

Empowering children with disabilities for the enjoyment of their human rights, including through inclusive education

Introduction

The Associazione Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII, (APG23) is an International Catholic NGO, accredited with Special Consultative Status to the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) since 2006.

Fr. Oreste Benzi, an Italian Catholic Priest who died in 2007, founded the Association in the early '60s, in Italy.

The Association is present in 40 countries on five continents. Its specific mission is to share directly life with the least and work to remove the causes that generate injustice.

It was with the desire to empower the rights of persons with disabilities that APG23 started its work in the '60s. In a world where persons with disabilities were not considered and institutionalised, APG23 started to welcome them in their family homes in order to guarantee their rights to live in a family, to go to school, to work always according to their possibilities.

Nowadays, the Association runs 500 welcoming structures all over the world, of which 298 are family homes where orphaned children, mentally and physically disabled, and others marginalised persons found a substitute family. It runs also emergency shelters, open families, houses of fraternity, cooperatives and day-centres, therapeutic communities for drug users and centres for alcoholics. The members of the association are 2.200 and the beneficiaries in the world are about 41.000.

All APG23 activities and initiatives involve direct sharing with the poorest and most vulnerable people, with the intent to alleviate their suffering in the short term but also to remove the causes of marginalisation and injustice.

In the implementation of the specific projects and initiatives, APG23 always considers crucial the recognition of the **centrality of human beings** and the necessity to ensure the fulfilment of all their human rights, **by addressing the root causes** that prevent their achievement.

In different countries, APG23 is involved in the empowerment, protection and care of children and adult with disabilities.

In this report, we will present 4 different experiences of APG23 in the empowerment of children with disabilities: a new approach to inclusive education in Italy, a project for the inclusion of people with hearing disabilities in Chile, the experience of an educational and recreational centre in Tanzania and lastly an experience of disability in a family home in Sri Lanka.

ITALY: School of Gratuitousness

Italy recognizes an inclusive school system in which almost all students with disabilities are included in the ordinary school system¹.

In 1995, APG23, starting from its real-life experiences of discrimination and marginalization of children with disabilities, elaborated a new approach to education and school called School of Gratuitousness. It represented an innovative answer to the needs of all children in the school system, in which students experiencing some difficulties are a resource.

The idea of the School of Gratuitousness takes origin from the broader idea of "Society of Gratuitousness", a society that is based on the awareness that everything (earth, people, resources etc.) is a gift from God, a society that is based on the values of being, sharing and relating, where the least, the disabled, the marginalised set the pace of the human family's march being the protagonists of their own development.

In the "profit society" rooted in "*Homo oeconomicus*", everything and everyone is marketable; the driving forces are "powering, valuing and having" and therefore human beings are valued for what they have and

¹ Law 517/1977 (inclusion on elementary), sentence of the constitutional court n° 215 (inclusion on secondary school), Law 104/1992 (inclusion on high school)

produce. Instead, in the Society of Gratuitousness, rooted in solidarity, social justice and the respect of human rights, a human being has value on its own.

The building up of the common good prevails in the awareness that everyone holds in his hands the good of the others and that, in the common good, the good of everyone can be found. It is a complete shift of paradigm in terms of the definition of economy, economic process, economic results, the concept of sustainability etc.

The School of Gratuitousness is based on a Manifesto elaborated in 1998 with the purpose of outlining the fundamental principles of this project. Throughout the years, different experiences have realized the ideals of **this innovative approach**. The major result has been the realization of an entire primary school based on the school of gratuitousness in Forlì in 2017.

From the Manifesto of the School of Gratuitousness

The School of Gratuitousness has the purpose of developing, with and for love, the talents and resources of each person following the originality, preciousness and uniqueness that each of us enshrines, leaving aside all logic of individual or collective profit. This school is based on the vital relationships amongst people. Such relationships are a fundamental guarantee of gratuity and of a true educational method. Interpersonal relationships are the key element for a real integration of everyone in the school system. Without this, education is reduced to simple information; the only objective of the school becomes the learning contents on which personal success and competition, which are privileged instruments of profit and cause for exclusion, develop.

