



ASMAE – Associatio Soeur Emmanuelle
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A European Seal of Approval for the Bobigny Childcare Centre!

2010 is the European Year For Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion. For this reason, the Bobigny Centre has been awarded the seal of approval from the steering committee for its program to support young mothers and their children.

This is a good time for us to revisit the work done by Sabine Pirrovani, the Director of the Centre, and her team.



Sabine, can you explain this program to us?

This program focuses on rebuilding lives, and providing professional training and parenting support for disadvantaged young mothers in Bobigny.

Today the centre welcomes 19 young mothers, from 18 to 25 years of age, from Seine-Saint-Denis, all having a transient lifestyle characterised by multiple family and marital breakdowns, and with no plans as they lack the capacity to make them. The majority of these women have suffered serious physical, psychological and even sexual violence and all have at least one child under the age of 3. The principle goal of the project is to promote the mother's social and professional training during the free time provided to her while her child is at the centre.

More specifically, the project focuses on preventing social exclusion and the breakdown of the family. It also supports mothers during the first years of their child's life.

What are the consequences of these women's lives on their relationship with their child?

The children at the childcare centre are affected by their mother's transient lifestyle.

In this lifestyle, the relationship between children and their mother is sometimes merged, with the child representing the only permanence in the mother's life. He may also have to play a role that should not be allotted to him: confidant, stress reducer, etc. He sometimes carries a heavy burden on his shoulders. Some children feel the effects of this intensely and adjust to their mother's needs, closing themselves off in an abnormal attitude for their age, like silence or introversion. The mother's insecurity and lack of stability can interfere with the child's growth and development.



Why is the centre called la Chrysalide (Cocoon)?

The centre enables these women to think about their lives, their suffering and even their violence in order to rebuild their lives and solidly envision professional training.

When they realise the consequences of the violence and neglect they've suffered, which resulted in finding themselves alone with their child, they can then consider new types of relationships based on respect for themselves and others.

It's also at that point that they develop more respectful and communicative relationships with their children. They are helped with this by the childcare team (teachers, child minders) who sensitize them to the needs, development and acquisitions of their children, of whom they are so proud. La Chrysalide is a place for transformation: from introversion to opening up, from adolescence to parenthood, from dependence to autonomy, from violence to respect and dignity.

Portraits of the coordinators...

Maud and Zeina are ASMAE volunteers. Zeina holds the position of coordinator in Egypt. Maud is the coordinator in the Philippines, after having spent two years in Madagascar.

Their mission is to coordinate ASMAE's work with our partners by designing projects in which professionals sent by the association intervene. For example, during the creation of a psychomotricity unit in Egypt, a French psychomotrician came for two years to train local teams.

What is a coordinator's day like?

Zeina: Each day, each week is different. I spend most of my time supporting local partners in the preparation and monitoring of their projects. Thus, my support is carried out either in the field with operational teams or from a more strategic point of view, with the associations' directors.



Maud: I would describe my day the same way. Additionally, given the geographic specificity of my intervention zone in the Philippines, most of the partners I support are spread over several islands. So I spend a certain amount of time travelling, notably by plane or boat. I spend about $\frac{3}{4}$ of my time in the field with the partners or travelling to meet them.

In spite of the distances, I always try to be present at the key moments of a project or when the partner requests my presence and my advice.

After almost two years in the field for Zeina and four for Maud, what do you like best about your job? Why did you choose it?

Maud: I wanted to keep working on child development projects. I like the double aspect of our job. We have to call upon qualities of analysis and strategy while remaining firmly anchored in the field. Our job is not to impose our vision for development and our own projects, but rather to bring to life local initiatives. I absolutely wanted to find an NGO that advanced these values.

Zeina:

What interests me most is at the heart of ASMAE's intervention method. It's the approach to development through partnership.

Zeina, how do you communicate with your Egyptian partners?

We're accompanied in the field by translators who transcribe for us the words of our partners and they especially help us decipher all the innuendos and unspoken words.

Personally, I'm lucky to speak Arabic and to know the Egyptian culture very well. That has enabled me to more quickly deal with problems with the projects and to easily communicate with our partners.



What is the most important quality of a coordinator?

Zeina: There's only one! The main thing is certainly to have a sense of humour!

Maud: Having a good interpersonal relationship is the very basis of a partnership. Without a good sense of contact, communication is more difficult and projects cannot move ahead! You also have to be multi-skilled.

What was your biggest headache?

Zeina: Without any doubt, my colleague's accident! (Note: A former coordinator had an auto accident). That was very hard, but I was extremely touched by the support and presence of our partners during that time.

And your best memory?

Zeina: My best memory is a feeling more than an event. It's feeling a thousand ideas blossoming around me and knowing that I'm a part of all this positive energy.

Maud: My best memories concern small details, like winks from our partners. Those moments reveal the path we've taken together and the ties we've woven. A coordinator's job is hard work, but it can be very gratifying.

It you had it to do over again, would you chose the same job?

Zeina: Absolutely!

Maud: Not only once but twice! After two years as a coordinator in Madagascar, I signed up for a two-year mission in the Philippines!

Now that you have just completed or will soon complete your mission, what are you dreaming of?

Zeina and Maud: Vacation...to regain energy and start again with a refreshed curiosity and desire!

What is Psychomotricity?



Anne-Cécile, a psychomotrician for ten years, spent two years training a seven-member Egyptian team in this approach to treating handicapped people. The students' training was just validated and recognized by the Training Institute of Beirut (Lebanon). Now they are working with our SETI partner in Alexandria and/or Cairo to support children with mental or physical handicaps, behaviour or

learning problems. Each year 70 children are cared for within this program.

What is psychomotricity?

