



SALESIANS, OBLATES AND LITTLE SISTERS OF THE ASSUMPTION WITH ANDREA

Visit to Madagascar

The purpose of the visit was to see at first hand the work of the two projects of the LSA which are being supported financially by Misean Cara and other donors in Ireland. Also my visit coincided with the visit of one of the Misean Cara mentors, Andrea Cortemiglia who is based in South Africa, and who was visiting on behalf of Misean Cara. We planned that we would be in Madagascar at the same time.

I left Ireland for Paris on Monday 2nd March and the following morning, Tuesday 3rd March I got a flight directly from Paris to Antananariva, the capital of Madagascar. This was a day-time flight of just under 11 hours so I arrived in Madagascar on the same day, just before mid-night. I was met by 2 LSAs and an Oblate brother who drove us to the Oblate community house where we had meetings scheduled for the following 4 days. As it was night, I could not see much on the journey but I saw enough to realise that this was indeed a very poor country. We seemed to drive through miles of 'shanty town'. The population of the Metropolitan area of Antananariva is almost 3 million.

Next day there was time for some informal conversations with the 3 LSAs who had come to the capital for the Misean Cara meeting. For them, this was a drive of 12 hours on a road which had lots of potholes. Andrea Cortemiglia, the Misean Cara mentor arrived from Johannesburg that day also. The hospitality of the Oblate Fathers was outstanding. There are about 12 in that community, including their Regional leader and some student Oblates.

MEETINGS:

Our first meeting was on Thursday 5th which was a day for the LSAs and key co-workers. Dr Jean, a Malagasy doctor, the new administrator of the Antoinete Fage Health Facility was

present, and we had a very fruitful exchange, where everyone had a good opportunity to ask questions about Misesan Cara procedures and share some of the difficulties encountered in the bureaucratic aspects of the work. It was a valuable opportunity for the projects to have a live exchange with Andrea.



ANDREA, MISEAN CARA MENTOR WORKING WITH LEADERS OF MISEAN CARA FUNDED PROJECTS

Friday 6th March was the meeting of three congregations, including the Oblates, the Salesian Sisters and the LSAs who were about to begin locally working together to set up an inter-Congregational training in Child Safeguarding. Representatives of UNICEF and of the Ministry of Population were also present. The three Congregations locally will now take up the more detailed planning of the Training event in partnership with UNICEF.

On Saturday we drove to Fianarantsoa where the LSAs live and work. This city has a population of 167,277. We left Antananariva by road at 6.10am and arrived at our destination at 5.30pm. That included just one stop for lunch and one quick 'comfort stop'. There were many rivers along the way and there were many market gardens all along the banks of the rivers. I saw no machinery of any kind, and all of this labour is done manually. This one main road passed through many small villages and the farther we got from the capital the poorer it got. Many of the villages seemed densely populated and had lines and lines of small stalls selling fruit and vegetables, all along this one main road from north to south of the country. Often the road climbed steeply through mountains, and had very many twists and turn.

AMPOPOCA:

On arrival in the Ampopoca community, I was welcomed by a large community....including 3 Malagasy aspirants, 8 Malagasy postulants, 2 French LSA, 1 Brazilian and 1 Malagasy LSA, as well as Alisi from the Island of Tonga....an international community indeed.

On Sunday 8th March we went to a local convent for Mass in French. At every Mass the community singing in 3 or 4 part harmony was really beautiful, and so spontaneous even at the 6.00am morning Mass! Later I got my first view of Ampopoca, the part of Fianarantsoa

where the health project is located....all extremely poor. As it was International Womens' Day we went to the town centre to view the parade. Even the town centre was very rundown.

