



NewsEurideas

November 2011 Issue

- In the spirit of solidarity - EVHAC
- Open Society Foundations in Central Asia - Interview with Jacqueline Hale
- Amnesty International and the EU - Interview with Natacha Kazatchkine
- What it takes to be a humanitarian aid worker
- Events in Brussels



Overcoming inaction: humanitarian aid and the fight against human rights abuses

In this month's issue we will focus on humanitarian aid and human rights defence programs. In the light of recent events, covering a wide range of problems from natural disasters, e.g. the Haiti earthquake, floods in Pakistan, famine in the Horn of Africa, to political crises, the Arab Spring, the humanitarian aid community's efforts have been stretched beyond their means at times, especially in the current climate of austerity measures.

In this context, we are trying to shed light on the efforts of the EU and non-governmental actors to tackle serious crises. We will feature testimonials given by representatives from NGOs such as Amnesty International and the Open Society Foundations, formerly the Open Society Institute. These will highlight some of the issues which governments and non-governmental actors are confronted with, while also focusing on their successes in the fight against human rights abuse and in crisis situations.

Hopefully, these articles will inform you of past challenges faced and the future challenges ahead for the humanitarian community and will inspire new initiatives.

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In the spirit of solidarity

by Cosmina Marian

Public opinion surveys usually show that volunteering has long been a top priority for Europeans. The idea that your actions can make even a small difference to society understandably has its appeal. The Treaty of Lisbon took into account these tendencies towards cross-community solidarity and humanitarian aid in laying down the groundwork for the creation of a European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps. Ultimately the responsibility for implementing the project now belongs to the European Commission. Hence, the project became in 2010 one of the main priorities of the Director General of the Humanitarian Aid department of the European Commission (DG ECHO).

The advantage of this kind of project lies mainly in increased awareness of humanitarian and development needs worldwide but also in offering the obvious logistic support to people caught up in crises. Furthermore, it is expected that the EU will gain from improved visibility of its attitude towards cross-community solidarity. The project may also serve to strengthen a sense of European identity amongst young people while at the same time being the perfect opportunity to exchange best practice and share experiences.

Thus far, a sum of one million Euros has been invested in preparatory action during 2011 allowing the Commission to take the first steps in establishing the Voluntary Corps. Since this year is the European Year of Volunteering, the Commission has successfully moved towards the next stage of the programme by putting together a network of European humanitarian aid volunteers and also by launching three pilot projects. The aim of these projects is to help the Commission ensure that European volunteers can complement the work of NGOs and thus avoid any overlap with existing voluntary schemes. The Commission has identified areas on which it expects the Voluntary Corps to focus in order to make a real difference and bring added-value to the field of humanitarian aid. These areas include:

- identification and selection of volunteers (to ensure correct matching);



- training, the development of common standards and good practice;
- deployment of European volunteers in EU humanitarian aid operations.

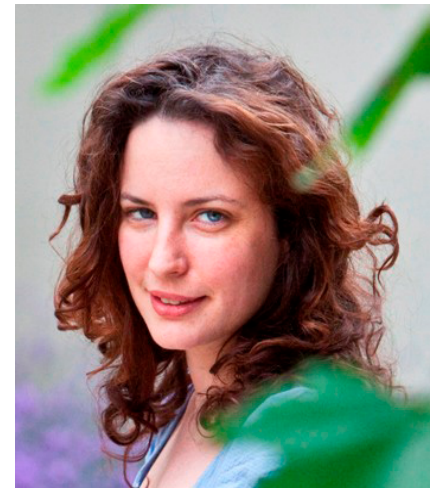
In this first phase a number of experienced partners was chosen to support the effective launch of the Corps. Identification, recruitment, training and preparation of volunteers were managed by NGOs such as the French Red Cross, Save the Children and Voluntary Service Overseas. It should be stressed that it was expected that the volunteers would be dealing with pre- and post-disaster operations rather than any emergency response to crises.

