

Missionaries leading the way on reform of care for children with disabilities

During the summer of 2022, Misesan Cara CEO John Moffett travelled with staff to South Africa and Zambia to visit projects run by Irish missionaries demonstrating innovation in tackling gender-based violence, access to education for migrant children, protecting the rights of women and girls, and care for children with disabilities.

"Seeing the incredible work and impact of missionaries in person is very inspiring and can spark a lot of new ideas," remarks Mr Moffett. "A real lightbulb moment for us on that trip was the excellence of the support to children with disabilities that we witnessed, compassionate and thoughtful approaches

"Exposure to projects like this eventually led to an idea to promote these approaches within the wider care reform agenda taking place across east and southern Africa. Misesan Cara has successfully secured funding from the GHR Foundation to support and learn from our members' wider disability projects, and bring that expertise to the wider catholic care for children initiative taking place under oversight of the UISG (International Union of Secretaries General)," he says.

"Children with disabilities are often the first and always the last to leave institutional care and we hope that this initiative will help to change that situation and broaden adoption of support for families."

poor access to schools with programmes for disabled children, discrimination and stigma, broken families and other factors also contribute to the placement of children with disabilities in care institutions, sometimes for their entire lives.

With a deep, long-term understanding of the institutions and mechanisms in place to care for children with disabilities, Sister-led missionary organisations in Africa are ideally placed to lead the charge for care reform.

Misesan Cara's recently announced part-

better, more child-focused model of care.

Why is Care Reform important?

It is estimated that between 5.5 and 8 million children worldwide live in institutions. A Human Rights Watch figure from 2014 shows that in some countries close to 50 percent of these children in institutions are also living with some form of disability.

Tragically, research has also shown that institutionalisation profoundly and negatively



Teachers and students in a class for deadblind pupils at the Bauleni Special Needs Project and School (BSNP) in Lusaka, Zambia. Run by the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, the BSNP is Zambia's only school to provide education and support to children who are deafblind. Photo: Moses Mtonga

that support families to care for children with severe disabilities at home and provide opportunities for those children to reach their full potential."

Mr Moffett recalls being particularly struck by a visit to the home of a young boy named John, living on the outskirts of Lusaka, Zambia with his mother and siblings. The boy, who was born with Spina Bifida, has suffered physical and intellectual delays, and due to the family's lack of resources was unable to attend school or access rehabilitation. John had recently been connected by outreach workers to the Bauleni Special Needs Project and School in Lusaka, which now visits him regularly to provide basic schooling and at-home physical therapy to build his mobility. He is making great strides and becoming much more independent as a result of this specialised care and attention.

Missionaries setting the stage for change

Around the world, children with disabilities are among the most vulnerable populations in the world today and are the most at risk of having their fundamental rights violated. One of the most critical rights violations of children with disabilities is the right to live safely and securely in a home where they are loved and have adequate care and access to education.

For disabled children in the developing world, whether their disabilities are physical or intellectual, it's not just their special needs that make it hard for their families to keep them at home. Many other factors lead to children with disabilities often having to be taken into residential care, away from their families and communities. Poverty, lack of social services in their communities,



Misesan Cara staff tour construction of a new physical and psychosocial therapy block for students at the Bauleni Special Needs Project, funded by Misesan Cara. Photo: Moses Mtonga

nership with US-based, Catholic GHR Foundation and Catholic Care for Children International (CCCI) aims to lead the development of a new approach to care for children with disabilities in Africa, aimed at preventing children with disabilities from entering care institutions and also to transition disabled children from institutions back home or at least to home-like environments in the community.

Funded by a \$1million grant from GHR Foundation, the three-year initiative will research and promote home-based care and community-level services as a preferred model for caring for children with disabilities within the wider movement of care reform in Africa.

2,000 children in Four Countries

Along with GHR and CCCI, Misesan Cara is joining with five of its member congregations on the initiative: Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary; Franciscan Missionaries of St Joseph; Franciscan Missionaries of the Divine Motherhood; Missionary Sisters of the Assumption; and Daughters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul.