Psychomotricity is a speciality of a person's overall development. It is the study of motor behaviors related to brain activity and physiological, affective and relational life throughout one's lifetime.

Care for handicaps is practically nonexistent in Egypt...

In Egypt, statistics regarding the number of handicapped children are under-reported. 1.5 million persons are handicapped, 45% of which are children under 18 years of age. Among them, the vast majority (95%) do not benefit from any specific care.

In large cities like Cairo or Alexandria, the population has been sensitized to the problems of the handicapped over the past ten years. However, in the country, as well as along the Nile River valley and delta, cultural and religious beliefs dominate. In these regions, a handicap is seen as a curse from God.

SETI's work is therefore paramount. The training of Egyptian psychomotricians will allow for better care of handicapped children.

A unique partnership with the Beirut Training Institute

The role of this Institute, the only one existing in the countries of the South, is to validate the theoretical and practical contents of the training throughout these two years by theoretical exams and practical tests given each semester. During this training, four students from Cairo and three from Alexandria spent two days taking theoretical courses and three days working directly with children each week. In Cairo, Anne-Cécile first took charge of the work sessions with children, then the students slowly gained autonomy and competence to identify the problems of the handicapped child and to lead work sessions themselves.



Psychomotricity, a very novel approach in Egypt



children greater self-confidence.

This training brings a very different approach to traditional Egyptian teaching methods, which are based on repetition and reproduction. It gives the child the right to be wrong or to fail and thus enables support following his own rhythm of progress. For example, to teach children with learning disabilities to write, the psychomotrician works on all the prerequisite competencies. She leads work sessions based on drawing to let the child progress through his difficulties like holding a pencil correctly, knowing how to organize the space on a page or being able to make circles and lines. The psychomotricity approach also gives handicapped

What support exists for the street children in Manila?

Since 1991, ASMAE has been helping street children in Manila, in the Philippines. In 2006, the three local partner associations regrouped into the Réseau des Educateurs de Rue des Partenaires d'Asmae [Street Education Network of Manila Asmae Partners or SENMAP in English] to better coordinate their activities in the field and to encourage the exchange of knowledge.



In 2010, upon their request, Elisa, an experienced Philippine psychologist, worked for four months to train them in the psychosocial support of street children. She gave them the tools and methods necessary for identifying the child's needs and then bringing him an adapted response.

Elisa, what was your first action with the educators?

In the Philippines, there is no training to become a street educator. Therefore teams in the field find themselves unequipped facing the scope of the phenomenon and the daily difficulties. For the training to be effective and adapted, I evaluated the level of the members' comprehension and knowledge of subjects as varied as the psychological development of the street children and the techniques for observing, listening to and implementing individualised plans for each child.

In the street, what difficulties are they confronted with?

Because of poverty, conflicts or sometimes natural catastrophes, some families are scattered or destroyed and their children find themselves on the street. Other children voluntarily flee their family to escape violence and mistreatment and then live on the street, without restraint or structure. These painful experiences make the task of returning the child to his family or into society complex and difficult.



For the workers, it is often difficult to maintain a stable relationship with children because they no longer have confidence in adults. However, dialog is essential to help the child design or redesign his life plan and enable him to escape from a life centred on survival.

The workers must also understand why they chose to do this job, because their attitudes reflect on their relationship with the children. Attitude is something that is much harder to acquire than knowledge!

The Victims of the Crisis in Madagascar

The political crisis that has touched Madagascar since 2009 has had significant repercussions for its economy. The absence of international recognition of the Malagasy government for a year and a half has caused instability within the ministries. Budgetary reductions are preventing the government from honoring its commitments to the health and education sectors. It is estimated that the education budget has been cut from 20 to 30% in the past few months. Numerous donor countries have suspended their development aid while waiting for the political power to stabilise. Thus the association partners are having more

difficulty financing their work. In February, to support them, ASMAE sent a field volunteer to spend four months identifying local and international financing currently available to the Malagasy associations. This work enabled us to formalise a directory of potential investors that the local agencies will be able to access.



The European Union's decision to suspend its aid for development on June 7, 2010 echoed the United States' decision to suspend its commercial agreements. The World Bank is maintaining just its humanitarian programs. These decisions reinforce the economic crisis already created by the partial financial withdrawal of numerous international investors. The logical consequence: many workers have been laid off, due to a lack of orders or financing.

In this context, the living conditions of Malagasy families are worsening and the entire family, parents as well as children, must participate for its survival. The most affected is the underprivileged population of the Big Island, of which the persons benefitting from the support of our partners are a part. Approximately 70% of the Malagasy population lived below the poverty level before the start of the crisis. One third of the children, according to the report 'Aid and Action'¹, state that they no longer attend school this year essentially because they must work to help their family. Since the majority of public primary school teachers receive their salary from the contributions of their students' parents, and the economic conditions of families is in freefall, it is becoming difficult to honor salary commitments.

The education of children from three to six years old, an example of the impact of the crisis...

For the past 5 years, ASMAE has developed in partnership with nine Malagasy associations education programs aimed at protecting and educating children from three to six years of age. Today, less than 5% of children are schooled before going to primary school, even though early childhood programs are essential for the development of underprivileged children. With the support of education professionals and the networking of partners, ASMAE supports preschool teachers to enrich their training by discussing their difficulties and sharing their experiences in terms of methods and tools.



Within this crisis context, ASMAE shares its partners' concerns for the future of the supported families and particularly their young children. Before the crisis, preschool programs provided children, especially those in the South East, with their only meal of the day. When will they have it from now on?

¹ Education, Courses Are Disappearing! Impact of the World Economic Crisis on Education, Aid and Action, under the direction of Claire Calosci, 04/12/2010.