the forefront of causing climate change, but it is one of the countries suffering from it and moving towards a vegan diet is a very positive step.

Do you see that as part of your vision for the future of Pakistan? And actually, another thing occurred to me when you were talking...these floods, which sadly are probably not the ending of floods in Pakistan, it's a very low lying country, and obviously very vulnerable, have shown how vulnerable livestock are.

So many people must have lost their animals, as you pointed out, by the millions. As part of your vision for the future, do you see moving towards a vegan diet as part of Pakistan's and the world's future?

**Altamush:** I mean, for me, becoming vegan was of course animal welfare. But the environmental aspects are something that's out in the open, especially in the global sense.

For example, if people just knew how much water or how much environmental carbon footprint just goes into feeding these animals, that are eventually going to be like eaten by us on our plates, is astronomical and people don't know these facts. So education and humane education, environmental welfare, these are like, these are very simple dots and people can connect them.

COVID was a huge example, people just didn't realize it. There are some treaties, organizations that are working on making that actually the foundation or the starting point where these conversations can go on. It's definitely there.

**Mariann:** What do American and perhaps European, well Western in general, animal advocates need to know about helping animals in Pakistan?

How does it differ from the work that is being done here? I mean, you've laid out some of that, but perhaps in a more global sense, what do we need to know about the world that we're missing by just seeing our own backyards?

**Altamush:** One thing I would definitely say would be the combination of animal welfare with human welfare and environmental welfare.

That is something that we need to understand, especially not just in Pakistan, all other low-lying countries and where these floods are happening, especially in Peru. Some of these glaciers and models are gonna melt and the people, the villages that are closer to these areas are eventually the ones who are going to get affected first.

I mean, if you think from a country perspective, you would actually lose focus. You have to look from a very global, perspective. Because if we do not care for these animals, which are directly linked to biodiversity and environmental welfare, the the sixth mass extinction would actually happen much sooner than has been envisioned by scientists.

**Mariann:** Do you think that there is a concern in Pakistan, a growing concern, a growing awareness of this, or is it still an uphill battle?

**Altamush:** Things have changed. So when I was a student, like uh, back in my law school in Pakistan, there was this civil coalition formed, it was called Climate Action Pakistan. It's still very active, and we started with the first climate action March that happened in Pakistan. I was one of its organizing members.

And these people are actually, they're working on different issues. For example, the smog issue, how it's related to human welfare, but the specific connection of how climate change is affecting animals and humans is something that has now come to surface because of these floods.

But these people still say that the government could not have expected any of this. So the response is still not up to the level that is required.

**Mariann:** Yeah. Well, it sounds like it would've been hard to expect something this dreadful, but certainly now we can all expect it. I mean, obviously the efforts within Pakistan to fight climate change can't be that great because it's not Pakistan that's causing climate change.

Is there also an effort to put pressure on us, in the US, and is that having any effect? Because I'm not seeing a lot of that, but I'd like to have a little hope that there is a developing, at least in the West, a more global perspective about responsibilities.

**Altamush:** Well, Pakistan, given the political landscape of the world, especially what's happening right now, and I don't wanna say it... These things are actually not happening at the level they're supposed to be.

So the pushback is actually very political rather than environmental. And you are asking a country that's on the bottom to push somebody at the top. So that's actually not a balanced thing to ask them. So I think it would be rather unfair, actually.

**Mariann:** Yeah, I sadly agree. You mentioned that you studied law, but more recently you've been studying at Lewis & Clark Law School, in their master's degree program.

Switching subjects a little, can you tell us a little bit about that and how it has related to your work on the ground in Pakistan?

**Altamush:** Lewis & Clark was actually dream school for me, so I'm like living the dream, studying what I wanted to, and I'm actually the second person from Pakistan to be a part of this program.

So that is something that will always stay with me. The bill that I have actually written, the amendment to include animals in the National Disaster Management Act was an idea that I'm doing for a paper topic here. And my professors are extremely helpful and one of them is, I'll just state his name, Professor Russ Mead.

He is an amazing person and he has helped me build that bill and he's also actually helping me, completely not related, getting Charity Doings Foundation get registered here in the US.

