

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION^{Review}

Field Reports

Life Preservers at Sea

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FIELD REPORT

PROFILES OF INNOVATIVE WORK

↓ A Proactiva Open Arms rescuer carries refugee children to safety during a rescue in the Mediterranean.

Life Preservers at Sea

Proactiva Open Arms' greatest threat to its rescue mission may not be the rough Mediterranean seas but European governments fearful of migrants seeking refuge in their countries.

BY JEANNE CARSTENSEN

When Gerard Canals and Oscar Camps saw the photo of the little refugee boy from Syria laying facedown in the sand, they knew they had to do something. The lifeguards from Barcelona had been following the refugee crisis for several months and were horrified by the mounting number of what they saw as preventable deaths in the Aegean Sea. But the photo of that little boy, Aylan Kurdi, that went viral in August 2015 stunned them—the toddler looked to be the same age as Camps' son.

A month later, after the lifeguard company they worked for closed for the season, Canals and Camps traveled to Lesbos, Greece, to assess the refugee situation. Sitting about six miles across from Turkey on a narrow but often treacherous strip of the northern Aegean, Lesbos had become the epicenter of the Syrian refugee crisis, with thousands of people arriving every day. Their plan was to evaluate the needs on Lesbos before returning to Spain to assemble a team.

Just minutes after their arrival, they spotted two refugees in distress about 300 meters offshore. They realized there were no lifeguards around—indeed, no one at all who could help. More than 250,000 refugees had arrived to Lesbos already—three times the population of the entire island—but in September the locals were still struggling to cope with the ongoing humanitarian emergency with minimal outside assistance. Canals and Camps didn't have any of their usual rescue equipment, but they swam out to the two men and brought them safely back to shore.

After that initial experience, Canals and Camps dropped their original plan and started

working immediately. Peter Bouckaert, emergencies director for Human Rights Watch (HRW), saw them in action as the pair guided the overcrowded boats of frightened refugees to shore and performed first aid. "I immediately realized that they could make a huge difference," Bouckaert says.

Bouckaert suggested they create a non-profit and offered to help raise money. From the beach, Camps called a lawyer in Barcelona to do the paperwork—and Proactiva Open

Arms recounts. Refugee boats were arriving day and night, so the team worked 24-hour shifts using two specially equipped personal watercrafts they purchased in Barcelona and transported to Lesbos, thanks to the fundraising campaign.

October 28, 2015, was a stormy day with gale-force winds and roiling seas, but smugglers continued to send boats, including an old fishing trawler packed with approximately 300 people that wrecked a mile from shore. When Canals and Camps arrived on their personal watercrafts, people in orange life jackets were bobbing helplessly in the swell, some in groups clutching at pieces of wood. "We were navigating among a lot of corpses and many of them were kids," Canals remembers.

Working so intensely for so long under freezing conditions, the rescuers, wearing



Arms was born. In just a few weeks, with the help of HRW board member Amy Rao, they raised \$600,000. "I thought, 'This is what you do in a crisis. You don't freak out,'" Rao recalls about the lifeguards after she arrived at Lesbos.

Canals' brother and another lifeguard soon joined them from Barcelona; eventually the team on Lesbos would grow to more than 20. In the first weeks, the team had to make due with minimal resources. "We grabbed an abandoned rubber refugee dinghy, put two engines on it, and used it for rescues,"

only conventional wet suits, also developed hypothermia. In the end, Proactiva and the other rescuers saved 240 people, but some 60 people died. The tragedy would have been much worse without the lifeguards and their personal watercrafts.

In the months following the wreck, thanks to ongoing fundraising efforts spearheaded by Rao, the team gradually got the state-of-the-art rescue equipment they needed, including military-grade dry suits, a powerful monocular telescope for spotting refugee boats in distress at night, and two rigid inflatable

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boats (RIBs) with radar. The fundraising also included money to help equip the Greek Coast Guard, which was underfunded due to the country's economic crisis.

ACROSS THE SEA

In June 2016, just eight months after becoming an NGO, Proactiva expanded its operations to the Mediterranean Sea, where smugglers were transporting refugees on the much longer, more dangerous sea route between Libya and Italy. The Barcelona lifeguards joined other NGOs, including Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and Save the Children, which had mounted maritime search and rescue (SAR) operations in response to the growing number of emergencies at sea.

