



## Disability services in Juba: the experience of an African country

Abu John Wani Loro Omer

My name is Abu John Wani Loro Omer and I was born in 1962. I belong to the Bari Tribe, one of the biggest tribes in Equatoria Region, in South Sudan. I'm married to Sabina, a South Sudanese like me, and we have 6 children. I am teaching Arabic in the Primary School of the Diocese. Since 1995 I am an Acolyte, I prepare the catechumens, I teach catechism and I am available for different pastoral works in the Archdiocese of Juba.

I feel very honored to be here, to participate at this Seventh World Meeting of Families with my family. It's our first time in Italy, it's our first time in a country which is not South Sudan, everything is completely new to us and I apologize if my voice will tremble with emotion.

Today I'm here to talk about my country and the wonderful things that OVCI-La Nostra Famiglia does for my people.

The Republic of South Sudan is the youngest country of the world, it's a Nation since the 9<sup>th</sup> July 2011. Our country is very poor and there's a lack of resources, even for the necessities of life, although it is very rich because there is oil (the reason why my country is always at war). In such a situation, there's no room for the weak, especially for people with disabilities.

One of the most positive characteristic of my people is that we still consider the family a very important institution and everyone feels protected by his family and the clan, we love each other and we are very hospitable. Foreign people always notice it and feel at home them too, they're not homesick, rather when they come back to their country they miss South Sudan, they miss our simple living, they miss our values of life.

The main cause of disability in my country is represented by landmines, left over from the war, but also by the lack of adequate sanitation and a generalized poverty. That's why there is a high number of the disabled. Unfortunately most of my people think that handicap is a problem to hide, first of all because there is a kind of shame and prejudice against illness. Children with disabilities face lots of problems both because of sanitary condition and prejudices.

During the civil war, which has seen the North against the South, I went to North to study but in 2009, after the peace agreement signed in 2005, I decided to come back to my land with my family, to realize a dream: to build a better future for my children and my people. When I came back to Juba, the capital of South Sudan, I've known about this project, financed by OVCI, *Usratuna* (the Arabic translation for "La Nostra Famiglia"), and the commendable job that its *workers* were doing. *Usratuna* takes care of many people with disabilities through a central structure and a project of Community Based Rehabilitation (CBR). A rehabilitation which works with children's families and gives people with disabilities a specific help. Most of all, *Usratuna* is important not just for the health point of view but also to awaken people, as it tries to promote a change in mentality: people with disabilities are not second-class citizens, they are not people to hide and to be ashamed of, they need help, both from professionals and from the family and the entire society. This is a very significant activity, a great help for those who have to face all the difficulties that disability brings. Community Based Rehabilitation is to promote and encourage respect for human rights, especially those of people with disabilities, because, first of all, they have the right to live like all other members of the community, to have access to health services, to participate in educational programs, to

enjoy social, cultural, religious, economic and political activities, to be part of that humanity which belongs to him.

With the peace agreement many things have become easier but there is still much to do, there are huge problems, for instance: a high level of maternal mortality (the highest of the world), a high level of child malnutrition and mortality and I want you to consider that the 85% of the population is illiterate. As you can see, we are trying to build a new story starting from a tragic situation.

OVCI-La Nostra Famiglia (*Usratuna*) is an Italian NGO founded to implement programs of human, social, health and technical promotion for the citizens of developing countries, supporting their education and self-sufficiency, with a special focus on children with disability and their parents. With the partnership of the Italian Association *La Nostra Famiglia*, OVCI-La Nostra Famiglia can offer a high level of rehabilitation service, a qualified education and a constant support to the family.

OVCI-La Nostra Famiglia is in Juba since 1983 with a project named "Rehabilitation Centre for Children With Disability", with a physiotherapy department and speech therapy and occupational therapy services. There is also a pre-school for children with disabilities which gives them the basic skills to better face the primary school.

*Usratuna* "Primary Health Care Centre" guarantees a health basic service, a specialized program for "Mother & Child Care" and a particular service for the diagnosis and treatment of Epilepsy, the only one in all the country.

There is also a University: the St. Mary's University, born in 2009 with a Bachelor of Science In Rehabilitation Science; there are about 12 students who work in the morning and study in the afternoon. The College for Education was inaugurated on the 7th of May and the College for Social Workers, will be soon opened.

When I came into contact with OVCI-La Nostra Famiglia I discovered, to my surprise, lots of admirable things that *workers* were doing, and still do, for my people. Indeed, these people come to my country and help us completely free, they give dignity to people who have, in some case, a great disability, they give dignity to life. They help mothers taking care of their disabled son or daughter, they explain them that a child with disabilities is a human being like everyone else and that he needs care, not to be abandoned to his fate. You know, we're not used to be the centre of attention and seeing these volunteers, all very dedicated to providing the best service to us, made me feel so happy and hopeful about our chances of building a better future.

We see things which seem like miracles to us: children considered lost because of their handicap, such as a child unable to walk who, thanks to their help, walks again.

I want to emphasize that CBR didn't force its method but tried to optimize what the country could give. It's not a scientific institute which imposes its presence to a poor country but they are people who are in the service of people, with patience and love, who involve all our territory in its improvement.

Thanks to OVCI-La Nostra Famiglia we have discovered our country's treasures, such as the importance of respecting life, especially children's ones, that Sudanese land is not just a resource to be exploited, the joy of giving and solidarity, the joy of Gospel which lives in each person and teaches us that if a man is in need, he has the right to receive, if he's got some skills and abilities he has the duty to give and by giving he feels happier than receiving.

I would like to conclude my speech saying that we are very grateful to OVCI-La Nostra Famiglia for the good job done during all these years. I hope that our society and our communities will learn from OVCI-La Nostra Famiglia how to take care of people with disabilities and their families.