Increasing Access

Supporting Hope and Homes for Children through the COVID-19 crisis

The long-term impact of our partnership with War Child

Exam cancellations and school closures
Uncertain futures for Smart Start graduates

Ten questions for Senior Pro Bono Manager Helen Rogers

Pro bono and community investment
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Allen & Overy
I’m in a high-risk category so my wife and I have had to completely isolate ourselves – we can’t see our three daughters at the moment – but still I know that we are unbelievably lucky. The impact of this COVID-19 crisis on people who already have so little is devastating. And the longer-term impact on livelihoods, homes and education could be even worse.

Our response to this crisis is both global and local. In some areas we’re taking a centralised approach: for example, providing emergency funding for the UNHCR to support refugees affected by the coronavirus; and telling all charities receiving grants from A&O’s Global and London Grants Programmes – normally directed towards specific programmes – that they can now use this funding wherever it is needed most.

We have also taken the decision to extend our global charity partnership with Hope and Homes for Children until July 2021. It was due to end in September this year and has already exceeded the GBP1 million fundraising target (see page 10) but with many charities facing huge shortfalls and uncertainties – at a time when their support is needed more than ever – it would be completely wrong for us to end our partnership this year. Ultimately, if we’re committed to what Hope and Homes for Children is working to achieve around the world, then we have a responsibility to see them through the worst of this crisis. In many countries, their access to the most marginalised families means they’ve become first responders, distributing food, medicines and personal protective equipment (PPE), as well as trying to protect livelihoods and prevent family breakdowns.

It would also be premature to decide what our next global charity partnership should look like now – it will certainly be shaped by what we’re experiencing through this pandemic, but we don’t yet know how long this will continue and who will be worst affected. So we need to see what things look like later this year, and think about where our resources can best be directed.

One of the key themes emerging from this crisis is the importance of collaboration, and that certainly applies to us as a legal sector. Helen Rogers (Senior Pro Bono

Colleagues from Hope and Homes for Children’s operations in Bosnia (top) and Ukraine (bottom)
Manager) and the wider pro bono team are leading a coordinated international response across the sector – through our memberships of the Association of Pro Bono Counsel and the Collaborative Plan – to ensure our collective efforts are efficient and effective (read more in Helen’s interview on page 31).

The local response is of course equally important, as our people see what the specific needs are in their communities. In Belgium, for example, we are providing IP advice to the University of Antwerp on face mask design issues; in Hong Kong volunteers are packing masks to distribute to the elderly and low-income families; in Frankfurt donations have been made to provide food and hygiene essentials to the elderly; in our U.S. offices, USD100,000 has been donated to three charities working to support the most vulnerable within their local communities; and in Belfast the team is supporting a local foodbank and thinking up a raft of fundraising activities for other local charities.

In Johannesburg, pro bono advice and donations totalling GBP50,000 are helping charity partners meet the desperate need for PPE, food and clean water within local communities (see page 13); and in London we’ve given two donations of GBP25,000 to support the Access to Justice Foundation and The London Community Foundation. We’re also collaborating with other organisations through the Fair Education Alliance and Social Mobility Commission to look at how we mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on disadvantaged young people and on social mobility efforts more widely. And we’ve made our London office car park available to healthcare workers at The Royal London Hospital.

A huge amount more is going on at an individual level, with people continuing to volunteer at virtual legal advice clinics and provide education and employment mentoring online. People are also finding new ways of helping – I’ve heard of colleagues using their home 3D printers to create PPE where there are shortages. It’s a real mix of big and small, which is wonderful to see.

Personally, as an employment lawyer, I’m supporting charity partners with their current employee situations and longer-term planning. Outside of A&O, I’m stepping up my work with people in prison – some of the most overlooked and marginalised individuals in society.

What is really apparent in all of this is that people want to help. Yes, we’re a big successful business but we don’t exist in isolation, either as an organisation or as individuals. I can see so many people connecting through this and I hope we hold on to that. I hope that when we emerge from this, the ‘new normal’ recognises the connections we’ve built, because if anybody didn’t appreciate the need to help others less fortunate than us – or the reason we do pro bono and community investment work – it is certainly clear now.
Successful work applications for asylum seekers in Hong Kong

Hong Kong has among the lowest acceptance rate of asylum seekers of any major developed country, approving around only 0.7% of asylum applications, compared with a global acceptance rate of 20-40%.

Despite adopting the UN Convention Against Torture and its principle of non-refoulement (which prevents refugees or asylum seekers being returned to a country where they are likely to face persecution), the Hong Kong Government permanently considers asylum seekers and their children, including any born in Hong Kong, to be illegal immigrants.

Even once officially recognised as a refugee by the UN – a process that can take several years – individuals do not have an automatic right to work in Hong Kong. Permanent resettlement to a third country can take several more years and usually requires funding and sponsorship, which many refugees cannot access, meaning they are stuck in limbo. While the government provides a small monthly allowance, this barely covers the most basic needs.

Over the past year, A&O has acted for five refugees on their applications for permission to work in Hong Kong. This process requires the Director of Immigration to grant discretionary permission to work on an exceptional basis, taking into account compassionate or humanitarian reasons and other special extenuating circumstances.

Each applicant must first secure an offer of employment, then show detailed employment terms, financial and licensing records from the employer, their personal medical condition, and the psychosocial and financial impact that being prohibited from working has on their life. The whole process can take months and, if granted, only lasts for a limited period (usually six months), as well as being subject to other conditions imposed.

“It is little wonder that Hong Kong only has around 0.2% refugees and asylum seekers within its population,” says Catherine Husted, A&O’s Head of Pro Bono and Community Investment in Hong Kong.

“The whole process can be daunting and onerous, particularly for such a vulnerable group, so we are very pleased that we’ve been successful in obtaining permission to work for four of our clients this year, with the fifth now on a dependant visa.

“These are often unseen and marginalised individuals, but we hope we can help them and their families build a better life and eventually feel like they are embedded in Hong Kong society.”

A&O wins
Pro bono team of the year in the IFLR Asia Pacific Awards 2020

The award recognises the work done across A&O’s Asia Pacific offices, for example with asylum seekers in Hong Kong (see left); as well as the ground-breaking report into discrimination against couples in alternative relationships in Hong Kong (see the last issue of Increasing Access); advising charities in Thailand; and defending the rights of migrant Indonesian workers.
Life-changing citizenship for children in the UK

In March this year, A&O celebrated the major milestone of helping 50 children to gain formal citizenship in the UK. Alongside Coram Children’s Legal Centre and DLA Piper, A&O launched the first ever Children’s Pro Bono Legal Service in 2015, through which volunteer lawyers provide end-to-end representation to some of the most marginalised children in the UK.

Tens of thousands of these children have a right in law to UK citizenship but without legal help have no way to achieve it. This means they face barriers throughout their lives as, without citizenship, they cannot obtain a passport, vote or gain full access to healthcare and higher education.

In February 2018, under the umbrella name of Kids In Need of Defense UK, the Children’s Pro Bono Legal Service joined forces with a number of other legal centres across the UK in order to support a growing network of similar working models, and has since extended its partnership to work with Baker McKenzie and Skadden Arps Slate Meagher and Flom.

