



## **Esra Özşüer, Maya Vakfı, Founder President**

Thank you Peggy for holding my hand  
Welcome my very respected guests and  
Thank you Synergos for this opportunity,

I believe that like minds and kindred souls attract one another and their paths cross one way or another. I always believe that doors open and brings me the right people at the right time. Since the very beginning, I had complete trust in this process. The biggest social barrier we face in the world today is trust. Actually it is that trust what keeps me going and makes me do what I do.

Well, I used to be a business person.

Very hard working. Ambitious. Success driven and sometimes too self-consumed.

On the other hand, I am a mother of 3; and a grandmother of 2.

As you would imagine, it was hard raising a family and keeping up with business.

But people, friends, used to say that I could pull it off quite well.

You know what ? I knew, deep down inside, they all expected me to raise my kids to a certain age and return back to business.

I mean, return like hardcore.

But now, when they look at me, seeing the things that I do; thanks to god most of them support me; but some think that I am a lunatic. They think like I should have a day job.

I know it. I can sense it. I can see it in their eyes.

Seriously. It's crazy.

They simply don't get it.

They don't get why I do what I do. They don't get this is my day job.

Don't get me wrong. They are very nice people. Sophisticated, highly educated, aware of the social problems and all, but they seriously don't get it.

And I tell them.

Every time I catch a skeptical look, I tell them.

I tell them why I do this.

I tell them,,, I can not sleep.

I tell them it drives me crazy to know what's happening there, in Syria, and not being able to help enough to all those children, to those people as we should have.

I tell them, my heart sinks!

With every report I read, every news I watch, every photograph I see, every workshop I attend; my heart sinks!

Friends, the things that are happening around the situation in Syria right now are the elements of the biggest humanitarian crisis that the world has faced since the World War 2.

The figures are unbelievable.

-It's estimated that the death toll is over 400.000 since 2011.

-Some Syrian NGOs claim that its 4 hundred and 70 thousand. 55 thousand of these are children! And yet, we do not know the exact number.

-UNHCR estimates 13,5 million Syrians are in need right now.

-6.6 million Syrians have been displaced internally.

-4.9 million Syrians have fled to the neighboring countries.

-Lebanon hosts over 1 million Syrian refugees.

In 2015 Lebanon's population was merely 6.2 million. 1/6 of the whole population! Can you believe it?

Around 70 per cent of these people live below the poverty line on less than USD 3.84 per person per day.





There are no formal refugee camps and, as a result, more than a million registered Syrians live in over 1,700 communities and locations across the country, often sharing small basic lodgings with other refugee families in overcrowded conditions.

- Jordan hosts over 600,000 Syrian refugees.

Approximately 80 per cent of them live in urban areas, while more than 100,000 have found sanctuary at the camps of Za'atari and Azraq.

Many have arrived with limited means to cover even basic needs, and those who could at first rely on savings or support from host families are now increasingly in need of help.

-Iraq has also seen a growing number of Syrians arriving, hosting nearly 25,000, while in Egypt there are over 100.000 refugees in need.

Well, let's have a look at Turkey.

Turkey is officially the biggest refugee center in the whole world right now.

Turkish government claims that are approximately 300.000 refugees in Turkey coming from countries like Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq.

Moreover, an estimated %59 of all Syrian refugees live in Turkey.

By adding the non registered population, some humanitarian agencies report that the number is close to 3.5 million.

(According to UNHCR) the number of the registered Syrian refugees in Turkey is over 2.8 million.

In 10 cities there are 26 refugee camps.

However, %91 of these live outside the camps in urban areas.

(According to Turkey's official Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency, AFAD ) just over 400.000 of these refugees live in the border town of Sanliurfa.

Merely 400.000 (395 bin) live in Istanbul.

Over 390.000 live in the border town of Hatay

And another border town, Gaziantep hosts over 325.000 Syrian refugees.

%90 of these refugees are estimated to stay in Turkey for good.

The number will rise to 5 million in 10 years.

Dear friends, merely %50 of the Syrian refugees in Turkey are under 18 years of age.

(According to AFAD) between 2011 - February 2016 over 152.000 Syrian children were born in Turkey and some die in Mediterranean while trying to cross to Europe.

You remember the baby Aylan Kurdi, right?

