

# Rescue and Resistance in the Med: An Interview with Caroline Abu Sa'Da, General Director of SOS MEDITERRANEE Suisse

London, 10 September 2018

Juliano Fiori

Head of Studies (Humanitarian Affairs), Save the Children; [j.fiori@savethechildren.org.uk](mailto:j.fiori@savethechildren.org.uk)

## Abstract

In this interview, Caroline Abu Sa'Da, General Director of SOS MEDITERRANEE Suisse, discusses search-and-rescue operations in the Mediterranean Sea, in particular those conducted by her organisation. She explains that as a European citizen movement, SOS MEDITERRANEE has adopted a hybrid and politicised approach, which represents a new kind of humanitarian engagement. And she reflects on the challenges of protecting and supporting those crossing the Mediterranean.

**Keywords:** European citizen movement, migration crisis; political engagement, refugee protection regime, search-and-rescue

Since 2015, more than one and a half million people have traversed the Mediterranean, seeking asylum in Europe. The EU has been negotiating their screening and resettlement outside of Europe. European governments have closed some ports and borders to them. And neofascist groups from across Europe have rallied on the ground and online to prevent their entry. Thousands have died at sea.

Multinational NGOs like Médecins Sans Frontières and Save the Children have carried out search-and-rescue missions. But it is citizen movements that have been at the forefront of the emergency response. Similarly inspired by cosmopolitan ideals, these groups tend to use more political language than conventional NGOs, presenting their relief activities as a form of direct resistance to nationalist politics and xenophobia. As liberal humanitarianism is challenged in its European heartland, they are developing – through practice – a new model of humanitarian engagement.

SOS MEDITERRANEE is an ad hoc citizen initiative founded in 2015 to prevent the death of people crossing the Med. Caroline Abu Sa'Da is General Director of its Swiss branch.

**Juliano Fiori:** SOS is very much a product of contemporary Europe. It's a civic response to refugees and

migrants in the Med but also to nationalistic politics, or to the return of nationalist movements to the forefront of European politics. How, then, does SOS differ from European humanitarian NGOs founded in past decades?

**Caroline Abu Sa'Da:** SOS is a European citizen movement. Besides our search-and-rescue activities, we aim to give to the greatest number of people access to information – facts – on the situation in the Mediterranean, so that they at least are able to form their own judgement on it. They can then decide whether they have a responsibility. Definitely the need is there.

After eleven years with MSF, it was really this kind of political and social engagement that interested me. SOS is a 'hydroponic NGO', if I may put it like that – nourished from below. Working with the organisation in Switzerland is particularly interesting, given that the country is not very open-minded on migration. It has really been a challenge to see how exactly we can engage with and mobilise people.

SOS was not conceived as something to exist forever. It is an ad hoc initiative, which will stop as soon as there is an institutionalised, legal way for people to cross the Mediterranean to seek asylum without drowning. So it's really not built as an NGO. It's a gathering of people from

different backgrounds who are willing to work together for a very specific reason, and it will be dismantled as soon as the political answer is considered satisfactory, even if that takes a while.

**JF:** SOS might, then, be considered part of a new movement in emergency response, which includes Alarm Phone, Sea Watch and Open Arms. But its operational approach bears some similarity to that of older humanitarian NGOs. Indeed, it works closely with Médecins Sans Frontières...

**CAS:** Yes, we are in touch with Open Arms, Sea Watch and so on, but SOS sits somewhere between citizen activism and humanitarian work. Other search-and-rescue groups, particularly those in Germany, are much more involved in discussing asylum systems in Europe, while our focus is rescue and testimony.

Most of the time, we are in reactive mode; it is an emergency mission but of a different kind. Right before leaving MSF for SOS, I was Head of Mission for Syria and Iraq, overseeing operations in Mosul. The level of intensity since I started with SOS is the same. But SOS is smaller. The team on board the Aquarius [the rescue ship operated by SOS and MSF] never includes more than fifteen people and our budget is only 4 million euros. It is mobilisation on land, rather than operational issues at sea, that take most time.

**JF:** How has SOS positioned itself politically in relation to European governments and institutions that have sought to prevent people crossing the Mediterranean to Europe?