As is the case for any project of this scale, challenges are unavoidable. Apart from technical difficulties relating to the lack of a legal framework or any sustainable source of funding for volunteering, there is also the issue of a recent decline in the number of qualified volunteers. In consequence there is a need to train volunteers, although training young volunteers needing constant supervision in a restricted timescale is an issue in itself. In spite of these challenges it is not too difficult to mobilise young people if you have a good recruitment strategy. Keeping them interested and motivated, usually determined by the degree of individual commitment, is of course another matter.

Ultimately the Voluntary Corps provides an opportunity to everyone, but in particular to young people, to get involved in humanitarian aid ventures. Although this may seem like an adventure to some, it is above all a responsibility which provides a rich learning experience and a rewarding way of contributing to society. It is expected that the Voluntary Corps will be established by means of a legislative proposal in the first semester of 2012 so until then it is hoped that this programme will provide volunteers with the incentive to put something back into their communities.

Interview with Jacqueline Hale

Jacqueline Hale joined the Open Society Foundations' Institute Brussels office in November 2006. Prior to joining OSF (formerly the Open Society Institute), Hale worked at the European Parliament and researched for UNHCR. She has published articles on South Caucasus and Central Asian affairs as well as other development issues.



What are the main objectives of the Open Society Foundations in Central Asia?

The objectives of OSF in Central Asia are the same as throughout the world: regardless of the region—whether Africa, Europe, Latin America, or the United States—we aim to foster vibrant and tolerant societies whose governments are accountable to their citizens. In Central Asia we support local civil society groups working on a range of issues from promoting debate and access to education to supporting budget transparency and independent media. In addition to fighting for civil liberties, our national foundations in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan champion social inclusion and protection of marginalised groups who are the most vulnerable in closed societies.

And what are the tools the Open Society Foundations uses in order to achieve them?

Our network of foundations—driven by local boards that set the priorities for a given country—combines grantmaking and advocacy to support our goals in Central Asia. The major thrust of our work is making grants to civil society organisations. A number of human rights NGOs receive grants to build their organisational and monitoring capacity; others receive support for specific initiatives. We also fund scholarships for young Central Asians to study at post-graduate level in Europe and the United States.

As a private grantmaker we can be both flexible and nimble and adapt to a fast-changing landscape. Based in Brussels, my job is to amplify the voice of local civil society organisations with EU policymakers and institutions. People in Brussels and the Member States are often not as familiar with the situation in Central Asia, and our extensive in-country networks enable us to provide timely information and evidence from the ground to European decision-makers. From commenting on specific provisions in a new law in Kazakhstan that will negatively impact freedom of religion, to providing broader policy analysis and advice on an EU response to developments in Central Asia.

Do you think efforts to improve human rights in Central Asia are being undermined by geostrategic and energy related concerns?

The EU is, on the whole, better at taking a more holistic view of Central Asia than the United States. The U.S. tends to see the region entirely through the prism of Afghanistan or in geostrategic terms relating to Russia's sphere of influence. But on energy security questions reaching a deal on a pipeline can take precedence for the EU over speaking out on a country's human rights record. The case of Turkmenistan, one of the most repressive states in the world (on a par with North Korea and Burma) provides one of the clearest examples of this. The EU has a Memorandum of Understanding on co-operation in the field of energy with the country; recently celebrated the signing of a Trans-Caspian Agreement (together with Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan) on building a pipeline to connect to Europe; and is seeking a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement to normalise relations between Turkmenistan and the EU. All this, despite the fact that thousands of people languish in jails to which the Red Cross does not have access, citizens are disappearing in the prison system, the government has put in place restrictions which prohibit civil society from functioning, and the authorities operate an exit ban list which prevents citizens of Turkmenistan from leaving the country.

What are the difficulties you encounter in the field when trying to implement your projects?

Governments in Central Asia are distrustful of independent civil society and do not like criticism: decision making and governance continue to reflect aspects of the Soviet legacy in which criticism and free thinking were not allowed. This contrasts with the mission of OSF, which aims to foster critical thinking societies who hold their governments to account. Therefore governments have at times sought to curtail or restrict our activities or those of our grantees.