All five congregations are active in providing quality care and education to children with disabilities, in home and community settings in Uganda, Zambia, South Africa, and Kenya. Collectively, they share a rich, long-standing expertise in working with children with disabilities at the community level, providing services that enable children to stay with their families and are currently involved in Misesan Cara-supported initiatives reaching nearly 2,000 children with disabilities.

Through an extensive religious network in Africa, these organisations will leverage their shared expertise and resources to advocate and build this change, enabling a

impacts a child's physical and psychological development, and can be associated with long-term mental health problems, emotional attachment problems, higher criminality, and suicide. It is also known that children with disabilities are up to seventeen times more likely to live in institutions than their peers, without disabilities.

This widespread evidence of the dangers of long-term institutionalisation is a driving basis for the move towards care reform, towards transitioning from institutional to family-based and community-based care.

At the heart of the movement is preventing the separation of families, and the reuniting of families in cases where separation has taken place. In situations where children cannot be reunited with their families, alternative care options, such as foster care and adoption, are prioritised over institutional care.

Meet the missionaries and projects at the heart of disability care for children

Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary (Uganda and Zambia)

(www.sacredheartsjm.org)

In Uganda, where the country's Population and Housing Census reports that the population of children aged 18 years and below living with disabilities is between 5.8% and 15%, the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary (SSHJM) operates the Children in Need (CHIN) project in Uganda's Mukono District. First established in 2004 to respond to the underserved needs of people with disabilities in the area, especially children with disabilities CHIN now operates a widespread programme throughout Mukono that encompasses inclusive education, health, livelihoods training, and human rights.



At the Children in Need (CHIN) project in Uganda, Physiotherapist and Community Based Rehabilitation staff conduct therapeutic exercises with students. Photo: Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary



On the outskirts of Lusaka, Zambia John (aged 5) and his mother Catherine, receive frequent home therapy and education visits from staff of the Bauleni Special Needs Project to help with John's physical and intellectual delays caused by Spina Bifida. Photo: Moses Mtonga

Another SSHJM project in Amuru District in Northern Uganda, is the Women and Children First Organisation (WACFO), a disability prevention and management project that applies a holistic and inclusive approach to supporting children and youth with disabilities in this largely rural, poor area. The project supports not only disabled children, but also their guardians and families, mothers to be, and the community at large, with the aim of achieving mainstream disability into all parts of the community.

The SSHJM also run projects in Zambia. In Lusaka, the Bauleni Special Needs Project (BSNP) is a recognised centre of excellence for inclusive education that provides quality, holistic and accessible education for more than 1,400 students, including children with special needs, orphaned and vulnerable children, and is the only school in the country with a programme for deafblind persons.

Franciscan Missionary Sisters of Saint Joseph (Kenya)

(www.fmsj.co.uk)

The Franciscan Missionary Sisters of Saint Joseph run the St. Francis Rehabilitation project in Malindi, Kilifi County, Kenya, where the poverty level stands at 42% and only a third of all people with disabilities are able to access adequate care for their needs.

The St Francis Rehabilitation project serves 75 children and youth with disabilities with therapies including physiotherapy, speech and occupational therapy, medication, and psychosocial support. The project strengthens home-based outreaches to support caregivers through training on best practices in the care of children with disabilities to maximise their health outcomes and reduce dependence in undertaking day-to-day tasks. Through community sensitisation, the project is also striving to create an enabling



Irish-based Misean Cara provides funding and support to the Bauleni Special Needs Project in Lusaka, Zambia, for its facilities and programmes serving children with disabilities. Photo: Moses Mtonga

environment for people with special needs to participate in society with prejudice or stigma.

Daughters of Charity (Kenya)

(www.daughtersofcharity.ie)

In Kiambu County, Kenya, the Daughters of Charity Services Thigio (DCST) operates day centres for people with physical and intellectual disabilities at three different primary schools in the area. The Special Needs Programs at DCST provide education and care for 118 children, youth, and adults with intellectual and physical disabilities. Children come to classes daily and parents attend classes as well to learn to participate in their child's development. Regardless of whether a child is in need of total respite care, or are preparing to enter Kenyan schools, they are cared for with compassion and caring in an atmosphere that enhances their dignity.

