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IROTO Rural Development Centre

Iroto and Abidagba, projects of the Women's Board - Educational Cooperation Society, a not-for-profit, private organization, are located at Iloti (Ogun State) between Epe and Ijebu-Ode. Since its inception they have carried out numerous programmes and services for the benefit of the local communities.

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** Iroto Rural Development Centre*

* Iroto School of Hotel and Catering

* Abidagba Health Centre

Iroto: Serving 33 Villages *The landscape is studded with villages like stars in the sky. The villagers wave friendly hands as we go past their homes. The children are more expressive and shout and laugh. They know we are headed for the Centre and they welcome us.*

Iroto Rural Development Centre

IRDC, situated 9 km from Ijebu-Ode in Ogun State, was opened in December 1985 to provide catering services to Iroto Conference Centre and to serve the rural community. It had been realised that the women of the area, the majority of whom had had very little formal education, needed help. The area is well known for its cassava growing the women being responsible for planting and tending this crop while the men

often seek work in the towns. The process of gari production – gari being the end product and a popular carbohydrate in the diet of the Yoruba of that zone – is a laborious one costing many hours of harvesting, peeling, frying and grinding the tuber from which it comes. It is not surprising that the women engaged in this work, find little time or energy for developing other interests or for even dedicating enough time to the wellbeing of their families.

The staff of the Centre introduced simple methods to ease their work on the farm and to bring better results. They also began classes of literacy, sewing and crafts.

Most of all they gave special attention to each person attending the Centre encouraging, helping with personal concerns and family problems. The women began to

develop self-esteem and confidence and having been situated in a subservient place in their society, started to realize the great potential each one had.

Abidagba Health Centre

When health problems became apparent in the women and girls attending Iroto, a room in the Centre was set aside as a small clinic and common and treatable ailments were attended to with palpable gratitude on the part of the patients.

Classes in hygiene and child care were given too with obvious benefit to the health of the community. The people began to recognize early symptoms and realise the importance of early treatment of e.g. kwashiorkor, malaria, typhoid fever, diarrhea and other infectious diseases. The Oral Dehydration Therapy is now well known and well used, frequently saving the very lives

of the infants of these villages. The value of western medicine was appreciated and was effective.

While it was clear that a Medical Centre would be welcome in this area, it was some time before donors were found who could provide the funds needed for its construction. However, two major donors did offer valuable help: Manos Unidas and a German family, the Dominicks, who wanted to contribute in memory of their son Andreas who had been killed in a car accident. Thanks to these benefactors as well as to some Nigerians who also wanted to donate, building went ahead and Abidagba Health Centre was opened in December 1996 by the Director General Health, Ogun State, Dr. Tunji Adelowo. In his speech he said “The new Centre is in line with one of UNICEF’s child survival strategies, female literacy which ultimately aids women empowerment and family

life improvement... This is yet another laudable effort of the Women's Board to contribute to the socio-economic development of the Ijebu-Ode Local Government area”.

The Centre now has a staff of a resident doctor, a resident and very experienced nurse, a laboratory technician and local health workers. As well as attending to the patients who come to the centre, health visits are made to the surrounding villages as a follow -up of the classes in nutrition, hygiene, child care and elementary medicine which are given in the clinic.

Harambee Help

The villagers have little money for the medical attention they need and when Harambee offered to help in 2005 with the finance of the centre, it was gratefully accepted. At the 2002 ceremony in Rome of the canonization of St. Josemaria

Escriva, the **Harambee** (Swahili for “all for one”) project was launched, with the primary aim of raising money for such projects in Africa

As many of the health problems emanate from unhygienic conditions in and around the homes of the villagers, Harambee funds were used to provide latrines. A borehole in Iroto village to the cost of which the villagers also contributed, has ensured that the villagers no longer use the infected water of the nearby streams, avoiding the common and debilitating diseases associated with it. The donation has also helped subsidize the running expenses of the clinic and has provided drugs which were beyond the reach of the local people.

Iroto School of Hotel and Catering

Unemployment is one of the biggest Nigerian problems. The girls of villages around Iroto very frequently

join the band of the unemployed when they finish school. Tertiary education and skill development schools are difficult to find. With this background, it was decided to expand the activities of IRDC by developing a School of Hotel and Catering. The school began in 2005 and enrolment is growing as the scope of the studies of the school become better known. The students follow a standard curriculum which includes practical as well as theory classes in Housekeeping, Cookery, Menu Planning, English and related subjects. Again, emphasis is placed on giving the girls individual attention, the students are resident and as a result of this education, become self-assured and capable home managers.

Gbemi Fayola was one of the first students. When her father was invited to witness the graduating exam of his daughter in Cookery, he

could not help making a public proclamation that his daughter's meal (of which he was the Chief Taster) was equivalent to that of a five-star hotel! As though this was not enough, before he left the School, he called together the students of the next set to encourage them to a greater appreciation of what the school was giving them.

Jobs are readily available in hotels, restaurants, fast food outlets and they can also open their own businesses. The vast majority of Nigerian workers eat not at home but at roadside or town restaurants and the girls who finish the course at Iroto are well able to make an adequate living for themselves and to help their families.

Home Management Club

As a means to give more girls the opportunity, the staff of the IRDC has begun a Home Management Club for

the students of a nearby school, Itamakpako Secondary School. Over 30 girls have enrolled in the club eagerly learning the art of Home Management and Catering as a prelude to joining the residential course at the Centre when they have finished school.

Iroto Rural Development Centre has gone a long way since it first started, the road ahead is wide and long and in spite of the challenges the vision of the future is a stimulus to do more and better.

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