The Legal Service as a whole has now helped 116 children to gain British citizenship, with a further 81 applications under way. This is life-changing for these young people and something they, and their children after them, will benefit from their entire lives.

The Children’s Pro Bono Legal Service has been recognised in the FT Innovative Lawyers awards and in 2016 won the Legal Week Award for Innovation in CSR.

Pro bono award for New York associate

New York Litigation associate Michael Westfal has received the 2019 Pro Bono Publico Award from The Legal Aid Society.

The award is given to Legal Aid’s pro bono attorneys ‘who have volunteered their time and talent to provide exceptional legal services to low-income New Yorkers’. It recognises Michael’s work with partner Eugene Ingoglia to defend a couple defrauded in the purchase of their family’s first home, who are now facing foreclosure action. Michael is also helping the couple to bring claims against their former attorney, the individual who sold them their home and the mortgage lenders involved in the fraud.
Last year, after months of record-breaking temperatures and severe drought, Australia suffered the worst bushfires in the country’s history.

The fires killed 33 people, destroyed almost 3,000 homes, shrouded cities in toxic smoke and devastated wildlife across the country. More than 110,000 km² of bush, forest and parks burned.

The Australia Institute estimates that more than half of those living in Australia have been directly affected, including millions suffering health effects. The recovery effort will be long and arduous.

“It is impossible not to feel horrified by the consequences of the bushfires,” says Karolina Popic, co-lead partner for pro bono in Australia with Meredith Campion. “We all watched the fires advance here and we feel deeply passionate that we must support fire-affected communities.”

A&O’s Sydney office has held fundraising events to raise much needed money for the New South Wales Rural Fire Service, and has taken on its first pro bono instructions to help a small business – a seafood farm on the South Coast – that has been seriously impacted by the fires.

Associate Alissa Lucas is playing a key role in coordinating the firm’s pro bono response. “Through a charity called Justice Connect, we have worked with the farm owner to explore avenues through which he could make a claim to his insurer.

“Those affected by the fires are having to rebuild their homes, their businesses and their lives. Legal needs are continuing to emerge as the full impact becomes known, so we’re monitoring how we best provide pro bono assistance to support the recovery in the months and probably years ahead,” Alissa says.
To mark Justice Week in the UK in February, A&O has partnered with charity Young Citizens to deliver ‘The Big Legal Lesson’.

Justice Week is jointly coordinated by the Bar Council, the Law Society and CILEx (the professional body for Chartered Legal Executives) and is a collaborative effort involving voluntary sector organisations, schools, universities, legal professionals and the media.

The theme of this year’s Justice Week was Public Legal Education, which aims to boost public understanding of the fundamentals of the justice system in England and Wales.

Nearly 600 teachers accessed the resource and an estimated 46,000 young people participated in The Big Legal Lesson – the biggest ever of its kind – to learn about the subject. With free classroom resources created for teachers to use in primary and secondary schools, children examined the rule of law, the role of parliament, government and the justice system.

Sixteen pupils aged 13-14 from A&O’s partner secondary school, Raine’s Foundation, also visited A&O’s London office to take part in an interactive workshop of activities and discussions with Young Citizens, A&O volunteers and a major banking client, followed by a tour of A&O’s office and a talk with volunteers about future careers.

46,000 young people participated in The Big Legal Lesson – the biggest ever of its kind – to learn about public legal education.
A&O has a long-standing relationship with BID (Bail for Immigration Detainees), a charity that challenges immigration detention in the UK. In the latest successful case, A&O has assisted BID with an intervention before the Supreme Court on the important question of whether an individual can be detained if the detention was based on an earlier public law decision subsequently found to be unlawful.

The case centred on an individual, ‘DN’, who was ordered to be deported from the UK and detained, pending deportation. The decision to deport him was subsequently found to be unlawful, so DN brought proceedings claiming that the decision to detain him was also unlawful – having been based on an illegal deportation decision – and therefore he should be allowed to seek damages from the UK Government for false imprisonment.

“Our team advised BID at each stage of the process,” says senior associate Maeve Hanna, who led A&O’s team including Georgina Thomson, Aoife O’Reilly and Rhona Egerton with partner Andrew Denny. “This included advising BID on its decision to apply for permission to intervene before the Supreme Court, making the application and corresponding with the other parties involved. BID had permission to make written submissions to the Court so we filed two sets of submissions before the hearing and, not being able to make oral submissions at the hearing itself, we also provided a note after the first day in order to assist the Court on certain questions raised,” Maeve says.

The Government argued that the decision to detain was free-standing and not tainted by the earlier illegal decision to deport. But in February, the Supreme Court agreed with BID’s argument that detaining any person in these circumstances was unlawful, that a claim for false imprisonment was available and that DN’s appeal should be allowed.

“The Supreme Court’s decision in this case will have a significant impact, both in terms of Government accountability, and for the individuals affected, as they could claim damages for false imprisonment.”

Maeve Hanna, Senior Associate

A&O is now advising BID on another intervention, this time before the High Court, that considers whether individuals who cannot lawfully be kept in immigration detention can still be required to comply with often harsh immigration bail conditions upon their release. Many of BID’s clients who are granted immigration bail find their freedoms severely curtailed by conditions such as regular reporting at immigration or police offices, or restrictions on where they can work and live. The outcome of this case will therefore be very important for BID’s clients.
Eighteen months into our global charity partnership with Hope and Homes for Children, we have now raised GBP1.148m.

This year’s First Hour, First Day campaign – in which partners and staff donate the first hour’s or day’s salary of the new year – has contributed over GBP418,000, with nearly 900 people from 39 A&O offices taking part.

A&O’s partnership with Hope and Homes for Children is working to end the institutional care of children around the world. Approximately GBP500,000 of the money raised is funding work in India and Nepal to tackle the root causes of orphanage confinement and family separation, aiming to help some 4,400 high-risk children. The rest of the funds raised are being provided for the charity to invest in its global campaign of transitioning children from institutions to family-based care.

You can read more about our partnership in the last two issues of Increasing Access in June 2019 and November 2019.

Supporting Hope and Homes for Children’s crisis response

Our global charity partnership with Hope and Homes for Children has exceeded the initial fundraising target of GBP1m and we have now extended the partnership until July 2021 to provide extra support during the COVID-19 crisis.

Becoming first responders in the COVID-19 crisis

Like so many other charities, Hope and Homes for Children’s work has been affected by the global coronavirus pandemic. For vulnerable families, COVID-19 is more than a health crisis – it is a catalyst for children being placed into institutions as families already living in poverty lose their incomes, livelihoods and homes.

Children already confined in orphanages are facing increased levels of abuse, harm and infection due to staff shortages, in particular those living with disabilities and serious health conditions.

“Our front-line teams are working hard to maintain communication with children, families and orphanage staff to find solutions to their biggest needs right now,” says Kate Welsby from Hope and Homes for Children.