Within the educational relationship, teaching requires commitment by everyone to develop all the potentials as a requirement for an evaluation process with the objective of promoting the individual.

The answer to the needs of students experiencing difficulties in terms of educational pathways, timeframes and individual relationships, requires the involvement of the entire classroom, which is stimulated to reflect on values, on the needs of the individual, and finding better timeframes for all to acquire a deeper knowledge. Students experiencing difficulties are the main actors of the School of Gratuitousness, both as a system and as a set of values. By putting their needs first, we will build a better school for everyone. Through them, each educator/teacher learns how to improve the educational relationship with the other students. The integration of these students is, therefore, a non-negotiable principle of the School of Gratuitousness. This is why an educational path tailored specifically on each student is elaborated for all in order to guarantee their integration and the realization of their full potential. This is possible with more attention to the programme and to the evaluation system that allowed all students to reach a full education related to their capacity and disability.

Moreover, the classroom becomes the place where the concept of gratuity is applied, where educators and students share and work together not for profit, but for the passion of teaching and growing. The classroom becomes a community environment for experimentation and life, an environment characterized by the spirit of welcoming and cooperation. Each personal talent becomes everybody else's talent and the limitations of the individual are overcome by being together.

Finally, in the School of Gratuitousness, the family that is the first educational entity is not a client of the school but rather a strict partner. Such a school requires active participation of the family in educational programs and methodological choices, by building and validating them within its specific role. Educators are active listeners, also receiving from the families all the suggestions concerning emotions and sentiments, sensibility, spirituality, solidarity and acknowledging all the needs that may not be readily understood by them. In this context, the family has the right to actively participate in the evaluation of scholastic results for their children.

TANZANIA: "Baba Oreste" Centre (Rainbow project)

APG23 is present in Tanzania from 1992. In Tanzania the stigma on disability is still very strong and families are often alone in facing problems. In some cases, they are ashamed to show that they have a disabled

child and keep him/her hidden at home. In recent years the government has put in place specific policies² in order to implement rules to protect these children but the pathway is still long. The day care centre “Baba Oreste APG23 for disabled children” is situated about 40 kilometres northward of Dar es Salaam in Bunju village. It was opened in 2009 to accommodate vulnerable and disabled children coming from low-income families living in the area. Through different educational and recreational activities in which about 50 children are involved, the volunteers of APG23 work to ensure that children are able to achieve their potential and the full psychomotor development, guaranteeing the fundamental rights like right to food, right to play, right to education and right to adequate living standard. The bus picks up the kids at home in the morning. When children arrive at the centre, they play in the playground and then have breakfast. Different activities are done such as literacy, count, identification of objects and colours, drawing, singing, body care, sport, moulding clay and other activities for the development of the five senses. In addition, gardening activities to develop the child's ability to interact with the environment are carried out. After these educational activities, children have lunch and a shower helped by the careers of the centre. Lastly at 4 pm the bus brings the children at home.

Notwithstanding that the right to inclusive education is guaranteed by law³, this right is not fully implemented. Only 6 children of the centre are attending primary school. An awareness activity is carried out with families through periodic meetings to promote the rights of children with disabilities. Parental training activities are organized to help parents growing in awareness of their children's needs. This training promotes the non-use of corporal punishment as an educational method among parents. Training activities are carried out on hygiene and on the environments in which children live and also on health, through lessons held by specialized personnel. The importance of bringing children to physiotherapy is reiterated. The volunteers of APG23 carry out activities in the schools to raise awareness and promote the rights of disabled children in order to assert and highlight the concept that children and people with disabilities are a fundamental resource for the society.