Moreover, in Central Asia there is a lack of capacity both in civil society and (with the possible exception of Kazakhstan) in government – something which has not been helped by chronic underinvestment in the education sector. Other than our scholarships, we have supported pilot projects fostering early childhood development (including pre-school learning) to give children a head-start. But there are limits to what a private foundation can do in a region where there is little investment by governments and growing youth populations. In terms of our policy and operational work, many of our projects seek to build capacity of local organisations to effect change. For example, we deliver training to partners on how to advocate and deliver messages at a national and international level and to professional organisations such as journalists and lawyers.

What is one of the most important recent achievements of the Open Society Foundations in this region?

It is difficult to pinpoint or prioritise a single achievement given the number of activities we are engaged in. Getting Kazakhstan to recognise—and implement—the concept of juvenile criminal justice system was one notable achievement; establishing day care centers in Tajikistan for pre-school children another. In the public health sphere, recently our Kyrgyz and Tajik foundations successfully pushed for the government to incorporate a specific curriculum for nurses on palliative care. This year, following the discovery that U.S. payments and contracts connected to the Manas airbase in Kyrgyzstan have served the private interests of powerful elites OSF colleagues in Washington and Kyrgyzstan persuaded the Kyrgyz government to set up an oversight body including civil society experts to monitor payments related to the base, as well as set up a fund within the state budget so the public can see how the money is spent.

Does the EU strategy towards Central Asia have a positive impact on society in the region?

If we look at the EU Strategy on Central Asia, on paper it says all the right things about the importance of human rights and good governance as one of seven priority areas for action. However, in practice the EU collectively as well as individual European governments tend to favour reaching bilateral agreements with partner countries, rather than taking a stronger negotiating stance premised on asking partners to improve their records on human rights, rule of law, and democracy through instigating reforms, as the EU asks accession and neighbouring countries to do.

The EU has established annual human rights dialogues with all the countries, but they are operating at a technical level, divorced from high level political dialogue. It is not clear that closer relations are linked to progress made through these dialogues. The EU has also launched a regional rule of law initiative for the region – which has laudable aims – but it is discussed behind closed doors and so far is not well known beyond government circles. Like in other regions, the EU also has a problem with visibility and communicating its strategy. The architecture of policy and financial support is overly complex with seven regional political priorities, three regional assistance priorities, three flagship initiatives, three country-based assistance priorities, many of which overlap or do not map clearly on to one another. It is therefore difficult for beneficiary governments and civil society organizations to understand or convey to the broader population what the EU's vision is and what it is trying to achieve.

For more information on Central Asian programs: <http://www.soros.org/regions/asia>

Amnesty International and the EU Interview with Natacha Kazatchkine



Natacha Kazatchkine joined the European office of Amnesty International in Brussels in October 2005 and currently she is the Senior Executive Officer at the European Institutions Office. She is responsible for the organisation's lobby and advocacy on EU policies in the field Justice and Home Affairs and Human Rights, covering topics such as judicial cooperation in criminal matters, counter- terrorism, internal human rights policies and discrimination.

What are the key areas of interest, regarding the defence of human rights, in which Amnesty International and the EU cooperate?

Working on human rights can potentially cover all EU policy areas. While we make strategic choices to both promote our priorities and accommodate the EU's agenda, Amnesty International's position is unique in that we work on human rights generally. As such, we cover a wide range of areas, from EU's cooperation with third countries to the EU's institutional developments.

In relation to the EU's foreign policy, we are currently focusing on the developments in Middle East and North Africa, including monitoring the arms trade with countries in that region. Another area of our work concerns economic, social and cultural rights, focusing on the discrimination faced by Roma people in Europe in accessing their right to housing and education for example, and the issue of corporate accountability of companies.

In the asylum and migration field there is a particular emphasis on the treatment of migrants arriving in Europe, and we also work on strengthening EU asylum law. I work on cross-cutting human rights issues such as discrimination, as well as justice and security issues, looking for instance at the new directive on access to lawyers or the ongoing lack of accountability for the abuses committed in Europe in the name of the US-led so-called "war on terror".