I don't know if someone's counting the drowned children!!!????

I don't know if some organisation has the exact number on the Syrian crisis but what I know for sure is these figures are outdated already.

Day by day, the situation is getting worse and worse.

And it's consequences are getting harsher for every nation.

Even you, people from the other side of the ocean can feel it's consequences.

Because the refugee crisis have served as a catalyst for your society as well. It has challenged both ethical values, perception on human rights, loyalty to international law and the notion of democracy. Hasn't it?

Look at Northern European countries that are known for their respect to human rights and democracy.

How many refugees have they accepted?

Unfortunately this crisis will keep challenging every society, every single one of us much more in the forthcoming future.

It'll get much deeper so that we would feel more obliged to do much more.

Dear friends I am a very passionate person. That passion is my drive. Brings on meaningful change and doing my part in making this world a better place for children and youth. But it was the Syrian crisis at our doorstep in Turkey that turned my passion into a mission.





It was my teenage son Emir; a compassionate young man of 16 years old who challenged me to think about what more we could do for Syrian children in crisis. That challenge led first to the formation of the Project Lift trauma rehabilitation program and later to the formation of the Maya Foundation where I serve as Family Founder and President. As I told you earlier on after over 20 years in the corporate world, I shifted my focus completely and dedicated all my energy and soul to this essential mission.

Before I began taking action I decided that it was important to observe the real situation instead of solely relying on reported data, which often lacks the human component. In summer 2013 this led me and Emir to visit refugee camps and conduct listening tours across Turkey to better understand not only the big picture but also the individual pieces and stories that create the collective crisis.

And I am still continuing to observe first hand, as I travel in and out of Southeast Turkey, meet with international and local NGOs, and most importantly, I talk to Syrian children and their families.

I want to share today what I have learned during this time period. Share my knowledge from the ground and give you some insight to our approach.

Maya Foundation is not your typical philanthropic enterprise. We are somewhere between a Foundation and local Turkish NGO. We serve as a necessary bridge between philanthropy and Syrian families. We focus on mental health and psychosocial support, community awareness and integration of Syrian children and families. To ensure 'No Lost Generation' we support teachers, caregivers, local and international NGO workers through various trainings about trauma and try to minimize the secondary traumatization.

Our flagship program is a MHPSS program called Project Lift. Our therapeutic creative arts workshops serve as a psychosocial support modality utilizing expressive art, music, and dance movement therapy methods. Our model is focused on healing the individual through evidence based holistic and humanistic therapy and serves as a necessary bridge to education.

When building Maya foundation and throughout the work we do with Syrian refugee families I value and uphold four main principles which I would like to share with you in hopes that it will serve as guide for you on how to address this crisis as philanthropists.

## **Listen**

'Listen' is the first principle I uphold.

Syrians are left without resources, not only on the outside, but on the inside too. They are without their homes. They are without jobs. They are without passports or legal status even! They are stripped from their identities, lost their sense of belonging and even their hope.

I witnessed fear, desperation and hopelessness first hand as I listened to countless families when I visited them in the homes.

I heard one father say that the stray dogs in the neighborhood eat better than his own family; he then asked why were they valued less than stray dogs. That father wondered many nights if he could provide for the next meal.

Although the problems I hear are slightly different from one another they always have one thing in common: concern of families for the well being of their children. So I reach out and offer my hand when they need someone to hold theirs and I always listen.

I listen because I truly believe that we have to deeply understand these struggles, and the nature of this trauma and its impact not only on a collective level but also on an individual level, before we can truly be of use as philanthropists.





We say we listen, but do we really listen? Do we truly hear out their needs or wants or do we simply react based on what we think they need? I personally learned this lesson in an unforgettable way I would like to share with you.

In my story there is a very traumatized little boy. In the very long five years of his life he had already experienced the loss of his mother, fled the only home he knew to come into a foreign country where he cannot understand one word of the local language and where his kind was not always treated nicely...