In Kiio, a semi-arid locale in Kitui County, eastern Kenya, many families go without basic needs such as food, shelter, and clothing due to high poverty rates among the population. They also have limited access to medical care and education, creating few opportunities for care and therapy for children and young people living with special needs. The Daughters of Charity in Kiio work with 119 children and young people living with various disabilities. They also assist their families with basic needs and also training and information on caregiving and rights for people with disabilities.

Missionary Sisters of the Assumption (South Africa)

(<http://msassumption.org/>)

In South Africa, government policies are very clear on protecting the rights of persons with disabilities, however the reality is that there is far too little implementation of these policies. The Enkuthazweni project of the Missionary Sisters of the Assumption serves 100 intellectually disabled people from the rural coastal town of Port Alfred in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa, the poorest province in South Africa, with two thirds of children living in poverty.

Enkuthazweni provides services to 40 children through its special needs educational programme; 30 children with severe multiple disabilities through its physical rehabilitation programme; and 30 young adults through its skills development and employment programme. Enkuthazweni also works closely with parents to offer training and support to improve parenting skills, attitudes and conditions at home. It is estimated that each family has five members in the household, which extends the reach of the programmes.

Franciscan Missionaries of the Divine Motherhood (Zambia)

(<https://fmdminternational.co.uk/>)

The Little Assisi Special School of the Franciscan Missionaries of the Divine Motherhood has been run from a residential dwelling in Ng'ombe compound in the capital, Lusaka, for the past 16 years. Housed in just four rooms, it caters for a diverse range of ages and special needs, provid-

ing education and care to over 200 children with special needs since it opened.

Plans for expanded facilities for the school will provide specialised classrooms and equipment to cater to the range of pupils' needs – a specialist learning environment for those with autism, and for those with Down Syndrome and epilepsy. A skills section and computer lab will help teaching staff ensure that each pupil reaches their full potential, learning life skills through whatever means is most effective for them, and increasing their opportunity of finding a livelihood and achieving independence when they leave school. The new school also hopes to have a rehabilitation centre, offering physical and psychosocial therapies, to support primary school pupils and those aged up to five; and to provide counselling and training for the parents of children with disabilities.

About Misean Cara

Misean Cara is an Irish faith-based organisation established in 2004 to support overseas development work of Irish missionaries. With funding from Ireland's Irish Aid Programme, Misean Cara, through the unique missionary approach to development, supports its 77 missionary member organisations to deliver effective development projects on behalf of the poorest and most vulnerable communities around the world. In 2022, Misean Cara supported 327 projects in 53 countries reaching almost 1.7million people. To learn more about Misean Cara, including how to make a donation to support the work of Ireland's overseas missionaries, visit www.miseancara.ie.

Learn about Misean Cara's partners in the Reform for Care initiative

Catholic Care for Children International

(www.catholiccareforchildren.org)

"A FAMILY FOR EVERY CHILD"

Catholic Care for Children International is a visionary initiative led by Catholic Sisters to ensure that every child grows up in a safe, nurturing family environment. Learn more at

GHR Foundation

(www.ghrfoundation.org)

"A hope-fueled global funder of service to people and their limitless potential for good."

GHR is a US-based foundation providing funds to organisations working in areas including global development and education. GHR supports projects rooted in dignity, equity and care as instruments of social justice for the most vulnerable and marginalized. Their work, and who they fund, is guided by two core truths:

1) All children deserve and thrive best in nurturing families or family-like environments.

2) The Catholic Church, related networks and allies can be a powerful force for good in serving, advocating, resourcing and creating space for the most vulnerable to lead the way forward.



Misean Cara CEO John Moffett on a visit to the Little Assisi Special School in Lusaka, Zambia. Photo: Franciscan Missionaries of the Divine Motherhood