On which projects are you currently collaborating on with the EU?

There are many issues that Amnesty International is actively involved with the EU institutions on, which include EU's strategy on social inclusion of the Roma and accountability for member states' responsibilities in the CIA rendition and secret detention programmes, which involved torture, unlawful detention and other human rights violations.

Can you give us an example in which cooperating with the EU had a positive and palpable result "in the field"?

The European Roma Policy Coalition (ERPC) is an informal alliance of non-governmental organisations (of which Amnesty International is a member) set up in 2008 to address the long-standing absence of effective measures at EU-level to tackle the racism, exclusion and human rights violations faced by many of the ten million Roma people who live in EU countries.

The ERPC challenges widespread stereotypes and demands effective change from decision-makers, and the campaign gained momentum in July 2010, when in reaction to developments in France, the European Commission committed itself to developing a Framework for Roma Integration Strategies, which was presented in April 2011 and endorsed by the EU Council in June.

It is a great achievement to have contributed to

raising Roma issues high on the political agenda and to secure the commitment, albeit limited, for change. We have seen the reflection of some of our calls in the final framework. We have also become recognised as a voice in civil society on Roma issues for European institutions and Member States. In fact the ERPC was recently nominated for “campaign of the year” by the European Public Affairs Awards 2011.

When you evaluate your strategies do you think in terms of outputs and inputs?

Amnesty International evaluates their work regularly by looking at both our outputs (in terms of lobbying, reports or campaigning actions), but more importantly what impact our work has, from a focus on our accountability to the individual victims, survivors and human rights defenders with whom and on whose behalf we work.

Do you consider that there is a lack of political momentum on the part of the EU concerning specific cases of human rights abuses?

Yes and this concerns not only specific cases like the rights of migrants or the hate crimes against Roma, it is a general lack of political will to give the EU a stronger role in addressing domestic human rights issues. Following all the publicity around the EU Charter on Fundamental Rights when the Lisbon Treaty came into force, the EU is now keen to dispel any “misunderstanding” that it has any general competence to act on human rights internally.

This is in sharp contrast with its message on human rights to the rest of the world and its monitoring of candidate countries in particular. Regarding third countries, whilst the rhetoric is often there, the lack of political momentum to ensure that human rights are firmly a priority in dealing with third countries is a major problem.

At the European level, which are the main concerns in regard to human rights violations?

Our main concern is that the EU is failing to prevent and redress human rights violations occurring in Europe! There are many examples, for instance, the Council has blocked the adoption of a new directive to fight discrimination, arguing that it will imply too many costs and reforms at national level. The Commission and Council are continually refusing to openly discuss the issue of secret CIA prisons in Lithuania, Poland and Romania.

The EU is still failing to amend EU regulations to ensure that no asylum seeker is ever transferred to a country where he will face torture or inhuman treatment. Amnesty International calls on the EU to observe all the various human rights laws and guidelines to which it has committed itself over the years, and to pursue robustly any member states which fail to adhere to their own national obligations.

For more information please visit:
<http://www.amnesty.eu/en/home/>



What it takes to be a humanitarian aid worker

After attending the AidEx event in October, which saw professionals from across the humanitarian aid industry and suppliers from a wide range of sectors come together, I felt inspired to find out more. Not necessarily about this field in general but about what it takes to be a humanitarian aid worker. In the aftermath of natural and man-made disasters, humanitarian aid workers intervene and become the people we rely on to help us in our hour of need.

First of all, let's dwell a little on the principles that guide their actions. Usually, you'll find humanitarian aid workers in developing countries helping not only with short term-relief but also in disaster prevention and reconstruction operations. The European Consensus, designed to coordinate the response to humanitarian crises, was adopted by the European Union in an attempt to create a common front regarding humanitarian aid. I believe these principles represent the starting point for many NGOs. Without going into too many details, it is useful to mention them: the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence. These should be the backbone of any humanitarian aid operation and the guidelines that humanitarian workers should follow. One of the most common mistakes made in this field relates to some people's confusion between the work of humanitarians and politicians. Ideology is expected to play a part in the motivation of aid workers, however this doesn't usually interfere with their job. This kind of misunderstanding damages the humanitarian space and thus endangers the safety and security of humanitarian organisations and their workers. Therefore, the main concern of humanitarian aid workers, obviously apart from providing help to those in need, is to translate the above principles into practice.

