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Perspectives - Kimse Yok Mu: An Organization's Effort For The Advancement of Life

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THE ROOFTOPS PROJECT

Photographer/Artist: Organization Kimse Yok Mu



Perspectives

KIMSE YOK MU

An Organization's Effort For The Advancement of Life

The Rooftops Project's **Shaan Lodi** talks with Turkish relief organization Kimse Yok Mu about its approach to the real estate needed to support disaster response and other work in often challenging settings in 96 countries.

It is the idea that an individual's efforts can go a long way and that, through a joint effort, the ability to make an impact is even greater. This is where organizations step in with the ability to provide resources and use the collective efforts of individuals to support victims and the under-privileged.

There are many not-for-profits all over the world whose goals are to provide for those in need and allow individuals, and society in general, to progress and develop with amenities they were once without. One such organization is *Kimse Yok Mu*, a Turkish not-for-profit organization. Its name is Turkish for "Is anybody there?" and was established after the 1999 earthquake in Turkey.



Photographer/Artist: Organization Kimse Yok Mu

THE ORGANIZATION

Headquartered in Istanbul, Turkey's most populated city and the nation's economic center, Kimse Yok Mu ("KYM") is part of a broader social movement that has its origins in Turkey. This movement, called "Hizmet" ("Service"), is led by Muslim scholar and author Fetullah Gulen. The efforts of the movement have since spread beyond Turkey, primarily with the establishment of Turkish-sponsored schools around the globe.

IS ANYBODY THERE?

A call out for help – "Is anybody there?" It was the question heard from under the rubble, of those trapped in the aftermath of a 7.6 magnitude earthquake that had just destroyed buildings and entire communities. The very question was also coming from those searching the collapsed buildings, a call out by those looking to help and rescue anyone who remained trapped under the debris. The earthquake not only struck a city, but it struck a chord in people from all across the world who went to aid and support those affected by the event and to rebuild what was destroyed by it.

In Turkey alone, KYM employs 98 individuals in its Istanbul office, plus another 221 employees based throughout 30 branch offices located around the country. The branch offices have a limited number of people working there; an office can have as few as five employees to as many as 20, such as the one in the city of Izmir. In addition to providing domestic aid in Turkey, KYM is involved in many projects all over the world in order to bring relief to disaster stricken areas, provide essential resources to areas in need, and establish schools and medical facilities in areas that lack such vital services. The organization is currently involved in 96 different countries around the globe, each with a specific objective.



These projects can be broken down into two different types: (1) temporary campaigns, and (2) permanent or ongoing aid. Currently, KYM is involved in permanent projects in Pakistan and five nations in Africa – North Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, and Somalia. These projects involve the building of complexes including schools, hospitals, and dormitories for students. In addition to the proposed opening of a new permanent office in Bangladesh, other projects and ideas are continuously being considered, such as plans currently underway to construct a hospital in Uganda.

KYM is involved in numerous temporary campaigns. Some of these that have most precedence at the moment include aid being given to the displaced Syrian refugees in southeastern Turkey, aid sent to the Rohingya refugees in Myanmar and Bangladesh, and aid for those living in the Gaza strip. KYM is also working with Helping Hands Relief Foundation, a U.S. not-for-profit organization, to help the victims of Hurricane Sandy. With these projects, KYM delivers food, clothing, shelters, blankets, durable goods, and medical care to those affected.

ONE TRACT AT A TIME

All of these initiatives cannot be done without proper logistics, which of course include offices and other real estate involvement. Outside of Turkey, KYM has two permanent offices, one in North Sudan and the other in Pakistan. At these foreign offices there are very few resident Turks, though employees from the headquarters' International Aid Department visit the offices frequently. There are negotiations currently going on to establish a third permanent office in Bangladesh, a strategic decision in order to assist with the ongoing Rohingya conflict and influx of refugees to the area.