One day he became very agitated and overwhelmed, he was crying so hard that he could not even form a sentence. In between his cry I was able to hear him say Dua. Dua means prayer in Turkish by the way. I wasn't sure at first but after hearing him say it couple of more times, I thought to myself if this child wants me to pray so that he can feel safe, I have to pray out loud to help. So I started with all my might to recite the most well known prayers, as his cry got louder so did my prayer. This went on for couple of more seconds and then it hit me that dua is what I heard but my brain told me what meaning to assigned to the word dua and maybe this child meant something else. By then a volunteer brought in a girl from another room who happened to be his sister and her name was dua. Little did I know, his sister who was also a participant of our program was named Dua and this little boy was calling out for his sister. That little boy thought me the importance of truly listening before responding.

## **Respond**

The second principle I uphold is 'respond'.

Acting in answer to the needs of the Syrian families is the only way to create sustainable change and this can only be achieved by a holistic approach.

I truly don't understand how can anyone let alone the experts in big international NGOs and governmental agencies cannot understand that only creating programs and initiatives such as women's economic development programs mean very little for Syrian women who can't leave home because they have no where safe to leave their children. Relying on a single component of this crisis and not only creating programs that offers a solution but also creates a real challenge for many, is mainly caused by the lack of understanding the holistic approach to humanitarian aid.

Instead of creating and implementing programs we think the Syrian should benefit from, we need to consider can these women actually benefit from these programs or do they need something else first, in place? In this case it is a safe space to leave their children.

A safe place for a traumatized refugee child does not simply constitute of four walls and a roof. I believe that as a mother of 3 and grandmother of 2, a safe place that a mother can entrust their children has to have caring and educated adults, warmth and compassion, learning and play, healing and recovery... That is the kind of place we create for Syrian families at Maya.

## **Advocate**

Another crucial principle I uphold is 'advocate'.

I believe that once we know the truth we need to make it loud and clear for everyone to pay attention to it and truly understand it. Advocacy and dialogue with decision makers simply must be part of our mission.





That is why I ;Emir and Leyla we travelled to Brussels in 2016 to present at the European Parliament and planning another one in 2018; that is why we regularly meet with country representatives of local and international NGO's and government representatives, give interviews and speak publicly about this issue.

So, it is my duty to explain over and over again to everyone that I meet that:

- ï The trauma inflicted by war is the highest level of trauma any adult or child could endure.
- ï Syrian children will not just grow out of their trauma, without proper MHPSS support and rehabilitation.
- ï Mental wellbeing of children directly affects their ability to learn.
- ï Considering that vast majority of children had either long interruptions to their schooling or had no access to education ever, it is already hard for them to integrate into the education system, adding the emotional, behavioral and cognitive effects of trauma creates a very challenging situation for a child to strive in.
- ï Without intervention, traumatized children are susceptible to becoming troubled adults and are at high risk of following a criminal path for the rest of their lives.

### **Envision:**

Last but not least principle I uphold is 'envision'.

I meet new people; I brainstorm and conceive new ideas to act in answer to the needs of the Syrian families. I envision a better future and search for the best practices to implement to bring on sustainable change. I continue to touch as many lives as possible, one child, one woman, one man at a time.

I have so many plans for Maya, we plan to expand to cover more geographical areas in Turkey to ensure that more families could benefit from our programs.

Now, Leyla, our board member and clinical director is going to tell you all about our programs in more technical and detailed way.

### Closing Remarks:

As I told you previously, one of the questions I get often is why I do what I do. In all honesty, I built this family foundation and took a great personal risk in doing so during this turbulent period in Turkey's history. The thought of just sitting along the sidelines and witnessing pain and suffering in the very world I live and raise my children and grandchildren in, is just unbearable. Because sharing, caring, giving and receiving, love, compassion, humanity and humility are the only way how I know how to free my soul.

Through this journey we've been with Emir; we met a great friend, Cenk Aydın, who has supported us with his love, knowledge, guidelines and generous contributions. He, now, is our ambassador for Maya Vakfı Foundation. Cenk is here with us today. Hmmm And Cenk would you like to say a few words?..

I have to admit, this journey has been and is still difficult, but difficult roads often lead to beautiful destinations.

How fortunate I am to have Emir as a guide in this Journey, his generous ,pure soul has given me patience, endurance and enlightenment to be able to achieve many of our dreams.

We are able to reach many children and their care takers with our programs but yet there are millions more to be reached .

Now is the moment to use the collective power in this room to be the change agents we are all capable of being. Let's envision together and commit to ensuring a better future.

We need every generous heart to hold our hands .

Thank you,



