



It is great to be here; I cannot imagine a place that is further, geographically and emotionally, from where I live and work. Sometimes this distance is very useful.

I'm here to talk about the value of art at times of war and political turmoil. And, I will do so, but please allow me to arrive at this point after I take you into a small detour. I will start by talking about Action for Hope, the organization that I recently founded with a group of other people. A simple "action" I, and a group of friends, took in November 2012, gave me and many other people a little bit of "hope". The action was a spontaneously organized solidarity visit to a Syrian refugee camp in Turkey. There, we saw how people who fled the bombing of the Syrian regime, because at that time there was no ISIS, were broken, lost, and distressed to an extent that no one can imagine. We also saw what we, a group of 17 artists and cultural operators, can do to help them in just a few days. It was like magic: teenage boys and girls regaining the glitter in the eyes after a few sessions of acting or singing training, mothers who were mostly silent before, were laughing at their children, and even the men, hardened by all the atrocities they witnessed, were looking at what was happening with teary eyes. Emotions were running freely in the air. We left, but left behind a very small glimpse of hope. A few months after this visit, we launched a pilot program called Action for Hope, under the umbrella of Culture Resource, the organization I was the director of for 10 years.

Action for Hope is based on two assumptions:

- 1- Communities that are subjected to very difficult conditions resulting from war, forced displacement, extreme poverty, or natural disasters, do not only lose their material belongings such as land, homes, clothes, furniture and money, but they also lose a lot of other less concrete things. They lose the social fabric that used to connect them to others; relatives, neighbors and friends. They lose the meanings and feelings that came from and surrounded all their material belongings. While it is possible, and even easy, to compensate them for the material things they have lost, it is very difficult to get them to regain the unquestionable security that normal people living normal lives have in crossing from one day to another.

In very difficult cases, like in the case of Syrian refugees, the density and frequency of horrors are just impossible to perceive or talk about. What is more difficult for them, is that other people around them, in host countries, and all around the world, are living normal lives and hardly know of or care about their tragedy. All this: the



disorientation caused by moving to unknown places, the inability to tell others about what they have seen and felt, the feelings of betrayal and abandonment incited by the little attention and empathy they get from others, and the suppression of all these feelings, result in a mixture of anxiety, anger, introversion, and eventually: despair.

2- The second assumption is that in situations like the one I have just described, artists can do what they are best at, and what is most needed: evoke emotions and turn them into stories and conversations. In other words: help people talk about and analyze experiences, even the most painful ones. The emotional and intellectual space provided by art, as in a poem, song, film, theatre piece or photograph, provides a much needed opportunity for individuals to express their long suppressed feelings of anger and sadness, to share them with others, and gives communities the opportunity to analyze situations collectively and to conduct discussions and eventually come up with solutions to some problems. The notion that people living through a major crisis caused by war need shelter, food, clothes and medicine is right, but the notion that this is **all** what they need is wrong.

Presenting artistic work within distressed communities is crucial as it preserves a space for imagination and criticism in an environment that regards these two essential human traits as luxuries. Organizing concerts, theatre performances and other artistic activities within refugee camps and slum areas allows the communities to have a live contact with creativity, and to meet, think, laugh and cry together. These become like electric charges of vitality and dynamism.

More important is giving the individuals in these communities, especially the artistically talented ones, the tools that enable them to produce artistic work, thus being able to produce their own electricity. The empowerment that comes from the ability to sing, write a play, paint or make a film, is incomparable with any other kind of empowerment, perhaps except for that given by good education. The act of creating a work of art involves many things: criticism, analysis, reflection, imagination, and visibility to others on top of all this.

So, because of these two things: the suppressed grievances of distressed people, and the ability of art to turn this into positive power, Action for Hope was created. We worked for two years under the umbrella of Culture Resource, then became fully independent earlier this year. Our programs include:



1- Cultural Relief Convoys: these are groups of 15 to 20 artists, doctors, social workers and psychiatrists who work in a distressed community for 2 weeks, giving and organizing a variety of services and activities, from arts training to setting up a temporary medical clinic, and from organizing cooking competitions to installing internet connectivity.

2-Advanced Training in the Arts: During the cultural relief convoys we select some of the most artistically talented older children and youth between 12 and 22 years and offer them a more advanced training program in theatre, video or photography.

3-Music School: We started a music school for Syrians in Lebanon in August 2015 for a pilot phase for 5 months. We are working to launch the school as a 2-year program as of March 2016.

4- Scholarships in the Arts: We recently announced a scholarship scheme to allow young Syrians who want to pursue academic study in the arts to join Lebanese public universities. The program also offers scholarships to those who want to go through long-term professional training in the arts.