**The centre of
Fianarantsoa.**





SCHOOL TEACHERS WALKING IN THE INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY PARADE, FIANARANTSOA



SCHOOL CHILDREN

My experience of parades for International Womens' Day in Brazil was something very different! In Brazil it is organized by local womens' groups and is a way of conscientization about women's rights. The parade usually stops in front of the various public premises.....Town Hall, Health Department, Education Dept. local hospital etcand the women give speeches on the various injustices, calling the duty bearers to account. However in Fianarantsoa the parade is actually organized by the Town Hall. Every Department has its banner with all of its staff marching behind it. I presumed that the local Government must have helped the people financially to buy all of these beautiful clothes...but no way. Everyone has to buy their own! Each category had to parade in front of the stage where the officials sat, i.e. Town Mayor, local Councillors etc. So not a word about the injustices suffered by women naturally enough! Different cultures surely have different ways of seeing and doing things!

ANTOINETE FAGE HEALTH FACILITY:

From Monday 9th to Thursday 13th I worked with the staff of the Antoinete Fage Health Facility. This is a large house bought by the LSAs about 5 years ago, and which has been developed into a community-based health centre in a very poor neighbourhood which has no access to health services. Recent developments have been helped greatly by generous benefactors from Ireland. I noted many other large houses in the area and discovered that each one housed several families on different floors.



IN THE QUEUE FOR A MEDICAL CONSULTATION AT THE ANTOINETTE FAGE HEALTH FACILITY



NUTRITION PROGRAMME FOR CHILDREN

The population of Madagascar is nearly 28 million. The latest UN report on Madagascar, February 2020 states: "Madagascar is a succession of floods, droughts, cyclones, epidemics that include measles, which has killed 1,200 people and required the emergency vaccination of more than 8,000 children". According to UNICEF, nearly 42 per cent of children under five suffer from "stunted growth or chronic malnutrition". "This situation, combined with widespread poverty and generally poor nutrition, leads to one of the highest rates of chronic malnutrition in the world."

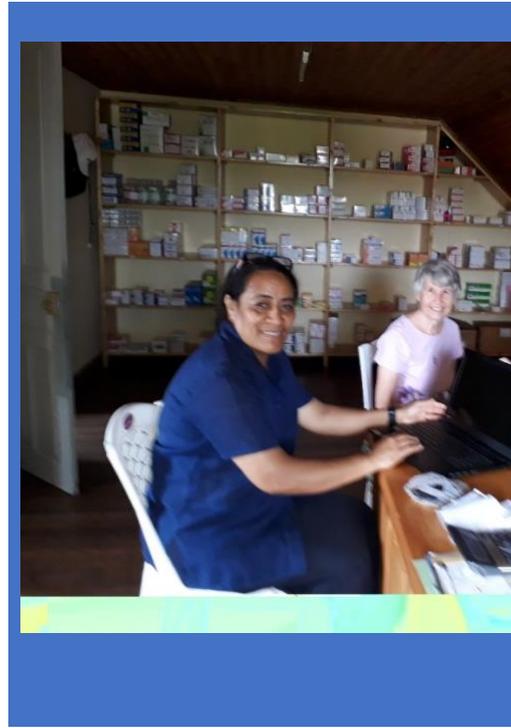
The Health Facility offers medical consultations and a low-cost pharmacy service each morning and also provides health education on an ongoing basis. This is a very valuable service to very poor people. Otherwise sick people have to walk several miles to the nearest hospital. There is no such thing as free health care for anyone. Everything has to be paid for, from the moment of becoming a patient. Every item of medicine, every test, and even the number of hours a body remains in the hospital after a death, all have to be paid for.

STATISTICS FOR THE HEALTH FACILITY.

In 2018 the Clinic treated 1606 patients, and by the end of 2019 this number had increased to 4627 patients, showing the great need for this consultation service. The Centre also places a strong emphasis on preventative health education, and by the end of 2019 a total of 99 people had participated in a range of topics on the most urgent health problems, including hygiene and environment, potable water etc.



STAFF AT THE HEALTH FACILITY



SR ALISI AND BRIDE LSA

During my visit to the health facility, I spent a good deal of time working with the Malagasy doctor who is the new administrator. He had no English and I had very little French so we did a lot through a translation programme on the computer (DeepL). I wrote in English and he read the French translation and vice versa! At times, he could even understand English when I spoke slowly!