CHILE: Proyecto Sol - The Voice of Silence

In Chile, APG23 is present since 1994. Operative in Santiago since 2005, *Proyecto Sol* wishes to be *The Voice of Silence* that is the voice of about twenty people with auditory disabilities who live family and social marginalization. Its main goal is promoting their integration through the following activities: a) adult literacy in sign language; b) training courses; c) family support to deal with their deaf children; d) awareness raising and sign language courses to spread the knowledge of culture of deaf people, with particular attention to schools; e) promotion and protection of the rights of persons with hearing disabilities, in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Every child needs to feel integrated and above all accepted how he/she is, both able and disable. The acceptance starts in the motherhood, in the family, in the first social environment. That's why one of the first steps of the *Proyecto Sol* has been the adult literacy in sign language, and the provision of family support, specifically to those parents who had no economic resources to access that kind of training courses. *Proyecto Sol* offered them the chance to access courses for free, in order to let deaf children families deeply know and positively react to their children disability, to take important steps in acceptance of their children culture and identity, from a socio-cultural point of view, consequently breaking down the barriers that prevented a fluid parent – children relationship. *Proyecto Sol* also organized many kinds of activities where young and adult deaf people could express and improve their abilities, and sensitize the social environment at the same time, by the representations of theatre acts in Sign Language, for example, or the participation to public events.

² Person with disability act 2010 https://www.ilo.org/aids/legislation/WCMS_151288/lang--en/index.htm, National disability mainstreaming strategy 2010-2015 (NDMS), Oct 2010

The law of the child 2009 https://www.ilo.org/aids/legislation/WCMS_151287/lang--en/index.htm

³ Art 27,28,29 Person with disability act 2010

One of the greatest opportunities to participate to the empowerment of children with disabilities for the enjoyment of their human rights has been the ratification of the U.N. Convention on the Rights of persons with disabilities in Chile in 2008. *Proyecto Sol* participated in a myriad of meetings with other Chilean associations in that process, creating a group of associations denominated *Movimiento D* (D Movement), chaired by Maria Soledad Cisternas Reyes, currently Special Envoy on Disability at the United Nations, and ex-president of the Committee on the rights of persons with disabilities. In the *Movimiento D*, which worked on many kinds of disabilities, *Proyecto Sol* pays its attention particularly on the articles of the Convention nr. 1 *proposal* (para 1), *communication* (art. 2.1), *accessibility* (art.9), *access to information* (art.21), being the voice of the people without voice, bringing their instances during the drafting of the texts to be submitted to the State for the convention ratification.

Furthermore, *Proyecto Sol* has been living by deaf children side for many years, and could understand the frustration that a deaf child feels in front of the simplest child habits such as watching a cartoon. It's one of the simplest things that every child usually does every day, but it's not so easy for a deaf one. That's why in 2008 the *Proyecto EnSenas Aprendes* was born (word put to say that you learn teaching and using signs), which is a *Proyecto Sol* spin off creation, derived from the Convention on the Rights of persons with disabilities, aimed at creating multimedia material in sign language. It has many purposes: it's meant to let everyone have access to information to be educated and informed by the use of multimedia material in Sign Language, dealing with different topics; it's meant to let deaf children, young and adults knowing important topics for their integral development in a funny and carefree way; it supports the literacy of deaf children during their school development, as well as the sensitization of society about this topic, starting from the littlest children, in order to create and develop an always more inclusive society. The first job created by *EnSenas Aprendes* was *A world without walls*, which tells stories in sign language for deaf children, educates hearing people to believe in diversity, helps bringing down the walls of communication. More jobs have been created and some work is on progress...

Here is a link to one of the latest multimedia materials in sign language, "Thiago y el Caracol":
<https://youtu.be/I0qUmC0Obbk>

SRI LANKA - The experience of a family home

APG23 is present in Sri Lanka since 1992. Disability, in Sri Lanka as in many countries of South Asia, may be considered according to some religious beliefs as a punishment for something wrong that the person has done in previous life. Therefore, in present life the person with a disability has to bear this shameful situation with the hope to be purified and get a better condition in the future.

That is why, especially in the past, children with disabilities were rejected since their birth, or kept hidden in their house by the parents who were helplessly compelled to grow the children without any educational training.

In our family home we have welcome some of those children who were rejected since birth and kept in the orphanage until adulthood. The children arrived without any document, as they didn't exist for the government. In such culture, if anyone has no ID card it means he has no family, that he is nobody.

After long time, we have obtained the birth certificate for them, and with that we applied for ID cards. Our goal is to train the children in our day centre, developing some abilities and bring them to a self-control and management. The further step is a great challenge: the inclusion of these youngsters in some training job, for example in a supermarket as door attendant.

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