“Working around lockdown situations, we’re providing food supplies and healthcare and working to protect livelihoods so that families can stay together. We’re also developing...
new ways to provide vital counselling to children and parents using mobile communications, and responding to staff shortages in orphanages by developing training to reduce the risk of increased neglect and infection.”

Hope and Homes for Children’s country teams are also becoming first responders, working in increasingly difficult situations to address the crisis. In Moldova, for example, the team made 160 calls to vulnerable families within the first week of lockdown – for some without access to the internet or a TV it was the first time they had been given any advice about COVID-19.

The situation in India and Nepal

Subhadeep Adhikary is a programme lead for Hope and Homes for Children’s partner – Child in Need Institute – in Jharkhand, India. “Many children here are already at high risk of separation from their families as a result of factors like abuse, neglect, child labour, poverty and trafficking,” he explains.

“These children often end up in Charitable Children’s Institutions (CCIs) because vulnerable families believe they are a way of giving their children access to education and housing, without understanding their damaging effects.

“We’ve been successful in reaching these children and working to reunite them with their families or, where this isn’t possible, find alternative care,” Subhadeep says. “We’ve also been able to strengthen services in the community, for example child protection committees and adolescent and women’s groups, to prevent separation in the first place.”

But as the COVID-19 crisis escalates, Hope and Homes for Children’s partners in India and Nepal are having to work even harder to prevent this progress from being undone. As Kate Welsby explains: “We are facing unplanned and unsafe reintegrations, loss of safeguarding mechanisms and increased institutionalisation.

“Child protection is becoming an even lower priority for the authorities as health and food come first. Our case workers are staying close to families to ensure that children are safe and to monitor children who have been reintegrated within families, while we also remain in contact with national and local authorities to keep child protection a priority at this time.”
Extending our partnership and support

To support Hope and Homes for Children through this increasingly difficult period, we are extending our partnership until July 2021, instead of concluding it in September this year.

“The aim of our global charity partnerships is to make a sustainable, positive impact on both the charity and those it supports,” says Kate Cavelle, A&O’s Head of Pro Bono and Community Investment. “So it would be irresponsible for us to stop working with Hope and Homes for Children and leave them with a potential funding crisis in the middle of all this. “These children are more vulnerable than ever, so extending the partnership gives us the chance to continue fundraising and see through the pro bono projects already under way – some of which have been delayed because they are linked to postponed international events like the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Rwanda.”

One of the key pro bono projects that has been completed is publication of an article on ‘Institutionalised Children: Explorations and Beyond’. Researched and produced by an A&O team led from Singapore, the article reviews the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in eight South Asian countries, and highlights priority areas where action is needed to translate laws into visible outcomes for children.

The article has appeared in a journal published by Udayan Care, an organisation that works with vulnerable children and women across India, and is free to download until July 2020.

The research for the article is part of a broader project to contribute to a regional conference on child protection and care reform in Nepal (scheduled for this year but now postponed), which will bring together influential policy and decision makers in Asia to learn about family strengthening and alternative care.
The front-line response in South Africa

South Africa, like many developing countries, has been hit hard by the impact of COVID-19. In March, a national state of disaster was declared, followed quickly by a hard lockdown and, as Lourenza Steytler-Foghill from Hope and Homes for Children says, “a suspension of hard-won human rights and freedoms”. Combined with a failing health system, struggling economy and shortages in food and clean water, the most vulnerable communities are becoming increasingly marginalised.

A&O’s Johannesburg office has stepped up support for Hope and Homes for Children, with extra funding from the local A&O Foundation, as well as supporting its efforts to get food parcels, basic essentials and personal protective equipment (PPE) to at-risk individuals.

“We’ve connected Hope and Homes for Children to another of our closest charity partners, the Barjume Trust run by Barney Andrews,” explains Jane Waters, A&O’s COO in Johannesburg.

“Barney has been incredible in mobilising community organisations and local officials to ensure Hope and Homes for Children’s staff and operations are enabled, supported and protected.”

The two organisations have worked together to develop an approach that ensures charitable relief reaches the most vulnerable. This uses Hope and Homes for Children’s assessment tool covering six key areas: household and social relationships; living conditions; education; health; household economy; and behavior.

“Through this approach,” says Jane, “the partnership between Hope and Homes for Children and Barjume has been able to share knowledge and upskill teams. The Barjume volunteers hadn’t seen anything like this assessment tool before, so it is giving them a more robust approach to their relief aid long term, and a greater development aspect to their work.”

As Lourenza from Hope and Homes for Children says: “This crisis is the greatest test of our mission and of our ability to effect systemic change. This is where systemic change becomes real.”

Together with its partners, Hope and Homes for Children has built a Community Assist Network in Gauteng Province, through which it is helping to provide PPE for the children and workers in institutions there, and also supporting 500 families with food parcels, airtime and data vouchers.

“We take small steps, every day, to tackle logistical blockages that prevent critical support from reaching families living with disability, chronic illness, and those impacted by growing desperation leading to violence, abuse and family breakdown,” Lourenza says.

“The need is ever increasing – but so is our capacity for innovation. We’ve had two significant wins recently: first, being accredited as Essential Workers, which gives us a measure of protection and mobility in the lockdown environment,” says Lourenza, “and, second, working with Barney Andrews to ‘unlock’ the community-based organisations we operate through. We also owe a debt of gratitude to A&O, whose pro bono legal advice helped us achieve this.

“We will do more than survive this crisis,” Lourenza says. “We will work together to build the resilient, effective support systems that will strengthen families and communities in this new reality.”
Progress towards broader global aims

Despite the coronavirus pandemic, A&O’s unrestricted funding is helping Hope and Homes for Children continue to work towards its wider programme of advocacy and deinstitutionalisation. In the past year, the charity has closed three orphanages in Romania, Bulgaria and Rwanda and is working to close 30 more institutions. Progress is also being made by working with local authorities, national governments and partner NGOs across Moldova and Transnistria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ukraine, Sudan, Uganda and South Africa.

Hope and Homes for Children has provided training for nearly 7,000 child protection professionals, supported more than 750 children to leave orphanages and start a new life in a family or community-based care, and worked with families to prevent over 95,000 children from being separated and confined within an institution.

Combatting the long-term impact of COVID-19

Longer term, we should all be clear, stresses Mark Waddington, CEO of Hope and Homes for Children, that this is a humanitarian crisis like no other and it is playing out in the homes of the most vulnerable children.

“These are the families unable to earn because of the lockdowns in their countries, prevented from travelling and working, with little or no money to buy food and medicine, pay for rent or gain access to online learning for their children. By extending our charity partnership, A&O is enabling us to make a huge difference in tackling this crisis,” Mark says.

“Make no mistake – children are dying and will continue to die without support. There are too many cases of orphanage doors being locked and children incarcerated with no carers, leading to wholly unavoidable deaths.”

Many more will live with the lifelong secondary impact of COVID-19, Mark says: more acute poverty, health consequences and educational limitations.

“We’re uniquely placed to tackle this because of our connections to families,” he explains, “and because we are already adapting our practice to support humanitarian efforts that would otherwise fail to reach these families.”

