

# Aquarius, the first “citizen” ship, has saved 917 migrants

*Maryline Baumard, Le Monde (03.05.2016)*

They wanted a "citizen" ship that would save lives. A ship financed through the generosity of private donors ... Sophie Beau, a humanitarian worker, and Klaus Vogel, a merchant navy captain, chartered the “Aquarius”, which after two months in the Mediterranean has rescued 917 men, women and children who were otherwise destined to drown.



Aquarius, ready to rescue migrants near Lampedusa.

*Patrick Bar / SOS-Méditerranée / AP*

A year after its establishment, the [SOS-Méditerranée](#) association has proven to be a credible rescue operator, taking its place alongside the military and the Italian coast guard. Its small management team has the deep conviction that "politicians have not taken stock of the situation and that we are in a lasting migration crisis," insists Ms Beau, the association's Executive Director. Francis Vallat, the President, adds that "to address this dramatic situation, civil society must contribute in an independent, sustainable and non-political way to rescue missions, which are inadequately taken care of by public authorities."

## €100 000 in five days

The Aquarius's first campaign confirmed the belief of its small team of backers that civil society wants to help save lives. "We are 98% funded by private donations. People joined our project very quickly and we raised €100 000 in five days on the [Ulule crowdfunding platform](#)," explains Jean Karinthi, who is in charge of fundraising. The remaining 2% comes from the City of Paris and from two members of parliament who wish to remain anonymous but donated their parliamentary allowance. Only one foundation has contributed so far, the BNP Paribas foundation. "Businesses have not yet shown any concern," laments Mr. Karinthi.

The Aquarius team does not want to sail for another two months across the Mediterranean Sea. Instead, throughout the summer, it wants to operate between Sicily and Libya. To do this, the association needs just over €1 million, with a day at sea costing €11 000. The total budget for 2016 will be €3.6 million, but

that is the price of saving lives. "The Aquarius has been equipped to accommodate migrants and we are working with Doctors Without Borders to offer them the care they need," said Ms Beau.



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### **In extremis rescue**

The six rescue missions already carried out by the Aquarius have shown that the health of migrants who stayed in Libya was very bad. "For instance, we had to deal with four gunshot victims aboard a canoe," said Ms Beau. However, for the 27 people on board the Aquarius, the most difficult moment to date was the *in extremis* rescue of 108 migrants from a boat where eight people were already dead.

The team felt the pain but also shared the joy of all those saved. "We are messengers. We want to share with our donors the experiences we have lived at sea," insists Mr Vallat. The association raises funds through the Internet but would also like to create a movement around it initiative. In Marseille, Paris and Rennes, groups have been created to support the project and involve citizens in these rescue efforts. SOS-Méditerranée intends to develop this aspect during a campaign it is now launching.

"We are really concerned about the summer of 2016. Thousands of people are waiting in Libya and we fear a shift of migrant routes towards the central Mediterranean as a result of the agreement between the EU and Turkey," added the SOS-Méditerranée director, although for the moment being this threat is not yet materialising.

[http://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2016/05/03/l-aquarius-premier-bateau-citoyen-a-sauve-916-migrants\\_4913141\\_3214.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2016/05/03/l-aquarius-premier-bateau-citoyen-a-sauve-916-migrants_4913141_3214.html)