

Open Arms: managing the humanitarian crisis

How an NGO was born, thanks to Spanish lifeguard Oscar Camps who saw a crisis unfolding and decided to do something about it.



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The shocking image of the lifeless body of three-year-old Aylan Kurdi, washed up on a Turkish beach in September 2015, put a stark face on Europe's migrant crisis.

The image sparked global outrage over the impotence of political leaders to help those who were daily trying to escape their war-torn homelands in a desperate bid to seek asylum in Europe. Aylan was not the first to perish in the dangerous seaway crossing, nor has he been the last.

Oscar Camps is one of those whose conscience had been stirred by the wrenching images seen on the news. As the director of Proactiva, which provides lifeguard and sea rescue services along Spain's Mediterranean coast, Camps was appalled to see whole families drowning so close — in some cases just 150 meters — from shore, where they could easily have been plucked to safety.

With the support of his family, he took his own personal savings and resolved to do whatever he could to stop this human tragedy taking place on Europe's doorstep. He mobilized a team of local lifeguards and headed for the Greek island of Lesbos, the main point of arrival for thousands of migrants.

Camps' initiative provides some keys for others looking to beat the odds and help steer their project to a safe harbor.

The power of persistence

The first thing Camps did was sound out his colleagues. "Everybody volunteered," he declares with a touch of pride. And he has every reason to be proud: how many other bosses could get all their employees to put their hands up for a project that technically wasn't even their business?

The response of public authorities and institutions could not have been more different. Camps contacted multiple ports with his offer to help the arriving migrants. He reached out to mayors, ambassadors, government ministries and aid workers — basically "anybody involved in this humanitarian effort."

But, as often happens when operating outside your immediate circle of influence, he says his offers were met with utter silence.

In such circumstances, dogged persistence is needed to get the project off the ground. And that's what Camps demonstrated in September 2015 when he and a colleague hopped a plane to Lesbos. It was essentially a reconnaissance mission so they could see for themselves the nature and scale of the situation unfolding there, and thereby assess what they could

contribute to the wider effort.

Seeing is believing

It didn't take long for them to see the acute lack of resources. One approaching dinghy was in such bad shape that people were falling off it into the sea. Although some of them knew how to swim, most didn't. "So we jumped into the water to save them," Camps recalls.

Boats were constantly arriving, all of them in precarious states and overflowing with human cargo. At the time, thousands of migrants were arriving daily, and there weren't enough sea rescuers to help them.

The situation was little better ashore, with NGOs and volunteer workers struggling to do their best with minimal staff and resources.

Recognizing the vast need right then and there, Camps and his colleague identified themselves as professional lifeguards and volunteered their services. As soon as people saw them in action, they immediately earned the respect of the other workers, and it wasn't long before they were being asked to provide further help.

Accomplishing a lot with a little

Sometimes, when trying to make changes or improvements, official authorization and funding may never be forthcoming. In the absence of formal means, Camps had to look for other ways of getting more volunteers and resources.

"All we had were the wetsuits and flippers we had brought with us," he says. Even so, without spending more than 2,000 euros, they had "saved 16 people from drowning," he says.

However, sheer determination can only go so far. Camps knew that to expand the reach of the mission and extend their short stay on the island, he would need to come up with more resources.

A human rights coordinator on the island encouraged them not to give up. "He told us we were providing a vital service and that we couldn't leave. He recommended looking for finance through crowdfunding or something similar. So, we designed and launched a website and opened a PayPal account."

They also began the administrative process to set up a charitable division. By October 2015, [Proactiva Open Arms](#) was born, barely a month after Camps' arrival on Lesbos.

The first donations came via other organizations already operating on the island. Thanks to international media attention, including coverage in *The New York Times*, individual donations started pouring in from elsewhere in Europe and the United States.

Gaining legitimacy

As more volunteer lifeguards arrived from Spain, their next priority was to get a car and some kind of boat of their own to help them patrol the coasts. Up until then, they had been using the vessels the migrants were using to transport themselves, as well as boats provided by local fishermen.

Again, the response from public authorities was painfully slow. When they tried to get permission from the coast guard to bring over jet skis from Spain, they just got the run-around, Camps says.

Apart from the sheer bureaucracy, Camps realized there were other factors at play: allowing outsiders to bring in their own rescue equipment was tantamount to admitting one's own shortcomings and inability to deal with the crisis, something that no authority likes to do.

In the end, Camps and his colleagues went and brought back their own cars, towlines and jet skis by ferry from Barcelona.

The jet skis arrived shortly before two deadly shipwrecks on October 28, 2015 — a black day for everyone involved. "We were rescuing lots of people in open waters with our jet skis," says Camps.

Together with the coast guard and other rescue workers, some 270 people were saved, but dozens of others, mostly children, drowned.

Those two shipwrecks marked a turning point. Though the stalling tactics continued at official levels, Camps noted that, at the operational level, their relations with the other teams became much more collaborative.

"We had earned legitimacy. When a boat was in trouble, the coast guard started sending us alerts, too. We were included in the loop."

Supporting teams under pressure

In the beginning, the lifeguards had to do it all for themselves, keeping a lookout from the coast to see when and where the boats were arriving. Once they started working with other organizations, they could shift their focus and optimize the team's assets.

