

INTERVIEW

Interview with Essam Daod, co-founder of Humanity Crew

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Essam Daod, co-founder of Humanity Crew

In September 2015 Essam Daod left his job as a Doctor in Palestine and, along with his wife Maria, went to Lesbos (Greece) to join a Humanitarian mission to help the refugees. Two months later, they founded the NGO Humanity Crew, specialized in providing psychological support to the people who arrive every day to the Greek coast fleeing violence and war. On this interview, he explains how his everyday life is now next to the refugees, the enormous amount of difficulties they encounter, but also the great satisfaction he feels for being able to help those who need it most.

When you arrived in Greece on humanitarian mission a year ago, did you expect to encounter the dramatic situation which now affects the Mediterranean?

Not at all. When we arrived, September- October last year, no one knew about the real situation, we didn't know how big the crisis was and we were totally shocked. 7000-8000 refugees on 120 boats were arriving every day and we just could not believe no one was talking about that. There was no big organization there yet, just individual volunteers and small organizations, such as Proactiva Open Arms, and it was a total shock for me.

Now, one year later, how have both the situation and your work there changed?

It has totally changed. After that shipwreck in which nearly 400 refugees drowned, the media coverage was greater. The thing is that, last year, 8.000 refugees were arriving

every day but in two-three days they were out of Greece, and a week later they were already in Germany. Greece was a transit area. Now there are less refugees coming but the problem is that the border is closed, so they are all stuck in Greece. There are 80-90.000 refugees in Greece and there is no solution for them. Our work has changed from rescue and immediate emergency relief to support intervention. There is a different kind of suffering now, people are very desperate. Last year they had hope because they knew they could make it to Germany. Now, they continue feeling war and escaping from Syria and Turkey even though they know the borders are closed. This proves how much desperate they are. Also, since it is now more difficult for them to reach Greece, they try moving to other coasts, such as Libya or Egypt, to cross over to Italy or Spain, but the journey there is even more dangerous, lots of kilometers of sea to cross, the Mediterranean is a big sea!

Humanity Crew highlights the importance of psychological support and accompaniment for the refugees. Why did you focus on this kind of support?

We provide psychological support: our staff are psychiatrists, psychologists, teachers, art therapists, speech therapists, etc. We have education programmes and we are focused on mental, psychological and emotional care. I am a surgeon and at the beginning I used my surgeon skills as an emergency doctor. However, after some time, I noticed that everyone was focused on the same thing: all the money, resources and volunteers were dedicated to first emergency medical aid, all efforts were put on the body but no one was taking care of the mental side. These are babies and adults coming from war zone. We are not robots! Everyone was saying “do you want a blanket? Do you want a banana or water”? These people don’t want a blanket or a banana. Lots of volunteers don’t have the skills to give psychological first aid. They are themselves very afraid because the situation is also very traumatic for them. Seeing a big boat with babies and women crying arrive at 4 am is not something we are used to deal with. They don’t have the skills to calm them down. It is easier for the volunteers to provide them with medical aid, physical comfort, money or food. No one was providing psychological first aid.

“ It is easier to provide them with medical aid, physical comfort, money or food; but these people don't want a blanket or a banana ”

These are processes that may require time. How can you provide such treatments in a situation where refugees are just in transit to an uncertain destination? The lack of resources and means could put an end to the work you do?

We know that we can't give a treatment to someone who is in transit situation, who maybe leaving on the following day. It is also difficult for them to open up to you and tell you your fears. We have a work plan called the Four-step plan, that I myself wrote. First step is right when they come on the beach: they are scared, so we provide them with first emergency psychological aid. It is forbidden to do any treatments on these cases. We tell them that this is just a short transit situation and help them feel safe. Second step is when they are at the camps, where we do crisis intervention. These are longer treatments but focused on specific crisis; e.g. for those people who have lost a beloved, a child, who have problems with violence. We just focus on these cases, nothing else. Third step is supportive treatment: we do it by skype and telephone once they are already gone. We continue to support them using skype and the social media. We keep in contact so that they know we are there, but we do no treatment. Forth step takes place once in the place of destination. There we do treatment, as we know they will be there for some time. We either do it ourselves on skype or we contact with other organizations in those countries, which we know can provide them with the treatment they need. We help and support them.