Secondly, one might question the reasoning behind a person's aspiration to become an aid worker. I'm sure there are as many motivations as there are workers. However, it is hard to pinpoint them without generalizing and losing the essence. Therefore, some of the generalizations limit themselves to: "they are doing it for the greater good" or "they feel self-gratification when they help people". I was once told that employers sometimes ask the applicants, "What are you running from?" This can be a profound question. Hence, in my opinion, it is safe to say that there are many motivations that could lead a person to work in this field. Moreover, it is very important to match your desire to help people with a programme that offers the type of work you are truly interested in. Some people start by doing volunteer work locally and then decide to use their experience in helping countries in need.

Thirdly, motivation and drive are of course significant, but as in any other career it is experience that plays a key role. However, the 'you can't get a job without experience and you can't get experience without a job' paradox crops up. This only means that you have to start from the ground up, by working as a volunteer or intern. Furthermore, experience gives you the opportunity to network and build a contact list that is very useful in this field. Humanitarian workers rely a great deal on each other and they need to have trustworthy people around them in high risk situations. What is more, a growing trend in the humanitarian aid field is the desire to start the process of standardization and professionalization. This process raises some concerns in the community regarding the likeliness that this could provoke elitism by limiting the possibilities of Eastern European humanitarian workers.

To sum up, humanitarian aid workers are a source of inspiration and should make us aspire to be better and help victims of forgotten crises.

By Cosmina Marian



AGENDA



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1 ▶ October 4 – January 15, Eurotopia

Eurotopia is a major international arts festival held every two years to celebrate one country's cultural heritage: music, visual arts: cinema, theatre, dance, literature, architecture, design, fashion, gastronomie etc. For its 23rd festival, Eurotopia takes you to Brazil.

<http://europalia.be>

2 ▶ November 11 – January 8, Poland in focus: Roman Polanski

Presented in Poland, London, São Paulo, and at the Berlinale, this exhibition illustrates the career of the great Polish film-maker through photographs of the actor and director in full action, archive footage from collections held by his friends and posters from the Lodz Film Museum.

<http://www.bozar.be>

3 ▶ November 15, Brussels Station Festival

To mark the opening of "Magic Mirrors" at Tour & Taxis on 20 May 2011, N78 asbl is organising "Brussels Station - North", an event featuring musicians from different provinces around Belgium. The aim of "Brussels Station" is to gather all of these talents, and what better place to do it than Brussels, the country's central location for this new concept: at each festival, artists from a specific province in Belgium will be performing.

<http://www.magicmirrors.com>

4 ▶ November 17-19, Brussels Innova

Discover the International Fair for Energy Innovations where researchers, experts and investors meet to talk about energy. The aim: deal with energy and climate through innovation. All interesting novelties are shown and explained during this fair.

<http://www.brussels-innova.be>

5 ▶ November 21, Concert "Tribute to Queen"

To commemorate this year's twentieth anniversary of the death of the charismatic singer Freddie Mercury, the cellist Damien Jarry and the pianist Thomas Jarry will pay tribute to the illustrious group by interpreting their greatest hits.

<http://www.bozar.be>

6 ▶ November 25-26, Brussels International Boogie Woogie Festival

For this 11th edition, for the very first time, a special rock 'n roll piano evening on Friday, and a tribute to Fats Domino by Peter Welch with Jimmy Moliere, Fats Domino's guitar player. On Saturday, a bunch of virtuoso pianists, and the great singer Alexia Waku who will offer a tribute to Bessie Smith, the empress of Blues, accompanied in a boogie woogie style quite different from the original recordings.

<http://www.88boogie.com>