

Moving Syrians moving the World

The 4-year civil war in Syria has caused the displacement of 6.5 million civilians internally and over 3 million into neighboring countries and beyond. Many have told their stories through the eyes of journalists and some even with their own words, but the rest do not have a voice in their home country nor in their current location or community.

In order to change this, a group of volunteers have created the participatory photography project Syria On The Move that aims to reconnect Syrians in exile with each other and to facilitate dialogue and understanding between them and their new host communities. As a joint Syrian-German initiative, the project focuses mainly on refugees in or on their way to Europe.

Syria On The Move

Anja Pietsch is a documentary photographer based in Berlin and also one of the co-founders of SocialVisions, the initiative that will be launching Syria On The Move in December 2015.

Anja's relationship to Syria started when she first went there in 2010 to work for Syria Today in order to cover the uprising, and later the displacement of Syrians into Lebanon and Turkey. During her time in Syria, she started offering participatory photography courses in Damascus for Syrian women, and Palestinian and Iraqi refugee women.

SocialVisions is a non-profit organization that grew out of these community art projects in Syria. The organization focuses on helping people communicate through visual art. They promote co-operation and inter-cultural exchange between Germany, the Middle East and North Africa. Many of their former projects have focused on the individual, and particularly women, in the Middle East and North Africa. Their newest project aims at helping document the journeys and new lives of the Syrian refugees, and give voices and agency to individuals.

"Refugees are so often described in the media as these passive victims. Here is a dilemma. Humanitarian agencies want to raise money and people give money when there is an emergency. That's why they put a crying child on their posters. At the same time, for the people looking it automatically prompts this image of a passive, helpless, speechless human being we have to support whom will rely on us," Anja points out.

How it works

Syria on the Move is a project that allows displaced Syrians to post pictures of themselves or their new surroundings on an online platform.

"We don't see the people as resources. And that is why it is important for them to provide pictures of themselves. So it is not someone that looks at them, it is them too in these pictures," Anja explains.

In order to encourage participation, the online platform allows for anonymity. In addition, the organization promises to not collect email or contact information.

Just as with their previous project *Blasti*, the idea is to post a photo with a short comment and add the location. This way the photos and thus the individual stories will be placed on a map, so other participants can see what countries other Syrians are in at the time and what their lives are like on the way and in their new home countries.

The project also hosts workshops for young Syrian refugees. As opposed to the organization's previous projects, this one does not focus on women "The gender is not so important in this case, because it changes the issue," Anja says, "we don't want to exclude men, because refugees are already excluded from so many things," she continues. In order to encourage women to apply, SocialVisions offers free child care during workshops.

These workshops allow for participants to learn to use professional cameras and to learn the basics of photography. Even though artistic development is encouraged, SocialVisions is less focused on the artistic expression and more focused on providing the young refugees with a safe space and an opportunity for self-development.

As regards the assignments, Anja says they do not ask for anything specific. "We will give them certain prompts, for instance, "take a picture of something that you took with you", "take a picture of a place that reminds you of Syria", "take a picture of a place you like right now", "take a picture of something you don't like", "take a picture of how you feel today,"" she illustrates.

Anja explains that "typically professional photographers are more focused on the results and humanitarian aid workers or social workers are more focused on the process. I would say that for us it is both."

This does not mean, however, that the quality of the photos is irrelevant, because after the workshops there will be public exhibitions showcasing the results. In addition, a final workshop showcasing all the results will be held in Frankfurt. These exhibitions are important, because they make the work and stories of Syrian refugees visible to the public and allow for young Syrians and local people to meet and talk in person.

Why Syrians and not all refugees?

"The project itself is a Syrian-German project. We wanted to start in Lebanon and in Lebanon there are only Syrian refugees," Anja explains. Since the idea for the project was developed, many more Syrians have made their way to Europe, and many are making their way to North America. This added distance means it requires more effort to connect and rebuild communities.

"Syrian civilians don't have the platform or the opportunity to speak out. They are not represented. You either have the regime or opposition, but where are the Syrian civilians?" asks Anja. Due to the large amount of Syrians who have been forced to flee their country, only some get to tell their stories.

“They are completely ignored, unheard and they don’t have any opportunity to talk about their visions or needs wherever they are, either Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey or now in Europe,” Anja adds.

The aim of the project is to give a voice and agency to individual Syrian refugees through photography. This is done by inviting Syrian refugees to contribute their own images and views, by letting them tell their own stories and experiences through images. Syria On The Move hopes to challenge existing stereotypes and phobias, facilitate dialogue, and contribute to an active European civil society.

Difficult to get funding

Due to the lack of institutional funding, the organization relies on donations and volunteer work. Even the cameras are donated by other projects and photographers themselves.

Anja believes the reason is that officials in Germany do not currently view this kind of project as a priority and therefore are not interested in offering aid. “For us it is more a diaspora project. We want to work with Syrians in different countries, but for the project implementation we need local money. For the local money, of course, they are not interested in this rebuilding of Syrian communities. They are more interested, for instance, in integration,” says Anja.

Perhaps after the project has produced positive results, it will be possible to get institutional funding for the future.

Brainstorming and first workshop

There will be a brain-storming session in Berlin on November 28, open to the public, during which the design of the internet platform will be discussed. The first two-week intensive photography workshop is scheduled to start in December in Potsdam, Germany. This first German workshop will be working with young Syrian refugees from Brandenburg and Potsdam.

Anja hopes that in the end the participants will be divided evenly, fifty per cent women and fifty per cent men, even though currently more men have signed up. There are some photography clubs in Potsdam that participants are encouraged to join after the workshop in order to further their skills.

The project will also host workshops for Syrian refugees in Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and Bulgaria. The exhibitions will be announced at a later date.