“We are very thankful that, by extending our partnership, we have the ability to build real momentum across the wider response and so maximise our efforts.”

Mark Waddington, CEO of Hope and Homes for Children
Mihai is one of the hundreds of thousands of children Hope and Homes for Children is helping. He was separated from his family and siblings in Moldova when they found themselves with nowhere to live, and placed in an institution by the authorities.

The orphanage provided food and shelter but not the love and attention Mihai needs to thrive. The neglect and abuse children face in these institutions severely impacts their development and causes long-term emotional and physical damage.

Working with local partners in Moldova, Hope and Homes for Children has managed to reunite Mihai with his mother and siblings and provide a safe, permanent place to live with the support the family needs to stay together. Mihai is so happy to be home again.

The family struggles to make ends meet in normal times, but the COVID-19 crisis and lockdown in Moldova have meant that Mihai’s father cannot work. So Hope and Homes for Children’s partner – CCF Moldova – has stepped in to provide emergency supplies and hygiene essentials to ensure the family can stay safe at home throughout the pandemic and do not risk being separated again.
A&O is one of six law firms driving a pilot programme with the NGO European Lawyers in Lesvos (ELIL) to help thousands of refugees stranded just off the coast of Turkey with their asylum claims (see the last issue of Increasing Access for the full article).

Since launching the programme in August last year, six A&O lawyers have received intensive training on asylum law and how to conduct interviews with often traumatised clients, ahead of travelling to Lesvos. The remaining six volunteers have had to postpone plans as a result of the current COVID-19 crisis.

With support from A&O’s volunteers, plus those from the other five law firms (Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe; White & Case; Dentons; Ashurst and Charles Russell Speechlys), ELIL’s team has so far provided free legal advice to 10,000 people to support their asylum claims, in a process that now takes months or in many cases years.

The programme is making an impact – 74.5% of ELIL’s clients have been granted asylum compared to an average of just 46.5% in Greece – and it will expand to the nearby island of Samos, once the coronavirus crisis stabilises, where over 7,000 asylum seekers are living in a camp with an official capacity of just 700.
Geert Glas is one of the latest A&O volunteers to spend two weeks helping at the overcrowded Moria camp, a former military base on Lesvos. He sent the message below to his team halfway through his stay.

The difference between watching this migration crisis on TV and being here is the individuals you meet – the people behind the statistics.

So much is recognisable: the young woman from Iran whose eyes shine with happiness when you congratulate her on being pregnant; the Congolese man who’s pleasantly surprised when addressed with the respectful ‘vous’; and the six-year-old boy who was given a puppy as a present (there are lots of dogs here) and proudly holds it while his friends stroke it.

My days are spent helping these people prepare for their critical asylum interviews and researching issues of asylum law or human rights situations in the countries from which they’ve fled. Speaking French means I’ve been able to assist some of the African clients, which is a bonus.

Some of those I meet will be granted asylum and start a new life in Europe; others will be returned to their countries of origin or to Turkey where they travelled to Lesvos from.

It all depends on whether they can prove reasonable fear of persecution upon return. Sometimes this is clear – like the case of the Afghan translator who worked for the Western military and is on the Taliban’s “traitor” hit list. Sometimes it’s equally clear asylum will not be granted, like the young Algerian man who has come in the hope of finding a job in Europe.

Often everything depends on how credible their story is, but evidence can be hard to obtain. How can the young Afghan woman who escaped a forced marriage to a much older man prove that her brothers will punish her for dishonouring the family? How can a reluctant youth member of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard – who fled when his commander discovered he is gay and has a Zoroastrian tattoo (interpreted as anti-Islam as Zoroastrianism predates Islam) – prove that if returned to Iran he will end up in jail, or worse?

Not easy. Not easy at all.

Since I arrived here on Lesvos, people at home have often asked me how we can find an end to the migration crisis, but while being here has given me a broader perspective it still does not answer that question. We always hope people will have less reason to flee their countries, but it seems that as soon as a crisis is resolved in one country, another one erupts from which people flee.

In Greece, the refugees are predominantly from Afghanistan, Iran, Syria, Congo and Cameroon, but the numbers differ on each island: Lesvos has more Afghans because the smugglers who pick them up ‘own’ the Turkish launching beaches closest to Lesvos.

Most people have only reached Lesvos on their second or third attempt – the hefty price they pay smugglers seems to cover several attempts. It’s a lucrative business for the smugglers.

Perhaps Moria camp is the last place you would expect to find humour – but the other day I passed by a young man selling new sneakers with ‘Nike’ all over them in his makeshift shop. He was shouting, “Sneakers, two Euros, original!” When he saw me smiling at the ‘original’ statement (I’m a trademark lawyer, after all) he broke into a big grin and added, “Moria original!” We high-fived.
Uncertain futures

As the global COVID-19 crisis continues, attention is turning to its impact on the most disadvantaged young people in society. Here, our Smart Start graduates in the UK explain how the pandemic is affecting their futures.

In April, the Sutton Trust, a foundation that works to tackle social inequality across the UK, published its first report into how the COVID-19 crisis is affecting disadvantaged children’s education, from the early years through to workplace apprenticeships. It identifies key areas for concern – access to technology, online resources and tuition, plus the consequences of exam cancellations on higher education opportunities – and warns that:

“In the long term, the economic impact is likely to have a profound impact on social mobility, with the damage caused leading to fewer job opportunities, which will in turn likely fuel greater inequality of opportunity.”

The impact on A&O’s Smart Start students

Emma Turnbull in A&O’s community investment team has been tracking the experiences of recent graduates of A&O’s Smart Start Experience – the work experience programme for young people from non-privileged backgrounds – most of whom are now on the follow-on mentoring programme, Smarter Futures.

“These are students who come from low-income households and are mostly the first generation in their families to make it to university,” says Emma. “With A-level exams being cancelled – which determine your university options – it’s creating enormous anxiety for these young people. They don’t know whether the work they’ve put into exam preparation will now be recognised in their grades, and whether that will jeopardise the university places they desperately want.”

A key area of concern highlighted through A&O’s partnership with the Fair Education Alliance – a coalition that works to end educational inequality – is that cancelling formal exams will have a worse impact on pupils from working class and ethnic minority backgrounds who often go on to achieve better results than predicted in exams – and conversely are less likely to challenge their awarded grades. Concerns have also been raised about the longer-term implications of school closures and exam cancellations on the mental wellbeing of the most vulnerable pupils, with the potential for a spike in school exclusions once students start to return.

All Smarter Futures students are being supported by their A&O mentors throughout this and receiving weekly updates from Emma and mentoring organisation Brightside about developments that relate to them.

“We’ve been signposting them to online learning materials, virtual university tours, good careers resources and platforms for wellbeing and mental health – like the free app MeeTwo,” Emma says. “We’re also putting on an extra session with Circl (who provide leadership coaching on the Smarter Futures programme) around goal setting and taking responsibility in the current situation.”