5- Creative Literacy: This is a new concept we are introducing this year. It starts with literacy training for illiterate women in refugee camps, then allowing them to use their newly acquired reading and writing skills creatively to either become story-tellers or creative writers.

6- Cooking and Nutrition (2016): Next year, we hope to launch a new program that aims at preserving, documenting and celebrating the wonderful traditional Syrian cuisine as part of Syria's cultural heritage. The program also aims at raising awareness about good nutrition and exploring ways to adapt traditional cuisine to the conditions in refugee camps.

Our programs now focus on Syrian refugee communities in Lebanon and Jordan where we are starting to work next week. We hope to be able to extend our reach to Turkey and Iraq in 2017 and beyond. We worked in Egypt in 2013 but had to stop our work there because of the legal and political risks and we hope that we will be able to resume our work there in the future.

At the beginning of this talk, I promised to say something about the value of art in crisis situations, so here you are finally:



As a result of this work, which started with a simple act of solidarity 3 years ago, I came to recognize and be able to articulate 7 things, you can call them functions or roles, that art and artists can do in situations of crisis and violent turmoil. These are:

1- Healing: As part of the immediate relief required for people who were subjected to war and violence, artistic activities such as creative writing, story-telling, acting, songwriting, painting and film-making, can help individuals and communities deal with the post trauma stress disorders, and with the feelings of betrayal and isolation through the sharing of stories and reflecting on them.

2- Problem solving through creative thinking: On the medium and long term, artistic training programs teach participants how to find solutions to problems by releasing their imagination and thinking “out of the box”. This capacity is especially needed by the young people who find themselves in new and difficult situations and who are required by their families to “sort things out”.

3- Reconstructing the social fabric/Building affinity with others: displaced people find themselves living with strangers and this causes a lot of anxiety and even hostility. Cultural work can help people find what they share with others from the same country or from other countries and to express and celebrate these newly found affinities.

4- Stimulating change: Art provides a relatively safe space for criticism and analysis of difficult facts. In a play or a film, people can express views and ideas that are difficult to express in a “real” discussion. Although sometimes controversial, the space provided by art is the safest way to conduct dialogue among opponents. With a bit of time, and a good deal of freedom, this mode of dialogue can help them find and use peaceful tools to change the unacceptable reasons and consequences of war and displacement.

5- Reclaiming and preserving cultural identity: Forced displacement into new countries imposes on the displaced people severe conditions that limit their ability to “be what they used to be”. This means gradually abandoning their life style, their language or dialect, their cuisine, their music, etc. Artistic activities allow them to remember and practice some of the most substantial elements of their cultural identity.

6- Learning: the creation of art involves research, documentation and information gathering, as well as sharing this information with others. In many cases it also involves examining and verifying information, and learning new analytical skills. This educational



element of artistic work is very important, especially in situations where regular education is lacking or inadequate.

7- Adding to the cultural capital: From the perspective of a cultural activist, this is perhaps the most important function of art and artists: to create more art and to generate more artists. The previous 6 points testify to the essentiality of art to any society, not just the societies that are in crisis. I would argue that our societies would not have the capacity to progress, to become productive, and become just and free, without giving a central importance to artistic creativity in all aspects of life. In Arab countries, we have a huge deficit in our cultural capital; we just do not have enough artists to meet the demands of social change. The reasons are clear: educational systems, political practices, laws and social norms are not conducive to addressing this deficit, on the contrary.

This is sometimes made worse by the cultural policies of some European countries that seek to support Arab artists and cultural organizations. For the most part, these policies favor work that they can understand and assimilate with, work that uses an “international” arts language and that can be safely presented to European audiences. This contributes to creating a grading system in the arts that looks down on art and artists that do not meet European “artistic quality” standards. Alternatively, some European agencies support artistic work that carries or advocates political messages they believe in, and/or believe are needed by our societies, something that reminds Europe of the Eastern block “dissident art”. Unfortunately, both approaches to supporting artistic work in our region overlook the long-term and difficult, even painful, cultural development processes that are required in any society so that it develops and respects artistic quality standards that are relevant and sustainable, and progressive and humane social values.

Inside Europe itself, where you have very strong systems for supporting artistic creativity, I wonder if such systems are designed to cater for the needs of artists coming from refugee communities. Encouraging more talented people from refugee communities to become artists would enrich your cultural scenes with new ideas, sounds, imagery and feelings, would help both sides understand and negotiate differences, and would undoubtedly contribute to the creative economies of the host countries.

We all need more artists!



Talk by Basma El Hussein on 4 November 2015 at the Conference: To the Core – The Value of Art and Culture – on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the Norwegian National Arts Council – Harstad, Norway.

