“Our work is complementary work — to transform and amplify what is already there”: Marine Burdel of Artolution on using art as a tool of expression, healing and connection

Eleanore Catolico
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Eleanore Catolico: Please introduce yourself and tell me what's distinctive about your approach in the field of youth mental health.

Marine Burdel: My name is Marine Burdel. I am the operations director of Artolution and also the Mental Health and Psychosocial Support advisor. At Artolution, we are a smaller NGO, focusing on providing artistic activities to youth and families who are facing adverse situations in life by providing them a platform to express themselves, to grow in resilience, and to support livelihoods and social cohesion.

Eleanore Catolico: Where is your work happening?

Marine Burdel: We are US-based, mostly in underprivileged urban areas. We have activities in Jordan for the Middle East, Uganda, and Kenya for Eastern Africa, with a team in South Sudan. One of our core activities is in Bangladesh with satellite activities in Myanmar. We are active with a team in Ukraine, and we also have a team in Colombia.

Eleanore Catolico: Do these activities happen in person or virtually?

Marine Burdel: Most of our activities are face-to-face. We have our hubs and our teams working with kids in different refugee settlement camps or urban violent areas. Then we

have created what we call virtual bridges, where we connect kids from different countries to work through the arts together.

Eleanore Catolico: What is something others might find surprising about your work?

Marine Burdel: We focus on the use of the arts. We can go from storytelling to muralism, to performance, dance, theater, craft making. All of our artists are local people that we identify and train.

What we train them with is how to work with communities to allow the communities to use these tools for their own recovery, for their own social cohesion and resilience. This is the specificity of identifying the right people who have the right mindset. We are looking for a specific type of artist who wants to have a positive impact on their community, and who has an appetite to put themselves at the service of the community, putting themselves aside and using the arts from a different angle.

Eleanore Catolico: What are the benefits of working with local people? Are you seeing that communities are more responsive or more trusting of somebody that they may already know within their area?

Marine Burdel: They know their context. They know what people are going through. Most of our artists are refugees themselves or have been affected by violence, or migrations. Most of our artists, our staff and our teams are people who we consider direct beneficiaries.

In Bangladesh, we have 20 artists in the refugee camp in Cox's Bazar. They are all from the Rohingya community. They know what their peers have come through, they know how to speak the language, they know the customs.

For them being able to portray the arts in the context of the refugee camp that they are in is giving them this depth in terms of facilitating the activities and helping their peers connect and express themselves through symbols that are going to be known by the community.

Eleanore Catolico: The Youth Mental Health and Wellbeing Co-lab has three focus areas: building young people's resilience, giving young people agency, and helping young people build a sense of community and belonging. What does your work focus on and what contributions does your work make in that area?

Marine Burdel: When you are intervening in a context where a whole population has been extremely discriminated against and gone through the violence of genocide and then being able to reinstate artistic activities that had been taken from them, it is having a strong impact. First, on how they connect with each other, then how they are empowered with the methodology. This is capacity building — giving to artists, to people with an educational background and the will to support their own community.

Coming from being one of the survivors to being one of the supporters for their peers is extremely boosting in terms of resilience and social cohesion.

In the context of the Bidibidi resettlement camp in northern Uganda which mainly receives refugees coming from South Sudan, we run a program.

South Sudan is scattered in terms of ethnic groups, and they usually don't get along with each other, which is why there is a protracted conflict and crisis in South Sudan, mainly on the grounds of rivalry between different tribal groups. When they flee South Sudan and come to Bidibidi, they have to live close to one another.

We run a program there with different tribal groups together. That was challenging at first because they were not keen to work together. However, thanks to the methodology we applied based on what we know about community-based work, they carried out a beautiful program.

They used a big wall that was a border between two of the small villages inside the resettlement camp. They created a beautiful mural featuring a cow, which is a strong symbol of wealth for both of the tribal ethnic groups. They used that symbol to make them connect to one another. We see that using the arts and community-based activities can foster social cohesion.

Eleanore Catolico: How do you collaborate with other organizations working in the same focus area?

Marine Burdel: We are working with INGOs, like UNHCR and Plan International. Usually they are our funders, so they subcontract us to work on the program in the areas where we have staff.

We strongly believe in working with local organizations who know what they're doing because of the context of their knowledge. This is what we do. We do community-based work. For example, right now we are collaborating in Uganda with UNHCR on a big program taking place in both the Bidibidi Resettlement Camp and also in the capital city, Kampala.

As part of our contract, we were to train new artists. We went through a community-based organization that is already connected to artists for educational activities. This is absolutely integral to our work.

Eleanore Catolico: What, if any, emerging work in this field are you excited about?

Marine Burdel: When we think about the arts, we think about the murals, paint, and things that are tangible. However, we can't deny that especially since 2020, we are so much more connected online. We see that digital arts can be used to connect people.

