

Who Are We Really “Saving”?



A lifelong journey that started 12 years ago and is still ongoing with several pauses and breaks. A journey that guided me to three continents and six different countries around the world. A continuous learning experience of different cultures and communities, of so many traditions, flavors, and colors.

Working for people in need, trying to alleviate suffering, making every possible effort to improve living conditions and make people’s lives a little better, more decent, more humane. Because what I have experienced is that life itself often loses its very humanity, and for many is just constant suffering and endless degradation.

And what is my role? What can I do in the face of the atrocities and extreme violence inflicted on human beings, both physical and psychological? How can I really be helpful, if I ever can be? Is the presence of humanitarian agencies and my role as a humanitarian worker sufficient enough to make a difference, to change the lives of people in need, of our potential beneficiaries?

This has been a constant question possessing me throughout all these years of humanitarian action around the world. It is an ethical dilemma as well; should I continue with this work? Am I on the right track? Is there any meaning in what I am doing?

So many stories and memories from people I have met, who I talked to and tried to help. So many images from people traumatised psychologically, wounded physically, who trusted me, felt comfortable, and managed to open up and share something intimate. So many stories of horror and terror, of extreme violence and lack of freedom, suppression of human rights and deprivation of basic needs.

Thousands of refugees and migrants fleeing the war in Somalia, misery in Ethiopia, crossing the Gulf of Aden, landing on the shores of Yemen, residing in camps under precarious conditions. The endless cycle of sexual abuse and extreme violence in Congo during an atrocious war that seems to have no end. The lack of freedom and violation of the human rights of millions of Palestinians in West Bank, and Kashmiris in Indian-administered Kashmir.

However, I cannot forget the hope that endures, despite the vicious cycles of repetition and very few chances for a better life. I cannot forget the strength and power of the people I have met, the resilience and courage to go on and strive for a brighter future.

This became the greatest learning experience that followed me over the years, and if I am bold enough, I would rather say it has been a life changing experience. When I decided to become a humanitarian worker, I believed that I could save others. I believed that I could save the world. This is already a good enough reason to start with, among other more selfish reasons like travel, curiosity, and self-improvement. But what I realized later on, is that I ultimately saved myself.

George Kanaris was born in Greece and studied psychology in Athens and Paris. He has worked as a mental health specialist with “Médecins sans Frontières” (MSF) in Yemen, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kashmir, and Palestine, and with the “International Committee of the Red Cross” (ICRC) in Uganda and Lebanon. He has been working as welfare service coordinator with Solidarity Now, responding to the refugee crisis in Greece. He currently coordinates the MSF Urban Spaces Project in Athens.