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Health Care for a Nigerian Village

A medical clinic in Nigeria started by a doctor in San Sebastian, Spain, has had a big impact on a small village. An article published at the Spanish news website “Que es.”

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Silvanus lives in an adobe house at the edge of a village in what was formerly the Biafran section of Nigeria. For some years now the people there have had a few hours of electricity each day, but no running

water. Silvanus has no idea where Spain is, or Europe for that matter. In his entire life he has spent only a few months in a major city to learn the trade of bricklaying, which is how he has earned his living in the small village of Iwollo.

He as well as his family are very surprised to see a white person in the village. Due to the recent kidnappings of several foreigners, no European country currently recommends a visit to Southeast Nigeria. The children open their eyes wide and whisper among themselves, and the smallest ones are frightened to see an “onyocha” (“white man” in the local language). The more-experienced teenagers call out “David Beckham’s brother” in English when they see me walk past (my resemblance to the British soccer star is about as close as that between Eleanor Roosevelt and Grace Kelly).

Silvanus's two youngest children refuse to appear in the photo. The strange man from a race they have never seen before is too much for them. They stand looking out from the door of their mud brick house. On the floor inside are several thin mattresses. Their mother is busy at the back of the house with a mortar mixing cassava and some vegetables for the evening meal. They also own a few cheap plastic chairs, which we sit on under the palm trees while chatting.

Silvanus tells me that three years ago he had to give up his work because of a heart ailment. The tropical heat and humidity make it difficult to work outside here. Normally one spends the whole day sweating, both in the sun and in the shade. Therefore it's easy to imagine the suffering of this man who was suddenly unable to support his wife and four children in a country where

Social Security is unknown and which lacks any social structure capable of supporting the millions of needy people. But thanks to the treatment he received at the local clinic, he is now well. To show what good shape he is in, he brings out the bicycle on which he rides to work every day. The bicycle is what enables him to go from one town to another to offer his services where needed.

The Rural Dispensary in Iwollo, where Silvanus received medical treatment, was started seven years ago as an initiative of some people in Opus Dei with the assistance of the NGO Zabalketa, located in the Basque region of Spain. It is maintained thanks to the efforts of a San Sebastian doctor, Joe Machimbarrena, who seeks financial assistance from institutions and individuals for the medical supplies needed. Thus they can provide most

of the vaccinations for free and more costly treatments at a very low price.

Cases like that of Silvanus are repeated every day in this clinic which treats more than 60 people a day. Those staffing it frequently see people suffering from malaria, which is endemic in the region, as well as diabetes, stomach infections and malnutrition. One of the doctors who looks after the dispensary told us that the essential thing is education. Often it's enough that the people add to their soup a few crayfish from the river (which are readily available and have a lot of protein) for the nutrition of the whole family to improve.

The day on which I visited the clinic children's vaccinations were taking place. Dozens of mothers came carrying their babies on their backs wrapped in a cloth used as a backpack. There they received

preventive treatment for many of the infectious diseases, including polio and yellow fever, that are prevalent in tropical countries.

Less than a mile away there is a state-run medical clinic, which we also visited. The two nurses on duty informed us that for the past two months they have not received the medicines they need for their patients. Whether owing to corruption, neglect, or poor organization, the fact is that this small building in Iwollo, recently constructed and clean, doesn't have the required supplies to take care of patients. One of the nurses tells us: "We help those who come here by giving them information, and if we see anything serious we send them to another hospital."

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