In order to work abroad, whether it is to establish an office presence in a foreign country or providing aid in general, every country has its own rules and regulations. KYM typically sends applications to the local authorities in each country in order to be granted permission to work there. This application consists of a summarized description of the proposed aid project, its planned duration, and other particulars. When collaborating with different governments and trying to solve the wide range of issues that are specific to each locale, it may take a long time to gain approval from the host nation. Countries with fewer restrictions, such as Somalia, may have almost no formal application process.

BUILDING FOR THEIR FUTURE

KYM is building for *their* future – “their” not being their own but rather those whose lives they have impacted. From projects such as a school built in Sudan along with dormitories, to the construction of a hospital in Somalia, and even the construction of an entire village in Pakistan, the organization aims to give facilities to those in need. How KYM goes about building these structures is unique to each need. Yet whichever route a project takes requires much planning, due expertise, and the right resources to get the job done.

STAGES AND HURDLES TO ESTABLISHING A KYM RELIEF FACILITY

Logistics

With every project, before site selection and construction, assessments are made with regard to accessibility to the site, the suitability of the site for the intended program, and logistics decisions. In locations that have no electricity,

KYM supplies its own generators for the project site. Where there is no access to clean water, the organization will drill wells. Being resourceful is key to KYM's operations. Repairing on-site infrastructure whenever possible is a time- and cost-efficient strategy KYM utilizes to its advantage, as well as aiding the local inhabitants and government officials in building the necessary capacity to support KYM's operations.

Providing sustenance and aid to some of the most impoverished areas in these foreign countries, KYM overcomes the fact that transportation to and from the project site is not always easily accessible. It is not uncommon for the nearest airport to be hours away or for the only means of travel to be on a remote, dirt road. Thorough preparation is done to ensure that the safest and most efficient solution is implemented to support KYM's field operations.

Safety

Safety concerns abroad are a special challenge with international relief. Whether it is a current project site, a potential new site, or a foreign KYM office, the safety of personnel and protecting its investment in facilities are of utmost importance for KYM. KYM must continuously monitor the situation on ground and the political climate. An example was the precautionary closing of KYM's permanent office in Somalia due to security concerns. KYM's humanitarian efforts continued there despite the closure.

Site for Sale?

As important as the design and function of a planned project facility may be, selection of the right location and suitable land are critical starting points, just as they would be for a commercial real estate project in an urban area anywhere in the world.

For short-term aid or services in a foreign country, KYM typically collaborates with the Turkish schools built in that nation (through the Hizmet efforts). With long-term missions and for KYM's permanent international presence, real estate considerations are of particular importance.

BUILD A BLOCK, OWN A LOT

As important as it is to find the best location for a project, gather the right team of experts to build the materials, and finally have a fully-functional facility, it is just as important to formalize one's rights to the property. KYM will rent or lease space if a mission requires, which is often the case for the operation of temporary campaigns. But KYM prefers to own and retain title to its locations in other countries whenever possible, especially since they often build from scratch.

In Turkey, a transfer of property is typically completed with the filing of the deed in the Title Deed Registry Directorate office in the district in which the property is located. Once KYM steps outside Turkey, however, it must manage the complexities and varied nuances of each and every one of the 95 other countries in which they are engaged. What constitutes title may be vague. Many of the countries in which KYM operates do not have a formal process to register ownership and land interests. Where there is a recognized process, the concept of formal ownership may be fairly new. Many times, the procedures are not followed strictly or are too new in the region to have wide recognition.

A local team handles most of the decision-making for the local facilities because of its familiarity with the area, language and customs. There are often





Photographer/Artist: Organization Kimse Yok Mu

complex negotiations, immersing KYM in the host country's unfamiliar laws and property system. Throughout the process, the details about the land and information about the deal are communicated back to the KYM headquarters, where the final decisions are made. KYM often does not use realtors or real estate brokers for the deal, as most of the areas where KYM will operate do not have a developed market for commercial real estate services.