Which kind of relationship do you have?

We are professionals and we treat these people as we treat our patients back home, as human beings. We are professional enough so that it does not entangle emotional difficulties for us, we have to stay neutral and not too much involved emotionally.

“ Unfortunately there is a huge fight between NGOs in Greece because there is a lot of money. There is no coordination at all! ”

How have all these experiences changed you?

I am not the same person at all! Me and my wife. I don't even know how to explain it... The most important thing is that, for the first time in my life, it led me to understand what it really means to feel happy and sad. I cried and laughed at the same time. I was very sad when I lost someone at the beach but I was also so happy because I just understood how strong sadness could be, how real. At home [Palestine], those emotions are not real. The idea of happiness we have at home, money or success, is not real. The money or even the success and the awards I had back in my country, as a part of this capitalistic world, would not make me feel so happy. I was just chasing a fake thing. Here the emotions are so real, I have connected with myself for the first time through the small things. Being in touch with these people, waiting for the desperate refugees to come so that we can help them. It's so true...

Humanity Crew is a small NGO compared to other huge humanitarian projects. Is there enough coordination among the different NGOs working with refugees in the Mediterranean?

There is no coordination at all! People don't like it to be said but it's all about money. Unfortunately nowadays there is a huge fight between NGOs in Greece, a huge one. This is because, now, there are just one or two boats arriving a week and there are 20 different organizations trying to help these people and rescue these boats, because there is media and there is a lot of money. Organizations get money for taking care of the medical, social and psychological support, so they want to have the monopoly in the field. They don't want to establish any kind of partnership with other organizations, not to lose the funds. No one will tell you about or recognize it, but they stay in a place where there is no need because the funds tell them to stay there. That's why we don't rely on

big funds; because we don't want to depend on them. We are very small but we are the fastest respondent NGO. We were the first organization to move to Salonica because we understand the situation as anyone else. We don't need to apply for funds.

What is your opinion about how the EU is dealing with the refugee crisis?

We should make a difference between the EU governments and the people. What the authorities do is unhuman. On one hand, the EU has signed the right of asylum for refugees of war. On the other hand, they pay 6 billion euros to a country outside EU, Turkey, to stop these people they signed their right to come from crossing. They could give 3 milion to Spain and 3 milion to Greece.. However, EU people are different. You can see all these people taking care of the babies and their families, cleaning them, giving them clothes, food, and a place to sleep.. This is the EU too.

“ What the EU authorities do is unhuman, but we should make a difference between the governments and the people ”

Do you think European civil society is doing enough to push governments into action?

It is not easy to push the governments. They are all well connected together and their politics make it hard for people to go out and defend their rights. When you finish work late, you earn 300 euros a week in Greece or don't have a job, you don't have the time to go and fight for someone else. That's capitalism. I have to pay for my house, my loans to the bank etc.

How do you see the future? Do you feel hopeful about any important change for this situation?

Before getting to know all this, one year ago, I was so hopeless. I didn't believe in humanity anymore. Now, after seeing all this suffering and death, I have hope. Because

I've met people who make me believe in the human being and make believe again that things can change (like Oscar Camps from Proactiva, Peter Bocca from HRW, Dani, Nico...). We just need to be aware of the things that make us human and try to make a difference. That's why the program in Barcelona (Ciutats Defensores dels Drets Humans) was like a dream for me, because I could talk about the refugee crisis with politicians but also with kids and teenagers! We need to work with them, with the young generation to make things change. It's not about money and politics, it's about these children. There is no fast change, it will take time.

Photography : ©Maciek Musialek

This picture was taken at the north shoreline of the Greek island Lesbos, a small town called Skala Skamias

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