By now, the majority of Proactiva's funds were coming from small individual donations, with some additional support from governments and foundations. They managed to incrementally grow the budget to meet their expanding operations, which included more rescue vessels: the *Astral*, a 33-foot sailing yacht, from which they towed two RIBs that they used to perform rescues and then transport the refugees to larger humanitarian vessels, and the *Golfo Azzuro*, a large fishing boat that they reconfigured to include a small hospital. Now they were able to rescue people in the RIBs and take them aboard their own vessel to receive medical attention before transporting them to safe ports of call in Italy or Malta. Between June 2016 and August 2017, Canals estimated the *Astral* and *Golfo Azzuro* rescued 21,000 people. In mid-2017, thanks to a donation from a Spanish shipping company, they finally got their own boat, the *Open Arms*. By September 2018, Proactiva had raised \$3,966,000—90 percent from 51,000 individual donors.

In the Mediterranean, they expanded their mission to include not only SAR but also informing the public about what was happening at sea and about the refugee crisis in general. For their "Voices for Hope" campaign, they recorded stories from refugees they rescued, such as 20-year-old Sa'id from Nigeria who was fleeing Boko Haram. When he got to Libya, he found further dangers.

"They were beating us, not respecting us," he said, wrapped in a red blanket on the deck of the *Open Arms*. "God bless you," Sa'id said, "you rescued me in the middle of the sea." Proactiva also has independent journalists aboard on all their missions.

During this period, European sentiment turned increasingly anti-immigrant and authorities sought to do whatever they could to deter the flow of migrants into Europe. Proactiva and other NGOs believed they had a clear mandate under maritime law to rescue anyone in distress in international waters and transport them to a safe port of call.

But the Italian government claimed that NGO rescue operations in the Mediterranean constituted a "pull factor," attracting migrants who would not otherwise make the trip. They wanted the Libyan Coast Guard to patrol its waters and gave them millions of euros for equipment and training to interrupt the smuggling business. However, a 2018 report by MSF found no evidence of the pull factor: The number of sea crossings did not significantly increase with the presence of humanitarian vessels. What *did* increase was safety—fewer refugees drowned.

HRW's Bouckaert says European governments are putting deterrence above human rights. "They appear all too willing to look away from serious abuses being committed to stem the flow of refugees and migrants," he says. "However one feels about migrants and asylum seekers, people should not be drowning by the thousands each year on the shores of Europe."

CROSS-SECTOR CONFLICT

The clash in objectives has led to increasing disputes between authorities and the NGOs, including Proactiva. In August 2017, the Libyan Coast Guard tried to capture the *Golfo Azzuro*, even though it was in international waters. The incident only ended after the Spanish government intervened. Authorities have also used bureaucracy to hinder the humanitarian activities by issuing a restrictive code of conduct and refusing to renew some of the vessels' registrations. In March 2018, after Proactiva refused to return a group of

218 refugees to Libya, which human rights experts do not consider to be a safe country, officials from the newly elected far-right Italian government in Sicily seized the *Open Arms* for a month, accusing them of enabling illegal immigration.

Then Italy, Malta, and other countries began refusing to open their ports to these NGO vessels. In June 2018, after Proactiva found a lone woman clinging to wreckage that the Libyan Coast Guard had left behind after a rescue, Proactiva had to sail all the way across the Mediterranean to Majorca because only Spain would accept her.

"The European authorities tried very hard to stop us and in the end they did it," Canals says. The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) has expressed concern "about the legal and logistical restrictions" that have been placed on the NGOs, but as of November 2018 there were no NGO vessels conducting SAR in the Central Mediterranean. Refugee flows to Europe have dipped back down to pre-2014 levels, but in the absence of Proactiva and the other NGOs, the death rates have soared. In September, according to the UNHCR, one person died in the Central Mediterranean for every eight who arrived; in the first nine months of 2018, 2,000 perished.

For Canals, the problem is one of mission: The Libyan Coast Guard and EU agencies patrolling the Mediterranean are there primarily to disrupt the smuggling business, not save lives.

Canals wishes that the work they do wasn't necessary anymore, but refugee arrivals are increasing around the world. "I don't see Proactiva disappearing from the sea anytime soon," he says. In fact, they're starting a new SAR operation in southern Spain, where the influx of refugees is growing, and trying to raise funds to buy a new, larger ship that would make it possible to conduct SAR missions beyond the Mediterranean if needed. His advice to any groups thinking they might want to do search and rescue? "You have to be ready technically, you have to be ready economically, and you have to be ready to fight—because they will go after you from all sides." ■