It’s already an incredibly stressful time for all students, Emma stresses. “But many of these young people have had to work harder and overcome obstacles just to get to this point in their education – and, as they’ve told us themselves, they really don’t know what the future now holds.”
Shania Charles, Year 13, studying for A-levels in Philosophy and Ethics, English Literature and Music

I took part in Smart Start last summer and found it extremely helpful in pushing me to pursue a career in law. But all the changes in this year’s university application process have been stressful.

Unfortunately, my school didn’t implement any online learning before it closed. Instead, on our last day we were told to check the school website for updates, while teachers frantically printed out resources and activities for us to complete. We’ve been told we must complete the work independently but we can email our teachers if we have any difficulties.

It’s just me and my mum at home so I can find quiet time to complete my work – the main hindrance is my amazing ability to distract myself. Being at school gave me a sense of order which I find difficult to establish on my own. My mentor at A&O encourages me to make timetables to manage my time more effectively – it’s good advice at a time like this.

We’ve been told that our final grades will be based on coursework, mock exams and teacher assessment – however it’s still unclear whether the work we’re doing at home will contribute to our grades. This is one of my biggest concerns. It’s especially stressful for students who’ve received university offers asking for higher grades than they’re currently predicted. My first choice university wants one grade higher than what I currently have, which is honestly daunting. While some of the universities I’ve applied to have promised unconditional offers, others haven’t said anything. It’s confusing – all we can do is study and wait.

Fortunately, my local music service prepared online resources before it closed so I’ve been able to have my oboe lessons via Zoom. My Grade 7 oboe exams have been cancelled, but seeing my oboe teacher each week encourages me to practise.

My friends have definitely helped me stay motivated – we speak daily through social media and discuss the amount of work we have (or in some cases don’t have). My mum is self-isolating but always encourages me to complete my work too.

My mentor at A&O encourages me to make timetables to manage my time more effectively – it’s good advice at a time like this.

I’m a recipient of a Government bursary that helps vulnerable students cover education-related costs but, given we’re not attending school for now, I’m unsure how long we’ll receive the bursary money. For many of us, this is terrifying. At least my school is ensuring that students who receive free school meals can collect supplies each week, so if circumstances at home get difficult I know I can enjoy a meal at school.

I hope I’ll still be able to study law at university in September but I know this may not be possible. We don’t know how long or how badly we’ll be affected by the coronavirus, so we can only hope for the best. Social mobility is something we have taken for granted, but hopefully we can find a way to continue after this virus.

“All we can do is study and wait.”
Yajvee Kowlessur, Year 13, studying for A-levels in English Literature, History and Law

When I first heard about exams being cancelled, I was very disappointed – I genuinely didn’t think it would happen. I understand that protecting people’s health is the most important thing, but it feels like all the hard work I’ve put in for the past two years won’t be recognised.

Speaking to my friends and teachers has made me feel better – at least now we understand more about how grades will be awarded. I’ve always tried to work conscientiously so I hope my teachers will award my grade fairly. An alternative would be doing the exams when the schools re-open – but if this isn’t until September, can we still go to university this year or will entry be delayed?

My father is a nurse so things are very difficult for him – he has been self-isolating because of a cough and high temperature, which is a big concern. Another concern is the financial situation, which is looking bleak for many people. But we need to be positive and work hard so that the economy can prosper again. It is difficult for me and my family, as it will be for many families, but we need to adapt to survive.

School played such a large part in my life so I am finding quarantine hard, but with time I’m learning to make effective use of it – I’m cooking and reading more. I’ve realised we take a lot of things for granted, like eating dinner with family. I enjoy these small things. I know it’s important to keep updated with the news, but I limit it so that I don’t feel overwhelmed.

I am focusing now on the next stage of my life. Hopefully in September I will start university, studying English, so I have emailed universities for their first-year reading lists. I am trying to be optimistic that by September the situation will improve – I’m excited for university because it will be a new experience for me.

For now, I am just appreciating the small things instead of dwelling on what could have been. Staying optimistic and persevering will help us get through this together.

“I am appreciating the small things instead of dwelling on what could have been.”

Jo Hughes, Senior PSL and Alumni Manager at A&O, is mentor to Yajvee Kowlessur

I’ve exchanged lots of messages with Yajvee through the Brightside mentoring platform since lockdown started – mainly we have been looking forward to potential careers for her and exchanging views on different platforms and websites. Trying to lift our heads up to what comes next.

I am concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on disadvantaged young people and have been speaking a lot to contacts in the social mobility community who are trying to address this. Emma (Turnbull, in A&O’s community investment team) invited me to join a Social Mobility Commission call with her at the end of April. One of the ways speakers said businesses can help with the opportunity gap – which will inevitably get wider following the pandemic – is by supporting schools with mentoring programmes. Thankfully, we have already established good virtual mentoring channels, so I am trying to make the most of these to help students through this really difficult time.
Madeline McMillan, Year 13, studying for A-levels in Law, History and Politics

I am usually a passionate and driven learner but schoolwork seems increasingly pointless. I suppose that’s a consequence of the pandemic: a lack of motivation.

I understand and respect the decision to cancel exams – this is an international health emergency – but we’ve been told for years that these exams will shape our future. We’ve cried over them, lost sleep over them, so it feels deflating to lose sight of a goal that we’ve poured so much energy into.

“In this crisis we’re not all in the same boat.”

I often hear the phrase “we are all in the same boat” – but in this crisis we’re not all in the same boat; or if we are, then one side is sinking faster than the other. Children from more affluent backgrounds, in schools with greater resources, have considerably better chances of adapting.

I know students at private schools whose learning has remained structured, with online classes that simulate their usual school days. Compare this to a friend who shares a room with a younger brother, has limited access to the internet and is being emailed assessments to complete with little support. This is not a level playing field.

My college, in a deprived area, gave laptops to students who don’t have computers at home so that they can complete timed assessments to support their final grades. Safe to say, this old, often unreliable technology puts students at a disadvantage, on top of being stuck in an environment not suited to learning.

Now more than ever, our home lives will impact the grades we achieve.

Studying at home also makes it hard to separate schoolwork from home life. I’m thankful that I have supportive parents and a garden, which makes things easier. I’ve also volunteered as an NHS responder and I exercise every day, which gives me the routine I lacked after college closed.

Ultimately, I’m worried about my future. Exams gave me something to work towards – I believed that if I put in the work, I would achieve the outcome I deserved. Predicting grades based on teacher assessments and previous work is probably the fairest option but people will lose out as a result. Some students don’t produce their best work during the year, for many reasons, but revise heavily and excel on exam day. Now, they won’t get that chance.

I hope, as many of us do, that by September this will be over. I hope that we will take lessons from this crisis and continue to support each other. Most of all, I hope people receive the help they need to recover from the impact on their mental health, education and financial situations.
Sana Hafeji, second-year student at the London School of Economics, studying Environmental Policy with Economics

My university teaching is now all online, but the tutors are making it as easy and normal as possible. I can actually see a change in the dynamic of classes as people feel more confident participating in debates, which makes it more interesting.