Also I was happy to be present for a staff meeting. This was attended by all 16 staff ranging from cleaner, to cook, to nutrition programme staff, to nurses and doctors. Everyone was consulted and every one had an opinion which was listened to. So it was easy to see how the participative model of the Health Project is bearing fruit.





PUPILS OF THE SAHALAVA EDUCATION PROJECT AKANY FIVOARANA WITH SR SABINE



CHILDREN AT SCHOOL

AKANY FIVOARANA EDUCATION PROJECT.

I spend the following 4 days at the second project of LSA located in Salahava on the other side of the city. The project here is called Akany Fivoarana which means 'Development Nest'. Here I learnt about the reality of the education sector in Madagascar.

The education sector in Madagascar.

According to a **2016 World Bank** survey on Education, 97% of children of primary school leaving age cannot read or understand a text. According to studies carried out in March 2019, 48% of Malagasy students have difficulty performing simple mathematical operations. These shortcomings could be explained by the **competence of teachers** in terms of teaching skills. *"Only one teacher in 1,000 scored 80 per cent or more on the French and mathematics tests. Moreover, nearly 20% of teachers failed to subtract two-digit numbers (86-55) and 55% failed to add decimal numbers: $0.24+0.57$ ".* Recent surveys show that only 7 per cent of children between the ages of 7 and 14 have basic numeracy skills.

According to the latest UN report dated February 2020, the country is facing a "dramatic" learning crisis. Even before the floods destroyed schools, 2,500 classrooms were needed to cope with population growth. In addition to floods, cyclones and droughts, the UN agency recalls that Madagascar is in a "permanent state of emergency" due to the weakness of development indicators and response capacity. According to UNICEF in Madagascar "child labour is widespread, with more than a third of children considered to be working in dangerous conditions, such as in the mines of Mica."

Sahalava neighbourhood:

The neighbourhood of Sahalava where the project is situated has a population of over 20,000. Approximately 30% of children do not go to school. 12% of children in the first grade of primary school leave school at the age of 6 years and between 5 – 10% drop out in the other grades of primary school. According to the local public school, the success rate of children in



this neighbourhood is very significantly lower than the national or city rates. All education has to be paid for - there is no free education.

Response to this reality:

At the heart of the education project is the integral development of families: the person, the child in his family, human and spiritual growth of the child, education. Akany Fivoarana is the only project of its kind in the city of Fianarantsoa. From year to year, activities are increasingly oriented towards the construction of the humanity of each person, each family.

The project has taken as its entry point After-School educational support for children and young people in great social and educational difficulties as well as help in continuing their studies after primary school. It responds to a crucial need to improve the educational success of children and young people and thus, in the long term, to enable them to become actors in their own lives. It is at the heart of the right to education for all, but this right to education is still too often a luxury in Madagascar that many families in the neighbourhood cannot afford.

This Supplementary Education Project offers homework/tutoring support on an after-school basis to 270 children ranging from primary to secondary school children, as well as 20 young people attending University. It also has a pre-school for 20 children. The tutoring is given on a wide range of subjects including French, Malagasy, Maths, reading and writing, history and geography, and physics and chemistry. There is a team of very committed staff working with the children and are producing very good results. The children/youths all come from families living in one of the three neighbourhoods surrounding the Centre. This area is marked by a real and flagrant impoverishment of the families' standard of living. As the city of Fianarantsoa has almost no industry, the only means of subsistence for the families of the children and young people is small informal work which will allow them to give the children food every day.



SR SABINE AND VOLUNTEER ALZIZ WITH AN AFTER-SCHOOL TUTORING GROUP AND THEIR TEACHER



LOCAL CHILDREN STUDYING.

Almost 100% of the parents of pupils receiving tutoring are not in fixed employment and live from informal work. Only one mother out of the 150 families has a work contract and receives a fixed salary (minimum) every month.

