

Ursich on refugees and a 500-year-old Venice palazzo

Posted on May 7, 2026 by Alina Trabattoni, Sabina Castelfranco

VENICE — We met Emma Ursich, CEO of the Human Safety Net Foundation, inside the Procuratie Vecchie on St Mark's Square, a 500-year-old palace closed to the public for five centuries and reopened in April 2022 after a full restoration by David Chipperfield Architects. Owned by Generali since 1832, the building is now home to the insurance group's venture philanthropy foundation, which since 2017 has reached more than 1.3 million vulnerable people across 24 countries, trained over 18,000 refugees and seeded 1,300 micro-enterprises. Oxford-educated in Chinese, born to a Triestine father and an English mother, Ursich also sits on the board of Venice World Capital of Sustainability. She told us why Generali chose social innovation over a museum or luxury hotel, and shared the story of a refugee barber in Paris who now gives free haircuts to those who cannot afford them.

Q. What is the Human Safety Net, and why did Generali create it in 2017?

"For us, it's all about unlocking people potential because we believe that everybody has potential and not everybody is in the position to express that. Our work on the ground in 25 countries is exactly this. We work with NGOs and social enterprises to accompany people in order to have a transformative effect on their lives."

Q. Why reopen the Procuratie Vecchie now, and why dedicate it to social innovation rather than a museum or a luxury hotel?

"Venice is an incredible city with more than 25 million visitors every year. So what better place than

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Venice to engage people around what matters to us as people, as communities and even as businesses? It was decided this space would have this new mission, to be open to the public and to involve people around social issues."

Q. Can anyone walk in off Piazza San Marco?

"Anyone can walk in. This is open and free. We like to have this Anglo-Saxon model where museums and experiences are free. We have a permanent experience on human potential, artists who interpret our work every year, and laboratories for children, families and schools. Also good Italian coffee, which is very important."

Q. One story that captures what the Human Safety Net is really about?

"A refugee, trained as a barber from age 12, had a long, difficult journey into Europe. Thanks to our programme for micro-entrepreneurs, he set up shop in Paris. Now he gives haircuts to people who cannot afford it. He said, this is my mission to give back, because we are all part of one community."

Q. What's your ambition for the next phase, for Venice and the foundation globally?

"Venice is a place for dialogue. We speak about issues that are sometimes hard, early opportunities, life chances, social mobility, inclusion of refugees, to find common ground around our shared humanity, so we can advance together in a moment where the world is very fractured."

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