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Sr. Juliana Ekwoanya chats with a child who visited the Hope for the Village Child Foundation clinic with her mother, in Kaduna, north central Nigeria. (Patrick Egwu)



by Patrick Egwu

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In late fall last year, Safarau Mukhtar, 29, rushed Sa'adatu, her sickly 2-year-old child, to the Hope for the Village Child Foundation, a local nonprofit in Kaduna, north central Nigeria. The nonprofit runs a small clinic that caters to the health needs of local communities.

Mukhtar was visibly shaken as she sat on the hospital bed, clinging close to Sa'adatu, who was wrapped with an old cloth. Mukhtar said she came to the clinic to find a cure for her child, who was groaning and crying.

Sr. Juliana Ekwoanya, a Dominican Sister of St. Catherine of Siena and the head of the health section of the clinic, works with a handful of nurses and community health workers. They ran some tests on Sa'adatu and took blood samples. The test showed that she had severe malnutrition. Sa'adatu was given milk, food and some medications for malnutrition.

Ekwoanya said she has handled cases like this before.

"Malnutrition, rickets and malaria are the three biggest health challenges we face here," said Ekwoanya. "These are serious issues and they are common in this area."

The nonprofit has a rickets program that helps children from poor and marginalized communities. Rickets is a bone disease that affects infants and children, usually due to vitamin D deficiency.



Sa'adatu cries as a nurse at the Hope for the Village Child Foundation clinic attends to her. (Patrick Egwu)

At the clinic, dozens of rickets patients visit to receive treatment. Rickets is treated for free through surgeries that cost more than 800,000 naira (about US$530). Ekwoanya said more than 1,000 children are receiving treatment from the foundation, while more than 4,000 have been reached with treatments since inception.

"We see a lot of children with rickets and we have extended our rickets programs in remote communities," she said. The rickets program is funded by Misereor, the German Catholic Bishops' Organization for Development Cooperation. "It's not something we can do on our own without funding because its treatment is very expensive."

Lami Tanko was a beneficiary of the rickets project by the nonprofit. Growing up in her village in Kaduna, she said it was "very painful walking."

But when the foundation visited her village in 2005, they took interest in her and booked her surgery. After the surgery, the sisters helped enroll Tanko in school and awarded her a scholarship.

"They taught me how to speak and write and now I'm a community health extension worker," she said. "I'm so grateful for what they have done in taking care of me and I want to pay this forward to someone else. Nobody expected me to amount to anything in life."

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Sr. Marie Wakdok, another Dominican sister who is also a nurse midwife, works at the foundation and helps to respond to the health issues facing residents of nearby communities who visit the clinic. She helps with consultations and follow-up visits for patients.

"You have to preserve life and give hope to vulnerable people," she said. "We respond and cater to the health needs of everyone irrespective of religious affiliations."

Engaging communities for peace

Hope for the Village Child was founded in 1994 by Eli and Margaret Mama. The Nigerian and English couple fled Nigeria after they were targeted in an attack by religious extremists. In 2003, Kansas-born Dominican Sr. Rita Schwarzenberger, who moved to Nigeria as a missionary more than 50 years ago, was asked to take over management of the foundation.

Through the foundation, Schwarzenberger works with other stakeholders to promote peace in troubled parts of northern Nigeria where communal conflicts and violent clashes by farmers and herders have displaced communities and residents. Fight for control over resources, especially land and water, has led to growing conflicts between the two groups.

Neem Foundation, a crisis response organization, works with Schwarzenberger on peace projects and initiatives that seek to address conflicts in local communities through community-led approaches. The peace initiative is funded by the Karuna Center for Peace Building, a Massachusetts-based organization working to empower

people divided to create sustainable peace.



Sr. Rita Schwarzenberger listens during a staff meeting of the Hope for the Village Child Foundation. (Patrick Egwu)

"The idea of working with communities is that we are not there all the time but people who live there know what is happening, so if anything happens, they need the skills to deal with it or respond," she said.

The first component of that peace project is the Early Warning, Early Response, Schwarzenberger said. She noted many conflicts can start little but can blow up overnight.

"But if people are trained to see that this could lead into something, then they're given the skills to look at that and to respond quite quickly," she said. "In those communities, we set up several groups of people that can handle this. Some of the conflicts are more complicated and last for years and so for a conflict like that, we trained people on Reflective Structured Dialogue."

The foundation trains community members on mental health psychosocial support, she added. The goal, she said, is for them to offer support and assistance to people who are having difficulty coping with a death or a traumatic situation.

"If the problem is too much for them, they refer them to experts," she said. "It's what we call first aid trauma healing because the communities are using it to solve their own problems."

Related: Dominican Sisters promote peace in Nigeria's conflict-prone communities

Last September, Schwarzenberger attended a national conference in Abuja, Nigeria's capital city, organized and funded by Karuna on managing relations between farmers and herders as part of the peace project. It's the third conference in three years.

"We work with farmers and herders to see how we can jointly address conflict and help each other to grow," she said. "We try to help them to find a path to peace. The work that we do is to help people to help themselves."

Attacks disrupt work

Mukhtar lives in a farming village some 20 kilometers away. Armed men attacked her village, and residents were displaced. The clinic where Sa'adatu was admitted used to run a mobile health care unit in some remote areas but was stopped due to growing insecurity.

Ekwoanya said insecurity remains a huge problem for the work they do at the clinic, including some of their health programs and outreaches. At the clinic, work hours have changed due to frequent abductions and killings by armed gangs.

"People have been displaced from their homes and this affects our work in so many ways," she said. "The communities around our office have fled. Farmers no longer go to the farms because of fear of being killed or kidnapped."

In 2021, armed men attacked the convent where the sisters lived. The sisters escaped and abandoned the community. They are currently renting a place that serves as their new home and community.

"It was one of the scariest situations I have ever seen," Ekwoanya said. "Our neighbours were picked up and killed, and we never went back there."

Ekwoanya said the motivation for their work is passion for children. "We want to give them hope for the future, to feel accepted and some sense of belonging."



Srs. Juliana Ekwoanya (foreground) and Marie Wakdok at the Hope for the Village Child Foundation in Kaduna, north central Nigeria (Patrick Egwu)

"We want no child to be left behind," she said. "When they tell their stories, you will really feel for them. Some of the children with rickets feel demoralized because of the pain. They can no longer go to school, play with fellow children or perform optimally because of the pains of rickets."

"We have to be available to give hope to children and communities," Wakdok said. "I'm passionate about the work and I have been trained both as a religious and a professional."

Schwarzenberger said when they work with communities, they are dealing with human dignity.

"We apply all the principles of Catholic social teaching in our work," she said. "We want to give them hope because no matter the problem you see in people, there is the possibility of hope and greatness in them."

She said funding is one of the challenges they face, including the peace project, which is coming to an end after its five-year funding cycle has elapsed.

"That is why we cannot offer free services for everything and for everyone because we don't have the funds to do that," Schwarzenberger said.

After the 2021 attacks and a recent break-in, the sisters invited a trauma counselor for sisters and staff who witnessed the attack.

"The counselors allowed people to talk about their fears and how to overcome them. There is a low level of trauma in everybody including children because of insecurity," Schwarzenberger said.