

Public lecture

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Speaker:

Jakob Kern, Former Senior Executive, UN World Food Programme (WFP)

Managing Complex Humanitarian Operations in Crisis

Abstract:

Drawing on 25 years of leadership experience with the UN World Food Programme (WFP), Jakob Kern will offer a first-hand perspective on managing complex humanitarian operations in some of the world's most challenging environments. Based on his experience as WFP Country Director in Syria and Emergency Coordinator for the Ukraine crisis, he will take students behind the scenes of humanitarian crisis management and explore what leadership looks like when decisions have to be made under extreme uncertainty, pressure and external threats.

The talk will explore how leaders set priorities when everything is urgent, make decisions with incomplete information, manage and motivate teams under stress, and remain focused on their mission in rapidly changing environments. Jakob will also reflect on the broader challenges of leading large-scale humanitarian operations and on lessons from an international career spanning operational, technological, supply chain and senior management roles.

Beyond humanitarian aid, the lecture offers insights for anyone interested in leadership, decision-making and building a meaningful international career. It will also consider how to navigate uncertainty, take responsibility and make an impact through professional choices.

Bio:

Jakob Kern spent 25 years in operational and leadership roles across humanitarian crises and at WFP headquarters. From 2016 to 2018, he served as WFP Country Director in Syria, leading one of WFP's largest and most complex emergency operations. From 2018 to 2019, he headed WFP's global Supply Chain Division, overseeing 3,500 staff worldwide. He later joined the Office of WFP's Executive Director as Deputy Chief of Staff and a member of WFP's Senior Management Group. In 2022, he was appointed WFP Emergency Coordinator for the Ukraine crisis.

Earlier in his WFP career, Jakob held assignments in Liberia, Eritrea and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, as well as senior roles in human resources and information technology, including as WFP Chief Information Officer. Since 2023, he has advised humanitarian organizations on crisis management, leadership and organizational challenges. He also teaches humanitarian crisis management as a guest lecturer at several universities. Jakob holds a Master's degree in Civil Engineering from ETH Zurich.

Date and time:

Thursday, October 8, 2026, 11:00 am – 12:00 pm

Location :

Pérolles 21, room C130, Bd de Pérolles 90, Fribourg

Contact person:

Prof. Nathan Kunz (nathan.kunz@unifr.ch)