**CAS:** What I thought was interesting about SOS when I joined was how it provided an opportunity for people, particularly young people, to engage politically on issues of migration but outside of political parties. We have had a lot of people aged 20–35, who have been willing to get involved because they don't identify with political parties on this topic, they want to do something about it and they can't necessarily join NGOs like MSF because they don't have professional experience in humanitarian work. They specifically want to do something in Europe rather than going to Bangladesh or Syria or Iraq. It is really this idea of dealing with a European issue, in Europe, in a way that might bring about political change, without being embedded in a political party.

This is a new type of political engagement and politics – different to that which inspired previous generations of humanitarian workers. SOS acknowledges the fact that dealing with migration today in Europe is extremely political. It points to existing maritime law and international humanitarian law to remind states of their obligations. And what's really interesting since the end of June is that we have ended up in a situation in which

rogue European states are deliberately throwing the law to the dogs. Now we know exactly what's going on in Libya. We know that European states are responsible for *refoulement*, sending people back to torture, rape and detention in Libya. This is completely unlawful but European institutions are endorsing it. So SOS says: 'No! Actually, according to international law, these are the obligations of states.' It's kind of a vigilante of the Mediterranean.

Right now, my problem with NGOs like MSF and Save the Children and Oxfam is not what they do out in the field. It is that their staff generally don't act as citizens. They go out to Uganda or DRC or whatever but they don't engage with politics in their own home countries. Perhaps this is a result of the way NGO workers see themselves. My PhD research was on 'NGO-isation' in Palestine, which has had a depoliticising effect. SOS is an emergency initiative that nonetheless provides opportunity for people who seek to engage politically.

**JF:** The arrival of more than one and a half million refugees and migrants on the shores of Europe since 2015 has tested the idea of a 'humanitarian Europe'. It has tested the self-identity of many Europeans. To what extent do these younger activists see their political engagement as part of a struggle against ethno-nationalisms to define European identity?

**CAS:** Switzerland is interesting in this regard. During the Yugoslav War, a lot of people – hundreds of thousands – came to Switzerland seeking asylum. Many of them were later granted Swiss nationality. They were well integrated. Nothing like that has happened since in Switzerland. Those born after the mid 1990s – about half of the people working for SOS in Switzerland today – have never seen these supposedly 'European principles' in action. So for them, it's more about defining the kind of society in which they actually want to live.

Although Switzerland has always had an ambiguous and difficult relationship with the EU, the Swiss see themselves as defending European values and, particularly, humanitarian law. But Swiss neutrality has a mixed legacy. Swiss youths today question whether their country's supposed neutrality is a denial of responsibility. Where does neutrality end and cowardice start? So now they say: 'No, we're not going to stand by and watch people suffering without getting involved. We're not going to allow our identity to be defined by others who would deny these people's rights.'

**JF:** To what extent do these 'others' – presumably opponents of search-and-rescue missions in the Med – pose direct challenges to the work SOS is doing?

**CAS:** The Defend Europe people actually aren't much of a burden. They organise a demonstration every time we

arrive somewhere, and they are extremely active on social networks – much more so than we are, that's for sure. When we publish something on Facebook or Twitter, we end up with thousands of comments from them. I've gone from working with MSF in highly insecure environments, where there are IEDs and shootouts, to receiving death threats on social media. It's not that easy to handle and it can take a toll on morale. But these people aren't really an operational impediment.

The much bigger problem is that states and the EU are ignoring conventions and laws. The Dublin Regulation – for what it's worth – is being undermined. It is now, in Europe, that the refugee protection regime is being buried. In June [2018], the Aquarius, carrying 630 people to Europe, was refused entry to Italian ports. France has also prevented people from disembarking from ships docked at its ports. The deals that were made with Libya

and Turkey [for the return of migrants and refugees] have caused a domino effect. Other countries are increasingly turning refugees away. And UNHCR doesn't seem prepared to stand against this. There's no solidarity. Solidarity and burden-sharing and protection are dead.

**JF:** If this is the case, if we are witnessing the death of the international protection regime that sets the terms for responses to forced displacement, what should be the response of those who support liberal humanitarian institutions?

**CAS:** Probably the only response currently possible is to fight back, to try to maintain the international protection regime – to campaign for humane and dignified responses to forced displacement in a broad citizen movement that might force states, including via elections, to stick to their responsibilities.