Granted, being able to count on a team of professionals and highly committed volunteers at all times came at a cost: it meant paying for flights as well as room and board for up to 14 people on set rotations.

All the volunteers were lifeguards, rescue workers or professionals in maritime safety. Even so, the extreme conditions took their toll, physically and psychologically, on the most prepared person. No one was immune to the emotional aspects of their work — the toll taken by making life-or-death decisions mid-rescue.

As such, they limited the work of their volunteers to two-week shifts, after which they could receive psychological support.

"The work carries a heavy emotional burden," says Camps. "We go through incredibly dramatic situations, and we've seen many people die right before our very eyes. Each person deals with it the best they can."

Perhaps as his way of dealing with it, Camps takes comfort in the fact that "we've also had the satisfaction of saving many others."

Using media to good effect

As their rescue efforts earned growing media coverage, Camps soon found himself fielding more media requests for interviews. Though media interest can be a useful means of drawing public attention to an important cause, it needs to be carefully managed, lest it become a distraction.

Social media provide unlimited storytelling opportunities and reach, but they generate exponentially more comments and queries.

Eventually, they had to look for a press officer to handle the media side of things, so the lifeguards could stick to what they had gone there to do in the first place.

In addition to being proactive about managing their communications, they wanted to be sure

that their communications were transparent. They found a way to do both by mounting cameras to their boats and helmets. That way, they could document their work in real time, feeding the media's insatiable appetite for live action footage and human stories, while not letting it get in the way of them actually doing their jobs, which was saving lives.

This strategy paid off on several levels. They were being transparent about their work. They were making an intolerable situation public. They were raising public consciousness about the plight of the migrants and asylum seekers, which put mounting pressure on European governments to tackle the situation. And it simultaneously led to an influx of donations, enabling them to continue financing their operations.

"Due to the effective way we communicated, we made many more people aware of what was really happening," says Camps.

Their smart handling of the media gave them a level of visibility that many others working on Lesbos did not have. Plus, the more that journalists, photographers and camera crews covered what they were doing, the more material they had for their website and Facebook; the richer the content on their webpages, the more support they received, generating a virtuous circle of benefits toward the larger mission.

Flexibility and adaptability

Another strength was their ability to adapt their operations to constantly changing realities. From patrolling the waters hundreds of meters out to sea to attending to people on the beach, "fixed hours are out of the question," says Camps. "Everything is extremely unpredictable. Our work time is determined by the arrivals."

Climate and tidal conditions, E.U. political agreements and the operations of local mafias all affect the dynamics of the arrivals.

Thanks to the solidarity and generosity of the public, they received enough funds to buy inflatable boats specially designed for carrying out rescue missions at night, when many of the migrants attempt to make the crossing under the cover of darkness.

Indeed, the night before Camps gave *IESE Insight* this interview, he said his crew had rescued 45 people trapped on a drifting boat because the smuggler had abandoned them when the propeller got tangled in some fishing nets.

This highlights the haphazard nature of the smuggling routes. Despite the best efforts of the Greek and Turkish coast guards, there is no telling what might happen, or the lengths to which people will go to evade the controls.

“There are thousands of people in Turkey waiting to cross,” says Camps. “They are desperate and they are not going to stay there for long. The authorities can’t stop them from trying to cross. It might take them longer, they might change their routes, but one way or another they will end up trying. You can’t make the sea impenetrable.”

People have tried to reach Europe via other Greek islands, Cyprus or Lampedusa. They have even tried to sail directly to Italy from Turkey.

Given this reality, they are extending their range of operations to include the central Mediterranean.

For the moment, they continue to liaise with the organizations operating in Lesbos, in order to “always have a team in the water. You have to stay ready and agile, because victims, especially women and children, can materialize at any moment.”

For Camps, no amount of financial remuneration could match the compensation he receives in the form of knowing he has saved a life.

On the morning of this *IESE Insight* interview, Camps received a text message from the doctor of a humanitarian aid agency with whom he had worked a few months prior. Attached to the message was a photo of the baby boy they had helped deliver among a pile of life jackets, and whose umbilical cord they had cut together.

The smile on Camps’ face as he recounts this story says it all.

Article written by Gemma Tonijuan and originally published in [IESE Insight magazine \(Issue 29, Q2 2016\)](#).



Oscar Camps (pictured) brought his own towline and other equipment from Barcelona and, thanks to the generosity of the public, was able to buy inflatable boats.

A reason to feel proud

Captains of the Maritime Safety Agency, firefighters, police officers: it's not just lifeguards who are volunteering to help. Open Arms says it has a waiting list of thousands more volunteers.

This huge outpouring of public support is something that fills the lifeguards at home base with a real sense of mission. Their colleagues in the field depend on the logistical, administrative and even emotional support that the headquarters supplies.

In many ways, this project stands as a good example of a successful [corporate volunteering](#) initiative, the likes of which are growing increasingly popular among companies.

As [IESE research](#) shows, apart from the positive social impact of the initiative itself, engaging

in such activities boosts employee morale and enhances the company's public reputation. It's a win for the company, its employees and, most of all, the intended beneficiaries of the social action.

READ ALSO: [*IESE Business School Insight* magazine #158 \(Jan.-April 2021\)](#) on Philanthropy and CSR.

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