

# Bridging the divide

The drowning of young migrant Moroccan men in the Bay of Cádiz prompted two local people to direct action. Now, more than four years on, they have transformed the lives of the drowned men's relatives and the rest of the men, women and children from the Atlas mountain village of Hansala

Looking out across the sparkling Bay of Cádiz last October, it was difficult to picture what happened on 25 October 2003, just four years ago. On that night, 37 young migrant men, mostly Moroccan, were drowned when their makeshift vessel capsized in heavy winds just off the coast near the medieval town of Rota on the northern arm of the bay.

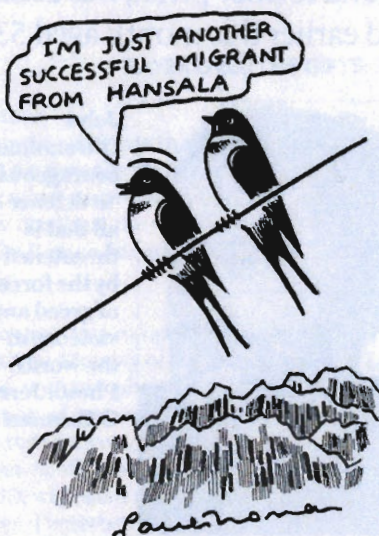
Their decomposing corpses were washed up in the bay for some time afterwards, prompting many of the people of Rota to worry about the families they had, presumably, left behind. Two of them – teacher Raphael Quiros and his wife, Violeta Cuesta – decided to take action. They discovered that many of the dead came from Hansala, a small village at the foot of the Atlas Mountains. They decided to go there. Their mission: to offer their condolences to those who had lost relatives and friends and to see how they could help.

Hansala was desperately poor, and the two of them took a momentous decision: they would work towards channelling funds, materials and friendship from Cádiz to Hansala. They called their group *Solidaridad Directa*. It does exactly what it says on the tin.

Their strategy is simple and clear: it aims to use the personal skills and funds of its members to combat the causes of misery and hunger in the area, via direct contact and cooperation. As Raphael Quiros explains, the group aims to make those it helps “participants in their own human flourishing”. To make sure that they get it right, and that money and materials are used directly to help the villagers, they have set up two organisations in Spain: the *Asociación para el Progreso y la Cultura*, which operates out of Hansala, and the *Asociación de Inmigrantes de Hansala*, run by expatriates in Valencia.

It is a continuing dialogue. Every time the Spaniards visit, a village meeting is held so that current concerns are voiced, and needs and progress are discussed. Quiros is keen to emphasise this charity's structural distinction from a typical NGO model: “Everyone who works with us pays their own expenses. This ethic means that all donations, including those received from the town council of Rota, as well as from Cádiz county council, have gone directly to the community of Hansala.”

Equally, for each project in the village, meticulous administrators require detailed receipts and invoices for all expenses and works carried out, before funds are transferred.



This further ensures that the full value of the donations is transferred swiftly to the heart of the village.

With more than £50,000 collected, and with the help of the villagers themselves, the associations have built and equipped a medical dispensary, a fully furnished classroom and a civic centre. They have also rebuilt the teacher's house, provided academic grants for more than 130 children, coordinated the donation and installation of solar panels, a library and – for the poorest members of the community – livestock to sustain them.

The group has assisted those orphaned by the shipwreck, as well as the widows: they even built a house for one such lady who was pregnant with her second child when her husband drowned. More recently, the group has delivered an off-road ambulance to the village and has installed an irrigation system with the assistance of a construction specialist from Alicante. Similarly, talk has begun of providing running water to every home.

Cynics may question the impact of a project with such humble beginnings on a community of more than 1,700 people. Yet Said Salhi, the Moroccan treasurer of the *Asociación para el Progreso y la Cultura* (Hansala), explained to me that, as a result of this mutual intervention, he and his fellow villagers now have what, collectively, they most value: “A roof over our heads, food, water, affection and time together with our families.”

I joined a representative group from *Solidaridad Directa* en route to Hansala. On this occasion the mission was principally to de-

liver clothes, bicycles, academic scholarships for the children and school materials. As we neared the end of the steep and rocky rise from the nearest village, Tarzirgh, it became increasingly clear that the optimism and determination characterised by *Solidaridad Directa*'s approach was highly contagious.

We were met by an outbreak of affectionate greetings from men and women at the roadside, coupled with broad smiles and excited cries of “*Hola! Cómo estás!*” from children, some of whom cannot have been more than three years old, scurrying uphill behind our 4x4. Any doubts I entertained about the success and impact of this project were buried on that mountain pass.

This infectious solidarity is equally manifest in the impressive centralisation of the village. Where an issue of high importance needs to be aired or discussed, it is declared from a megaphone at the top of the minaret in the centre of the village. Then, as Said explained, “the people know that it is in their interest to convene, and so they do”. Communal issues such as which trees to fell and when, or how to prevent the slaughter of young fertile animals and laying hens, are also worked through in this cooperative way.

The upshot of all this is that, through intelligent discussion and resource management, Hansala's standard of living has risen dramatically. In an international political climate where so-called “social and economic rights” are often criticised as aspirational and unrealistic, this model provides a robust example of just how attainable such goals can be.

Underpinning these ideals is a fundamental belief in human equality and dignity. Contrary to the many xenophobic generalisations that have besmirched the European press over recent years, the experience of Hansala indicates that where migrants are forced to take flight, they seldom want to stay away for ever. Indeed, it is a recognised irony that the treacherous crossings made by young migrants are frequently, in effect, cyclical homeward-bound journeys. Far from seeking the right to permanent residence in foreign countries, successful migrants from Hansala were looking for an effective “passport” to enable them to return home.

Since 2003 not one of Hansala's villagers has emigrated clandestinely.

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