A large part of the mothers of the students, have as their main source of income washing clothes by hand. This work is not fixed and varies every day. Among the fathers of the students, the majority are in daily work as labourers in construction. A few families, those fortunate enough to own a few square metres of land, grow a few food crops. In general, families engage in a variety of activities on a daily basis, seeking to increase their daily resources in as many ways as possible. Many engage in selling charcoal and vegetables on the street. In many families, schooling is not a priority. The importance of learning to read and write is not yet inscribed in a whole line of people who orientate their lives every day around respecting the customs of their ancestors and the taboos to be respected. Schooling is not part of the criteria of a "successful life" for many of the families. This is particularly true for a population living largely below the poverty line for generations and whose only stable reference points are the customs to be respected.

Results:

Given this social context, the results of this project in 2019 are amazing. 255 out of 270 students passed from one grade to the next. 30 out of 45 students passed their exam to enter secondary school, although not all of them got places. 12 of the young people obtained their baccalaureate compared to 2 to 3 in previous years, and 5 got honours. Only 1 primary school pupil and 2 secondary school pupils dropped out of the project during the year. The biggest 'success' for the preschool children was their access to educational colourful toys, as these children never have toys at home and don't know how to play when they first come to the preschool!

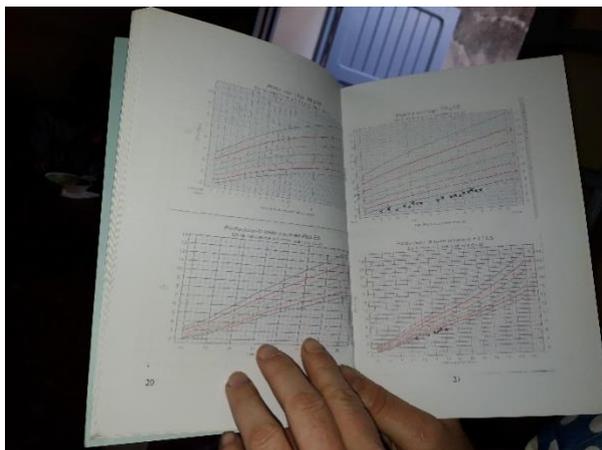


THE PROJECT ALSO OFFERS A NUTRITION PROGRAMME FOR MALNOURISHED CHILDREN



SIGN TO BRING BATTERIES FOR RECYCLING

While the Supplementary Education is the focus of the Akany Fivoarana project, there are other services which support the students' education such as the Back to School bookstore where students can buy school books at subsidized prices and the Nutrition Programme for malnourished children. To create environmental awareness local people are encouraged to bring their used batteries to the project, and these are sent to Europe via visitors, where they can be re-cycled as no such facility exists locally.



Results show gradual improvement of each child's weight.

Conclusion:

The best way to conclude the experience of my visit to this great project is to allow the staff to have the final word. I asked the teaching staff about the difficulties of the project and the

difficulties that they encounter in their work. There is not enough capacity for all the participants who would like to join as the premises is limited. Unfortunately there is too little teaching time for the children to fully benefit as it is an After-School project. Many children suffer from mal nutrition due to poverty and this prevents some from attending. Others fall asleep in class and have no energy for learning. Lack of parental commitment, which at times is due to the poverty of their lives leads to children dropping out of school. This is a big problem in the public schools. Many girls give birth at too young an age which also prevents them from finishing their education.

However there are many ways in which the teachers see that the project is going well. There is a good range of activities on offer including educational games, meals and play activities, all of which contribute to the further education of the children. There is openness among the staff to flexibility in the time table as required due to an on-going spirit of collaboration. There is an on-going realisation among the participants and their parents of the better opportunities afforded for a continuation of education and the hope for a better future. There is evidence of a positive attitude among all those involved leading to an atmosphere of reciprocal trust, good communication and mutual listening, all of which results in fulfilment in the work.

THANKS

I am very grateful indeed for having had the opportunity to visit these two LSA projects and to see at first hand the great work that is being done under very difficult conditions. The commitment of the Sisters and staff is very evident and one gets the sense that this is not just a job but a life commitment. I appreciated particularly all the help I was given to understand when people spoke in French and Malagasy. The local people spoke Malagasy and the staff of both projects spoke both French and Malagasy. A big thank you to everyone for all the ways in which my visit was facilitated.

Bride Coughlan

4th May 2020