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Iroto, a rural development center for women in Nigeria

Iroto Rural Development Centre was started at the beginning of 1986.

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What is the Rural Centre all about?

The Itamapako Local Government Area is composed of 33 villages, including Iroto, Abidagba and Iloti, and could be considered one of the

underdeveloped areas of southern Nigeria. The Women's Board of the **Educational Cooperation Society** undertook in 1986 to help the people there by teaching skills, English language – a necessity for communication in this English speaking country – as well as social relations, etiquette, etc.

The needs met by the Development Centre can be understood better by considering the socio-economic situation of this segment of Nigeria. Girls marry at a very early age, the area has had a persistent problem of husbands not looking after the needs of the family and either going to the town to find work or staying at home while the women do the work - usually farming. The local social convention is that the men “own” the land and the women have to pay their husbands for using it to provide food for the family, including that very man. The women do not tend to

complain about this situation, as it has been a convention for generations.

Keeping in mind the words of the **Pope John Paul II**, who has spoken so frequently of the human dignity of every human being, the staff of the Centre sought ways of improving the lot of the women, encouraging them to have the self-esteem they deserved especially by helping them develop the potential each one of them had.

First – to overcome the pervasive superstition and even suspicion the women had of the help they were being offered; then to banish their deep-seated belief in unhygienic and harmful traditional medicines.

It has been a challenging battle but the staff is confident that now the villagers have complete trust in them. Paula has been in **Iroto** since 1996 . “In spite of being Yoruba speaking, I found the first years

difficult for making friends and for instilling the ideas and practices I knew were going to help them. However, I believe we are now over the hill and I am able to share confidences and concerns with them. I am truly accepted as being one of them.”

Among the needs of this community - perhaps number one in the order of priorities – is health, and the realization of this - so necessary before other plans could be effective – led to a plan to build Abidagba Health Centre, a Primary Health Centre located within the grounds of **Iroto Rural Development Centre.**

Naturally funds were needed to build this Centre and when the German Dominick family heard about it, they gave a handsome donation to materialize the idea. The Centre was built in honour of their son Andreas, who had been killed in a car accident

in Germany, a boy who had been particularly interested in Africa and in helping its development. Manos Unidas, a Spanish organization which helps in similar projects all over the world was a generous partner.

Abidagba Health Centre was inaugurated on 6th December 1996. Dr. Tunji Adelowo, Director-General of Health of the Ministry of Health, Ogun State said on this occasion, “This is another laudable effort of the Women’s Board (ECS) to contribute to the socio-economic development of Ijebu-Ode Local Government area. It provides a forum for the women and children of the catchments area to seek promotive and preventive health services, in line with one of UNICEF’s child survival strategies. It is a most welcome complement to government efforts which cannot meet the demands of health care provisions.”

Patients have gradually become confident of the help they receive in the Centre and there is no doubt that standards of health have risen remarkably.

Health classes, and the advice given especially by Wachera, the Kenyan nurse who has been with the Centre since its inauguration, says “While malaria is still rampant, now the villagers recognize the early symptoms and know they can come to the Centre for treatment and be saved. Malnutrition, which was such a common ailment when we first started, has almost disappeared thanks to better knowledge of nutritional needs. People are poor but if they use the local products they can grow, definitely their children will be healthy. The improvement we see is certainly very encouraging.”

Oluwakemi Otusoga’s mother, Agnes, had very little money. Wachera

became involved realizing the family of 5 children was not getting the food and nutrition they needed. Agnes was offered a job on the farm and was guided on the best way of utilizing the food she was able to grow or buy. Kemi, Oluwakemi's teacher at the Girls Club, discovered that she was partially blind caused by congenital retinopathy, and the condition was deteriorating.

Wachera came to hear of a School for the Blind in Lagos and went to see the school and then look for a sponsor. Through what was considered a miracle, a sponsor was found, Oluwakemi passed the interview and began a 2-year course. The school is residential but Oluwakemi never fails to come to the Centre in the school holidays to lend a hand in whatever she can do. "I am very happy and very grateful to the Centre for the help it has given me". Agnes her mother is even more grateful and brings, out of her

meager resources, gifts to show her appreciation for what has been done for Oluwakemi. Among the crafts she has learnt are cane-making, adire, soap making, very attractive and colourful shopping bags, tie-and-dye. She can type and read Braille. Her Industrial Training was in the National Museum and there is no doubt she will find a good paying job when she finishes the course in December.

Elizabeth is a schoolgirl who lives with her grandmother. She attends activities at the Centre and has learnt to care for her granny with affection. This might seem a usual attitude but as these families are scattered and economic survival is so chancy, affection is not a common attribute. However, through the guidance of Chinwe who visits the granny frequently and teaches Elizabeth how to care for her, the atmosphere in the home has changed immensely

and both Elizabeth and granny now live happily together.

The Girls Club run at **Iroto Rural Development Centre** has taken time to develop but what is now crystal clear is that the girls have learnt among other qualities, the importance of compassion and kindness to each other. The ‘elderly’ were always a part of village life which was taken for granted and although there was usually a granddaughter to stay with them (the boys are sent away to school but the girls not always) care was not very comprehensive. The regular Visits to the Elderly, a feature of the Girls Club, has been eye opening to the girls who have realized that in spite of their own difficulties others are much worse off. Agnes is one such girl. “What I have learnt at the Club has helped me realize that these visits – sharing and showing love and care for others - have had a deep

effect on me. I now look at the elderly and the sick with different eyes and I am very happy to be able to spend time with them.”

There is also a thriving Women’s Club in the Centre with 25 young mothers. Most of them are the bread winners of the family but having left school at an early age have no skills or knowledge to help them earn a living except by farming small plots of land. In the Club they are taught first of all, basic hygiene, health education and baby/child care. Cookery classes are based on gari, the local product made from cassava, adding available nutritional supplements. Sewing is not taught at school but is included in the Club programme and has become very popular. The women have become proficient at crochet and are making articles for sale to supplement their incomes. The staff help market their products.

The land of the Centre is large and a portion has been allotted to the women for the Club to grow vegetables – okro, ugwu and tomatoes. In this small farm, jobs have been distributed, incentives are given for orderly work, for punctuality to classes and results are very pleasing.

Literacy classes are being given to Juliet and Agnes. Juliet had been working in the clinic for some time but is now working in the farm. She works very well and diligently and keeps the family going. She says, “What would have happened if these centers had not been here!”

The Kabiyesi of Oko Ako is the traditional ruler of a large area, which incorporates Iloti, Iroto, Abidagba, and all the other villages of the 33. He is a great friend of the Centres and does all he can to help. “We are very happy and grateful that

the Women's Board has chosen to provide us with Iroto Rural Development Centre and Abidagba Health Centre. They are doing wonderful work for the people of our communities and I wish they could get the support which would help them to expand the splendid work they are doing for us." Sir J. F. Adelaja, a prominent Itamapako personality adds: "The Centre has played an important part in halting the urban drift which is the bane of our rural development efforts. Our community has been gifted with peace, security, well-being and a more christian life."

The teachings of Saint Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer about the work as a means, a way of holiness, are at the base of the educational and support services carried on at Iroto.

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