When the campus shut down, I returned home to Yorkshire. I hadn’t been home for two months so I just wanted to relax with my family, but with three weeks of term remaining I had to discipline myself. I’ve created a timetable to organise my lectures and study slots, but also to make time for friends and loved ones. We may have to physically distance, but we can still stay in contact – it really helps our mental wellbeing.

With so much uncertainty, I am anxious for the future. A lot of the jobs and internships normally available during the summer have been cancelled – but internships are a way of equalising the playing field and gaining crucial experience, particularly for people like me who don’t live in London. This is a big setback.

Luckily, my time at A&O has given me valuable work experience but the economic impact of this crisis could affect my career opportunities in such competitive industries. I’ll have to consider getting a job close to home in the short term, and that may become a barrier to re-entering the graduate job market in London.

As the year ended so abruptly, I couldn’t say goodbye to friends who have now graduated and left LSE; others I won’t see for a long time. Nevertheless, I am grateful to have had such an incredible year and, despite the difficult circumstances, this pandemic is making communities, friendships and connections grow stronger. I’ve been volunteering with my local community to help vulnerable neighbours and, I have to say, the community spirit has been wonderful!

“Jobs and internships normally available during the summer have been cancelled – but internships are a way of equalising the playing field and gaining crucial experience, particularly for people like me.”
Samuel Cole, Year 13, studying for A-levels in Business Studies, English Literature and Sociology

Like most students I’m being sent tasks through Google Classroom – I can’t say I’m consistently enthusiastic but I’m doing my best! Motivating myself at home is something I’m still getting to grips with. Aren’t we all?

When I’m lacking motivation I think of the goals I want to complete once the lockdown is over – going to university and being able to travel to see friends again. Strangely, I miss public transport, which I never thought possible!

The situation around my exams is less than ideal – but that’s true of this pandemic in every aspect of our lives. The Government’s decision to award grades on previous work and teachers’ judgments is probably the fairest solution, but home assessment isn’t like exam conditions and could therefore give unfair advantage to those with access to extra resources and support.

I’m struggling with the lack of contact with friends, but I am finding some positives in lockdown: spending time with my family and cycling a lot. I’ve also been doing all the things I never found time to. I’m making my way through the reading list for the Law LLB in preparation for starting university in September – I’ve just finished About Law by Tony Honoré and have begun The Secret Barrister – so I’m doing something enjoyable as well as beneficial for the future.

Luckily, I have a part-time job in a supermarket, which means I’m classed as an ‘essential worker’ and therefore have a guaranteed income. Working to ensure my little part of the nation is fed has motivated me even more to beat this pandemic.

My hope for September is that some sense of freedom will be restored and I will be able to continue with my goals of studying law and entering the legal profession. I’m looking forward to going to university and all the positive challenges that will bring – making new friends and adapting to life away from home in a new city.

That is one of my main reasons for staying motivated throughout this very unpredictable time in the world.

“Home assessment isn’t like exam conditions and could therefore give unfair advantage to those with access to extra resources and support.”
The legacy is everything

A&O’s record-breaking global partnership with War Child – an international charity that works with children caught up in war – ran from 2016 to 2018 and involved nearly every A&O office.

In fundraising terms, it was the firm’s most successful partnership, raising GBP1.5m and breaking all previous fundraising records. It generated the template for a more sustainable form of funding for future global charity partners and – most importantly – supported thousands of families affected by conflict in the Middle East and Africa.

We take a look back at the partnership’s success and its long-term impact, both on War Child as an organisation and the communities it supports.

In War Child’s London office, its staff ring a bell every time the charity receives some good news.

The bell was donated by colleagues working in Jordan, one of the ten countries across the Middle East and Africa where War Child works to protect, educate and safeguard the rights of children whose lives have been disrupted by conflict.

“I remember the bell ringing to announce that War Child had won the vote to be A&O’s new global charity partner,” recalls Rob Williams, War Child’s CEO.

“Back then, in September 2016, I had no idea how significant the news would turn out to be. I knew the partnership would be transformational for the group of children we wanted to support in Jordan – but I didn’t know it would become the biggest corporate partnership in War Child’s history.”

For A&O, it was the same. Not only did the two-year partnership exceed all expectations in fundraising terms, it also developed the firm’s thinking about how to maximise the benefits for future global charity partners, striking a balance between supporting specific projects and providing the unrestricted funding vital for charities to operate in a sustainable way.
The partnership takes off

Having applied to be A&O’s charity partner in the past, 2016 presented the perfect opportunity for War Child and A&O to work together, with A&O making the plight of displaced people the focus of its next global charity partnership (previous partnerships with AfriKids and Amref Health Africa had focused on access to education).

It was a potentially controversial subject, as Wim Dejonghe, A&O’s senior partner, observed after visiting War Child projects in two Jordanian camps housing hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees.

“The global refugee crisis was a politically sensitive issue,” Wim says, “with millions of people displaced as a result of religious intolerance or political nationalism. Yet it wasn’t an issue we could turn away from. We felt with A&O’s resources we could make an impact, so it really came down to choosing a good organisation to work with – which we certainly achieved with War Child.”

The escalating refugee crisis had clearly struck a chord across A&O, says Singapore partner Brendan Hannigan, who was involved with the partnership throughout.

“The figures were – still are – shocking,” he says. By the middle of 2017, the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) was reporting that some 66 million people had been displaced by conflict around the world, including 5.5 million from Syria alone. A year later the numbers had risen to nearly 71 million and 6.7 million, respectively.

The response across A&O was amazing, Brendan says. Nearly 2,500 people took part in the staff vote from nearly every office, and more than 600 immediately signed up to be ‘ambassadors’ for the partnership, volunteering to support fundraising and pro bono efforts.

“Given how topical the refugee crisis was, and what War Child was setting out to achieve, the partnership had momentum from the outset,” says Brendan.

Nick Scott, the charity’s former Head of Partnerships, agrees. “The opportunities it presented for War Child were huge,” he says. “When you’re talking about a major global law firm, with significant resources across 31 countries, we felt we could achieve something really powerful together.”
Rescue Childhood was designed to provide psychosocial support and education for 2,000 young children displaced by the Syrian conflict.

Rescuing Syrian childhoods

Initially the partnership had a target of raising GBP500,000 to fund a specific education project, Rescue Childhood, in the Emirati refugee camp in Jordan.

The Emirati camp was new and well built, but unlike larger camps had relatively little infrastructure and provision for the thousands of women and children living there.

“Za’atari – a bigger camp in Jordan – is like a small city,” Nick says. “There are employment opportunities, a functioning education system and all sorts of shops. Emirati, by contrast, had much less, certainly no education system. That’s why we wanted to go in there.”

Rescue Childhood was designed to provide psychosocial support and education for young children displaced by the Syrian conflict. Its aim was to deliver a system of Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) for around 2,000 children, and to support parents and caregivers to achieve a more joined up approach between the classroom and home.

In creating the programme, War Child was building on its work since 2013, two years after the Syrian conflict began, to develop an ECCD curriculum alongside the Jordanian government for the entire country.

