



SAVING A LIFE WITH SHANITA

Photo-journalist Lior Sperandeo documents the hardships of Karamoja, Uganda

By Hagay Hacohen

TO GO to school, a child in Karamoja, north-eastern Uganda, must present a bag of sugar, a small broom, shoes, and school uniforms. Shantia founder Lior Sperandeo told The Jerusalem Report. The sugar is used for the morning porridge children eat. Due to ever-prolonged draughts, Karamoja and other regions of East Africa suffer from food shortages. This means children, and the adults around them, often suffer from hunger as they try to hold classes and study a subject – like English.

Sperandeo is a self-taught photo-journalist who climbed all the way up the news corporation world, from the person schlepping cables to the eye behind the camera. The Christian news channel he worked for made him an offer, create documentaries about how Israeli NGOs function during humanitarian crises.

He found himself with Israeli activists at hot spots around the world, from the 2015 Gorkha earthquake to the migrant's crisis on the Greek island of Lesbos. Where thousands currently live in transit camps waiting for their appeal to be processed.

"It was in Lesbos I began to feel an inner conflict," Sperandeo told the Post, "a boat full of people hits the shore. Some of the people

in it are busy hauling out water so they won't sink. Other people are destroying the boat so nobody could order them to leave on it. Some look up, what do they see? An army of photographers and reporters rushing towards them."

"It was then," he said, "I began to feel I don't want to tell the story of the Westerner who came for a two-week volunteering stint, I want to tell the story of the real hero. The person

who is living this crisis and is collecting the fragments of her life with bare hands."

In the 2010 film *The Bang Bang Club*, an angry black South African man tells a white photographer (Ryan Phillippe) "this is a white man's photo taken for white man's purposes."

The film is a drama-filled attempt to share the real histories of conflict reporters. Among them Greg Marinovich (whom Phillippe



Lior Sperandeo and Shanita Children

plays) and Kevin Carter.

Carter took the famous 1993 photograph from the Sudan famine which depicted a starving child and a vulture in the background. Published by The New York Times, it earned Carter a Pulitzer. Having witnessed many horrors, Carter took his own life in 1994.

Photographers, Sperandeo said, often form personal relationships with the people they take pictures of and return to conflict zones to report back on what, if anything, has changed.

Sperandeo used to bring his contacts printed photographs from his last visit. They were usually very happy to see these pictures. But every so often they would become sad because, right there, was a picture of a child who died.

When he asked why did the child died, they explained the cause was malaria. Which can be treated if one has access to Western medicine.

"This built inside of me a sort of contempt to the pornography of poverty," he shared "this Hallel-like prayer honoring aid agencies. I wanted to be on the side of the actual heroes."

It was in Uganda that the Israeli photographer met Mukatabara, who asked him to help his daughter, Shanita, to go to school.

Sperandeo had some spare money after buying an entry visa to Uganda, and gave it to him.

When he returned to Karamoja, he wondered what happened to that child and went to check.

Her father took the money and bought a goat. Shanita never saw the inside of a classroom.

In *Dead Aid*, a 2010 book by Dambisa Moyo which Sperandeo often referred to during the interview, this dynamic is explained.

Mukatabara wants his daughter to go to school, but he also has a family to feed. Buying a goat, which can offer milk over a long time, is a much more sensible choice than sending Shanita to school. It is this gap between what Westerners expect aid recipients to do, and what is actually done with this aid, that often leads to clashes.

"Aid agencies offer people condoms, for example, or mosquito nets," Sperandeo told *The Post*, "so the children take these condoms and blow them up and modify them to have make-shift soccer balls to play with. Or their parents take the nets and turn them into ropes to tie their roofs."

The aid workers look around with pleasure, all the items had been taken, ergo, the goal of sex education or preventing malaria had been reached. Time to secure more funding to get



Each sponsor can save the life of a child

more items!

However, in the lived reality of these societies, African factories which made mosquito nets went out of business because nobody would buy an item given for free. So jobs were lost, and now malaria-preventing nets are not available because they were turned into ropes.

Sperandeo described how in one case, an aid agency built a water tower hoping to offer people clean drinking water. Not realizing that in a herding culture, a free source of water would lead to people building camp. The camp would lead to human waste production. Without toilets, the water would become polluted and unsafe to drink. Which is exactly what happened.

"This is why I moved to Karamoja," he told *The Post*, "to be a part of the community and really understand how they do things. At the time, the person who translated for me was embarrassed over what Mukatabara has done and began chiding him for cheating me. I understood that money, by itself, would not solve anything."

Sperandeo decided to do things differently. He went around Karamoja collecting the needed items, a bag of sugar, a broom and the like. Then he went to a school and got the papers needed to enroll Shanita.

He then returned to Mukatabara and his wife and told them: 'I have done everything, if you send her to school, we will be partners in this project and she could study. I cannot do it for you.'

Shanita is now finishing her fifth year of school and is able to speak English.

This in a part of Uganda where 38% of girls never study in high school and one quarter are



wed before they reach adulthood for bridal money, US Aid reported in 2016.

The Karamojong people, he explained, are herders who are deeply connected to the land they live on. "They are full of resilience," he pointed out, "they might be poor by Western standards but they don't throw away food or produce a lot of waste. When asked what we can give them, they do not ask for laptops or Western high-school kids who will build huts for them – they ask for a gift which never spoils and cannot be taken from them, to teach their children, so that they will be able to help themselves."

Israeli sponsors offer 150 shekels per month and get regular reports on the progress of the children they help.

Right now, there are 250 such children. More children are on the waiting list to join the program as soon as sponsors are found.

When sponsors visit in person, Sperandeo shared, they often feel they should have done more.

"I have three laptops at home I am not using," a sponsor might say. "why didn't you ask for one? I would have given it to you."

The urgency, and the realization how little is needed to change the trajectory of a human life, is a little like the famous scene in *Schindler's List* where Liam Neeson realizes he could have sold his watch and save one more person.

"Every reader who contacts us," Sperandeo said, "will save a life." ■

Visit <https://en.shanita.org/> to learn more about Shanita.