**Mariann:** Oh, that's great.

**Altamush:** I want to connect the work here, and because of the donors and everything, and take that to Pakistan because of the global perspective of animal welfare.

We shouldn't just stick to one continent, you know? Animals need to be saved everywhere.

**Mariann:** Yeah. Animals are not citizens of any country. They are all of our responsibility, I totally agree. Well, as long as we're on that topic, tell people how they can find out more about the organization and donate, if they're interested.

We'll also put this in the show notes if you want to look it up.

**Altamush:** I mean because of the exchange, I learned everything. Given what the US has already learned from, especially from Hurricane Katrina, in the disaster sense, I'm just trying to transplant all that knowledge to Pakistan. And I'm also actually externing at Best Friend's Animal Society.

They work with community cats and all kinds of animals. And I'm trying to transplant all that knowledge back to Pakistan, but that's my animal law work. But on the other end, the non-profit Charity Doings work, we would actually need a lot of donations to keep this thing going. The water projects, we are like at a thousand now, almost going to hit a thousand.

And we just started with one like three years. So things are changing and animals are not citizens of any state. We have a mutual responsibility and in that scenario they can just reach out to our websites. I'm assuming the links would be there.

**Mariann:** Yeah. We'll put the links in the show notes

**Altamush:** So they can review our work and it will be really odd for them to find any other organization that connects all these three things.

And I hope somebody picks it up from me and takes it to the global, or even a bigger level in Pakistan. That's my hope.

**Mariann:** Well, it sounds like you're leading the charge right now, so I hope others join you as well. But I think that you are well equipped to lead this. You're doing just really amazing work. I'm really thrilled we had a chance to talk.

Before I let you go, I'm not sure I really got to this when we talked about the floods, but what does it look like right now in Pakistan? I mean, I assume a lot of the floods have receded, but it's such an enormous, enormous piece of the country. What does it look like?

Is it just miles of disaster? And where are people? Where are people and they're animals, to the extent they've survived, where are they being sheltered?

**Altamush:** So for the people, because of the floods, they don't have any houses anymore, so they're on the streets. So all these disaster management organizations, and they're many, they are doing their very best to get these people houses in the form of tents.

So that is something that's temporary measures happening. Community kitchens are happening all over the country, we're doing several of them. There's another issue that's come up because of the water issue. So, there's a dengue epidemic in our country right now and more things will happen.

So we are getting them, and many people are getting them, these mosquito nets, especially the kids who are more vulnerable. I'm not exaggerating. All the effort that has happened is just, 3-4% of the rescue efforts of the entire 100%. So there's still 90% who have received nothing because there's just not enough to give to everybody.

And that's just the human angle. The animals are sadly still invisible. So, there are a few organizations that are, and I can count them on my fingers, they are actually doing these sessions, especially in the urban areas, pushing the government to change these laws and work on sheltering these animals.

However, the humanitarian organizations, they're only focused on human beings. There's just one more that I actually am affiliated with. So it's called CDRS, I'm actually their ambassador for animal welfare, and they are running the biggest and the first DNVR center in Pakistan. And they have these animal rescue services as well.

They are also on the forefront of helping animals in the middle of floods. But as of right now, the question that you ask, I would have to say no, that we don't have shelters for animals available for now. Trying to get them fed and even getting the emergency vet care is something that's still not happening at a bigger scale.

So, the shelter point will actually have to come after. Actually, that gives me a really good idea and I'll try to work on something and making that possible.

**Mariann:** Oh, well good. I'm gonna take total credit for that if you pull that off, because I don't even know what it is. But you had that idea while you were talking to me! \*laughs\*

**Altamush:** Yeah. I agree.

**Mariann:** Uh, it's just... Why am I being funny? It's a tragedy of monumental proportions, the amount of suffering for both people and animals. It's truly unimaginable.

And you know, as we've both said, it's a harbinger of what is to come. So thank you so much for joining us today to tell us about it and about your work, Altamush. It's very inspiring.

**Altamush:** Thank you so much for actually letting me be part of Hen House. It was always a dream for me as an animal rights activist and a lawyer, so I'm so thrilled. I cannot even thank you enough.

**Mariann:** That makes me very happy.