War Child’s own assessment clearly demonstrated the desperate need. Interruptions to children’s early education and development were having a significant impact on their ability to succeed at school. Children were not only returning to education at very different stages of development, but often displayed the symptoms of deep trauma, such as terrifying nightmares, poor concentration, an inability to form relationships and even violent or antisocial behaviour.
A record effort

“The stories of the Syrian children and families War Child was helping in Jordan really showed the human dimension of the refugee crisis and engaged people across the network,” Wim says.

“The response to our First Hour, First Day fundraising campaign in January 2017 – in which people donated the first hour’s or day’s pay of the year – was enormous. It raised GBP467,000 – our most successful campaign ever.”

This combined with other events meant that just six months into the partnership the initial fundraising target was exceeded. A new GBP1m target was announced, which was also broken six months later.

The impact of this was felt quickly in the Emirati camp. Over the course of the Rescue Childhood project, War Child has provided education, recreation and psychosocial support to over 2,200 children – 200 more than initially hoped.

Eight hundred parents and caregivers have also received help – more than four times the initial target – meaning that, with an average family size of five, the programme has reached an estimated 4,200 children in Emirati camp.

With Jordan remaining relatively accessible, A&O teams have been able to visit the camp and see War Child’s work in action, with Wim Dejonghe, Andrew Ballheimer (then managing partner) and Corporate Responsibility partner Mark Mansell among those to spend time in Emirati camp.

Since the end of A&O’s involvement, Rescue Childhood has been taken on by War Child Holland, the charity’s Dutch affiliate, so is continuing its important work.

Sustainable funding

The early success of the partnership – funding Rescue Childhood within six months – meant that the additional money raised could be provided on unrestricted terms, allowing War Child to invest it at its own discretion, thereby helping to sustain the organisation’s work long after the relationship with A&O ended.

As Brendan explains: “The idea of unrestricted funding – not having direct input on what our money funds – can be tricky to engage people with internally, particularly when the sums involved are substantial.

“But War Child was unlikely to have another partner step in and replace us immediately, so rather than have a sudden loss in funding, this provided the flexibility to build a buffer while looking for new funding. Conflicts can also spring up or escalate very quickly, so this means War Child has access to money that can quickly be sent to where it is needed most.”

By investing just over 20% of unrestricted funding in its internal operations, War Child has created important new funding streams, one of which has been to grow its gaming team to develop new ways of attracting donations. An example is the award-winning Armistice initiative, where, for Remembrance Day each November, gaming studios are asked to pacify their games for a short period and to set up a donation function.

In 2016, revenue from gaming was around GBP185,000 – today it is nearly five times higher.

As Nick puts it: “The gaming function is starting to influence the rest of the team, demonstrating how mass-market fundraising can work. We wouldn’t have achieved this without the unrestricted funding A&O provided.

“If all our funding had to be directed towards specific projects,” Nick says, “there would be no life for things like the Rescue Childhood programme after the partnership with A&O ended. We wouldn’t be talking about what we’ve learnt and how we are now doing ECCD projects in various other countries.

“The legacy piece is everything.”
Learning from War Child

Brendan believes A&O has learnt much from War Child, too – both about the impact of unrestricted funding, which is now being applied to the current charity partnership with Hope and Homes for Children – as well as the organisation’s wider work.

For Brendan, the high point was visiting the KATI project in Uganda, a social venture set up by War Child in 2013 and successfully scaled up to become an independent, youth-led organisation.

Through KATI, War Child provides financial support and mentoring for young entrepreneurs aged 18 to 34 to set up microbusinesses. This is the generation who still live with the disruption and lost opportunities inflicted by the 20-year conflict that ended in 2008.

War Child has worked with local communities to brainstorm business ideas, provide small amounts of seed funding and, importantly, offer ongoing mentoring and support. It is creating a dynamic network of young entrepreneurs across northern Uganda.

“The young people benefiting from the project are incredible,” Brendan says. “They had buckets of energy and loads of ideas. It shows we don’t need to come in with capes flying and ‘save them’ – they just need some initial support and can do the rest themselves.”

The trip changed his view of Africa completely from the “relentlessly negative” media coverage of the continent. “Within a few hours of arriving in Uganda, every single assumption I had was turned on its head,” says Brendan. “I was so impressed by the local team working there and with the young people themselves. I came away feeling massively positive.

“Overall, I think our partnership with War Child has been excellent.”
Important pro bono support

For Nick, a standout feature of the partnership was the strength and imagination of A&O’s pro bono and community investment team who, he says, were professional and demanding – in a good way. The largest single pro bono project was a review of War Child’s safeguarding policies and procedures in the wake of allegations that seriously impacted the reputations of other major international charities in 2018 (see page 30).

Rob Williams agrees and especially praises the volunteers across A&O for their commitment and determination to get under the skin of the partnership. “We can only make a success of these relationships if we give each other something to work with,” he says. “A&O really did that – everyone on both sides was open to being challenged.”

Longevity

The impact of the partnership has been felt most by the Syrian refugee families in Jordan. The longevity of the partnership, as Wim says, has been the most important feature, with the benefits he saw so clearly on his visit to Emirati camp being sustained well after the end of the formal partnership. “By raising more than we ever thought possible, we’ve been able to help thousands of children caught up in conflict – not just while the relationship lasted but way into the future,” he says. “That is the result we always hoped for.”

How War Child invested its unrestricted funding

A&O raised GBP1.5m throughout the two-year partnership with War Child. After fully funding the Rescue Childhood programme, the remaining money – close to GBP1m – was provided as unrestricted funding:

- 51% has been invested to directly support children and families most in need around the world, including in Uganda (see page 28) and responding to emergency situations in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where War Child reached some 21,500 families in 2018, and in Yemen, where life-saving support has been provided to nearly 32,500 children and their families. This tranche of funding has also been used to leverage support from institutional funding sources, like the UK’s Department for International Development, which often insists on partial matched funding.

- 21% has been spent strengthening key parts of War Child’s internal operations – such as compliance, finance, training and security – all crucial to ensuring it can operate effectively into the future.

- 28% has been invested to secure additional fundraising: War Child estimates that it has raised GBP3 from every GBP1 invested.

“A&O’s unrestricted funding has enabled us to bring in at least an extra GBP900,000 to War Child – but we think that estimate is conservative.”

Nick Scott, former Head of Partnerships, War Child
Throughout the partnership, A&O provided War Child with pro bono and other professional support: on the legal side, ranging from advice on electoral rules in the run-up to the 2017 UK general election, to commercial, IP and employment matters; and, on the non-legal side, translation support, graphic design and presentation skills training.

The largest single pro bono project was a major safeguarding review in the context of the allegations of sexual harassment and exploitation that rocked the international charity sector in 2018. War Child was in no way associated with any of those complaints but nonetheless asked A&O to undertake a large-scale culture and operations review of its safeguarding policies and governance framework – including around recruitment, training, health and safety and security – to ensure its practices continued to meet the highest standards.