Construction

Construction of KYM field projects begins in Turkey, as the parts are all prefabricated in Turkey and then shipped overseas and assembled at their final destination. The Domestic Aid Department at KYM has its own manager who is in charge of the buildings and facilities located in Turkey. For permanent aid projects in other countries, KYM's International Aid Department, run by a manager with a civil engineering background, is responsible.

KYM handles the entire building process, hiring engineers and contractors (including volunteers) from within Turkey as well as in the host country, who then oversee the construction and assembly of the facility. The effort that goes into the building process is significant. The structures involve many components and are built with meticulous detail. Even with the construction of water wells, such as those KYM built in Somalia, Palestine and Niger, there are many steps involved and surveys of the land that must be done. Due to the complex nature of projects in the international arena, it is all the more important to organize the respective roles of the team members that are involved with the construction. KYM has a network of local engineers, scientists, and other assistants to oversee the day-to-day activities of the project.

In addition to raising funds for their projects, many design services and construction materials are donated to the organization. KYM has a logistics department at six locations throughout Turkey, which handles these donated items. A team of logistics specialists is assigned at each warehouse for

quality control, and volunteer engineers are in charge of items that require technical expertise (such as concrete and steel enforcement materials). KYM maintains strong relationships, including the broad network of Turks around the world who lend their support for KYM's cause. This includes local Turkish businesses who donate or discount materials for the organization and individuals who wish to do their part in helping the needy.

The supervision of these foreign sites is done mostly by local volunteers. As a practical matter, having local employees and volunteers allows for a reduction of cost for each project, as there will be less need for finding or building accommodations for Turkish nationals to reside during construction. A representative from the KYM headquarters will also visit and inspect the site – such as the current case in Somalia, where trips are made every few months to the hospital under construction to examine and document the progress being made.

While KYM is instrumental during the planning, organization, construction, and initial operations phases of the facility, KYM will ultimately pass the torch onto the host country after the building is completed. This is true for the permanent campaigns as well as the temporary projects overseas; the operating and managerial authority shifts from the organization to the host country.

OPERATING REAL ESTATE FOR HUMANITY

KYM's dedicated team of individuals, experts, and volunteers seeks to establish not just a facility, but an essential lifeline. As much effort as is put into a project, the biggest challenge for KYM tends to be when the project is complete. A huge part of KYM's mission is to foster the operational success of the project and allow for self-supported developments in the host nations.



In what is practically a donation to the host country, KYM will transfer the project over and, though still owner, will not charge any rent or collect any occupancy fees from the host nation. The host government may not have experience and know-how in operating and managing such facilities. The transition from KYM's highly effective and experienced team to local hands is critical. There is always potential for this transition to be less than perfect. Every step is well-orchestrated, as it must be for projects of this scope to come to fruition.

KYM has found that by maintaining contact and relations with the managing bodies, the outcomes are much more positive for the continued success of the project. Even though the completed project may be operated entirely by the host country, KYM will participate when needed – stepping in, for example, to fix any severe structural damages.

Once the facility is complete, KYM will ship all the basic resources and deliver them to the project site. For specialized health care facilities, for example, required medicine and devices are often shipped in unless suitable items are produced locally. Once the necessary equipment and medicine arrive, KYM will recruit doctors to work on site. As one example, in Darfur, KYM has provided cataract surgeries to local residents free of charge since 2008. Volunteer doctors fly to Darfur from Turkey for the job. Although these foreign medical centers are not exactly the same as the ones back home in Turkey, the doctors have all the requisite resources to perform their procedures. In addition, since the medical equipment is produced and shipped from Turkey, it is likely to be similar, if not the same, to equipment that the medical staff normally use back home.

LEND A HAND, MEND A LAND

All across the world, there are those in need. KYM is motivated to effect change and provide the resources essential for a prosperous life, striving to help communities all throughout the world. From the planning stages of a new mission, to the acquisition and construction of property and finally to a fully-functional project, both Kimse Yok Mu and its local partners and volunteers are essential to create the facilities necessary to implement this vision.

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