For example, we had a program called the Virtual Bridges between Colombia and Jordan. We were able to connect the two groups despite the time difference. We had these two groups communicating on how to create something together. The outcomes

revealed how much it expanded their world, their ideas, and their concepts of what it is to be a youth here, youth there.

Last year we ran a program jointly with UNHCR in four different countries on four different continents: Indonesia, Algeria, Uganda, and Czech Republic. At some point, we had three countries connected together in one virtual room. They were using VR headsets, and they were creating art together — a village.

Each of them was creating the houses, the town hall, faith-related buildings, and they could walk inside of it. We had beautiful narratives coming out of it.

There are many, many perspectives using digital tools, even more so as we are talking about kids who are in areas that are a bit isolated.

Eleanore Catolico: Are there specific prompts, or are you encouraging the young people to reflect on their life, or create art based on their experiences, or is it open-ended?

Marine Burdel: We are active at the community level. We are not providing clinical specialized services, so we do not say that we provide art therapy. We provide group and community sessions to foster resilience and social cohesion. We try to have prompts that will ignite and open the door to an imaginary world and one's creativity.

The goal is to build trust. Our usual core program lasts about two weeks, and over two weeks, there is a strong trust that can be created between the youth and the facilitators. They are a role model opening a door towards creativity and speaking about oneself, and giving them attention, interest, and focus.

Eleanore Catolico: Can you share another example that illustrates the impact of your work?

Marine Burdel: In Jordan, we launched a new program focusing on craft making for widows and older ladies who haven't had the chance to pursue any type of education.

It's a small group of 10 and we onboard them for three months teaching them a professional skill — they have the choice between pottery, hand knitting, and Islamic geometry.

At the end, they have an activable skill for livelihood. Giving this type of perspective to people focuses on self-empowerment, for them to feel they have control and agency over livelihoods.

Eleanore Catolico: Everyone learns as much from things that don't work as things that do. Can you describe something that you tried that didn't work, but that you learned from?

Marine Burdel: Our artists come from the community themselves, meaning they are sometimes facing the same difficulties.

It is challenging to find the right balance between the fact they are direct beneficiaries and also staff members. How do you handle it when your staff member is encountering the same difficulties as the beneficiaries they are serving? It is a hard line to navigate because they are responsible to apply the level of demand of our donors, but we are also cognizant and flexible to understand the context that they are still living in.

There is always going to be a reassessment. We are working in hard contexts, extremely volatile sometimes, and these are things we have to embrace.

Eleanore Catolico: What insights, or teachable lessons, can be taken from your work that others could use?

Marine Burdel: Sometimes there is a perspective of miserabilism, as it's called. It's the idea that being a refugee means being poor, helpless, and without resources, or that a refugee camp is a place of constant despair and tears. That couldn't be further from the truth.

This is why we do not practice having international artists going to the different territories. There are artists out there. They are there. I have seen incredibly hardworking people dedicated to their community and doing absolute wonders without any background.

For example, Max Frieder, one of our co-founders, arrived at that refugee camp in Greece, and he saw one lady surrounded with kids doing some artistic activities. He approached her, and asked if she was an art teacher. She said, "I'm practicing the arts for myself, and I saw so many kids wandering around. I figured we have to do something, so I just started."

Our work is complementary work — to transform and amplify what is already there. In our case, we bring the part on how to work with a group of people to help them put on paper what they think, which is a different angle from the one of an artist that is practicing the art on their own.

Eleanore Catolico: How would you define current attitudes towards youth mental health? Have you seen attitudes toward youth mental health shift in your community or sector, and what contributed to that change?

Marine Burdel: The crisis of COVID-19 made us more aware of mental well-being. We have focused a lot more on the mental health of our youth because at the time it was visible that having kids not going to school for so long, and having to learn behind screens had some impact first on learning and then on not being able to hang out with friends. We know the numbers in terms of rise in suicidal thoughts or in feelings of isolation.

I'm keen to explore the new generations and their concerns, especially towards how affected they are and are going to be about climate change. Most of our territories that we are active in are seeing potential for crisis and migration movements because of the rising climate disaster.

Eleanore Catolico: How do you hear from and incorporate youth voices in shaping your work, or the broader narrative on mental health?

Marine Burdel: We have a monitoring and evaluation program where we run pre-assessments and post-assessments of our youth to detect the impact that the program had on their well-being. As part of this post-assessment, we have open-ended questions and we have feedback mechanisms for them to share.

In our recent work with older youth in their twenties, the livelihoods component generated the most feedback, with participants expressing strong appreciation for the stipend they received. Receiving both the capacity building plus benefiting from the program, and being able to financially support their families, has proven an efficient combination.

The voice of the youth is direct, because we interact at all times with them firsthand, and thanks to these feedback mechanisms.

Eleanore Catolico: Thank you so much for your time.

Eleanore Catolico is a freelance journalist, writer and editor based in Michigan. Her solutions journalism has focused on initiatives in K-12 schools that address trauma, cultivate affirming and inclusive spaces and foster healthy peer connections.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*