Overall, nearly every single office contributed to the partnership through pro bono, global fundraising campaigns and over 100 fundraising events – including two 70km treks across the Dana Nature Reserve in Jordan to the ancient city of Petra. Read a diary account of one of the treks in Increasing Access November 2017.
Ten questions for Helen Rogers

Describe yourself in 30 words
I posed the question to my 11 year-old son who told me I am “mostly patient and a good cook”. I’ll take that.

After being a fee earner, what motivated you to move into a full-time pro bono role?
I’ve always been interested in current affairs and social justice. For a long time, I was torn between law and journalism – in the end, I married a photojournalist and became an employment lawyer. Although I enjoyed my work, I always felt I wanted to do more to improve the lives of others. Discovering that a role existed where I could combine elements of everything that motivated me was an irresistible opportunity.

I spent a lot of time drinking coffee with people who were kind enough to help me find a way into the pro bono sector. After a six-month secondment, I knew I’d found a role I loved. Now I use my skills as a lawyer to assess and understand charities’ legal needs and create opportunities for my incredible colleagues at A&O to provide free legal advice to charities and individuals.

What impact is the COVID-19 crisis having on pro bono and community investment work at A&O?
Wherever possible, the pro bono and community investment team has been moving all projects online – delivering workshops as webinars and using new safeguarding technology to allow mentoring sessions with young people to continue. All face-to-face legal advice clinics are now telephone clinics, and we’re working closely with our charity partners to address the needs of clients who may be struggling with a range of issues, both legal and personal.
We are also in discussions with our partner NGO on the Greek island of Lesvos to provide volunteer support via video link for its asylum lawyers. Before this crisis we were sending lawyers to Lesvos to support the work in person – as Geert Glas talks about on page 16.

One of the positive outcomes is that law firms are starting to collaborate more on pro bono work. In times of crisis – for example the Grenfell Tower fire in London, the Australian bushfires and the U.S. Administration’s immigration orders – the sector has learned that charities and NGOs cannot cope with the demand of law firms all wanting to ‘help’, so a unified approach is essential.

From the outset of the COVID-19 crisis, A&O has been collaborating with other law firms to review the potential legal issues emerging in different areas of law and to make global resources available via a single platform. In Paris, we’re reviewing a range of legal areas, including employment law and contractual matters; in the UK we’re focusing on issues faced by refugees, asylum seekers and stateless persons as a consequence of COVID-19. We are also working with the Thomson Reuters Foundation on a series of webinars for charities and NGOs in different countries on insolvency and commercial contracts.

**What impact can you see this crisis having on charities and NGOs?**

The pressure on the charity sector is immense. For the most part, charities operate on a tight budget and live with constant uncertainty about funding. The impact of this crisis has accelerated operational difficulties at a time when front-line charities need and want to do more to support vulnerable clients and communities.

Charities and NGOs face the same problems as all businesses – how can they look after staff and pay their wages, adapt to delivering services remotely, maintain an adequate level of income and fulfil existing payment or grant conditions? Depending on the duration of the lockdown and recovery periods in different parts of the world, the sad reality is that many of these organisations won’t survive the COVID-19 crisis. Pro bono colleagues in Asia are already seeing this.
Describe your perfect day off work – when not in lockdown

Walking my dog, Molly, through the fields near my house and ending up in town to have brunch in the sunshine with my husband and children. Ideally I’d have time to read the newspaper and have a coffee on my own first. In the afternoon, a wander around the V&A Museum with my best friend and tea in the café, then dinner with friends in the evening. Food features pretty heavily I realise!

What is the first place you’d like to travel to when the restrictions are lifted, and why?

It would have to be somewhere that could quickly satisfy all the things I’m missing right now, somewhere vibrant – pavement cafés for people-watching, great food and wine, live music, museums and galleries, hot, sunny days and warm evenings. I love Seville and it was one of the places we stayed on our honeymoon, so full of great memories.

Tell us something not many people know about you

When I was 18, I worked in a paediatric hospital and rehabilitation centre in Jerusalem. I’m neither Israeli nor religious but it’s a place that has long fascinated me for its history, politics and religions.

I was the only volunteer there intending to be a lawyer rather than a doctor or physio, but they must have seen potential in me as, after a basic induction, they gave me a uniform and introduced me to the patients. It was a time of real highs and lows: friendships and losses, a country and a region of beauty but instability, and living independently in an exhilarating city. Most of all, watching multi-faith medical teams at work in the hospital, treating Israeli and Arab children together while bombs exploded daily in the Old City, brought home to me the importance of being involved in positive change. That has never left me.

What words of advice would you give to someone interested in getting involved in pro bono and community investment work?

People are moved by causes that interest them or affect someone they care about – work out what that is for you and be open to opportunities to get involved. You might find things in this publication that inspire you, or projects that your colleagues are doing. Be curious and find out more. Start small, take a risk to do something new and I guarantee that working with others interested in the same cause will give you the appetite to do more. Being part of a like-minded team is very motivating, and seeing your work achieve good things for others is a truly great feeling.

Who do you admire most, and why?

There are so many people I admire in the charity sector but the name I keep coming back to is Julie Bishop, Director of the Law Centres Network. Her name isn’t known to many outside the free legal advice sector and she would hate it if it were. Julie is determined, unassuming and passionate about her work and manages to speak truth to power (most often the UK Government) in a way that is disarming and persuasive. I hugely admire her resilience to guide Law Centres through innumerable challenges year on year and her commitment to working for a future where society is more just and equal for all.

“Take a risk to do something new and I guarantee that working with others interested in the same cause will give you the appetite to do more.”
My proudest achievement in pro bono work is...

I don’t know where to start! Every day at A&O I’m lucky enough to work with some of the best lawyers in the profession who give their legal skills for free to charities and communities all over the world. I don’t consider these matters my achievements, but I’m proud of every piece of pro bono work we do as a firm. We can’t save the world but we can, and do, apply our legal training and intellect to address the problems and inequalities that make life hard for many people.

I’d like to mention one matter that I think shows the best of A&O and what we can achieve collectively:

In 2010, I worked with colleagues, funders and government to prevent the imminent closure, due to lack of funds, of South West London Law Centres (SWLLC) – one of England’s largest Law Centres and a long-term pro bono client of A&O. The Legal Aid Minister at the time, Lord Bach, said he would commit GBP235,000 of government funds to save the Law Centre, provided law firms contributed the balance of funds. A group of law firms and funders led by A&O, the London Legal Support Trust and the Baring Foundation raised GBP80,000 within a few weeks and kept the doors open.

Over the coming months, A&O lawyers in London gave SWLLC hundreds of hours of pro bono advice on restructuring, employment, tax, real estate and commercial contracts, and specialists in IT, Marketing, HR and Business Services all gave their time to strengthen SWLLC’s infrastructure for years to come. It all paid off. Despite constant funding challenges, in February this year the Centre celebrated its 45th anniversary and continues to help thousands of clients every year to access justice and uphold their everyday rights. A&O lawyers still give pro bono advice at Battersea’s free legal advice clinic every Thursday evening.

“We can’t save the world but we can, and do, apply our legal training and intellect to address the problems and inequalities that make life hard for many people.”
For more information, please contact:

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