

Father Stefano – and the maternity dispensary in Madagascar

One of the many delightful things about the Association Femmes d'Europe is that through our projects, we meet – directly or virtually – the most amazing people. It is heartening to know that there are so many exceptional people out in the world, working to make it a better place.



High in the galaxy of such people is Father Stefano Scaringella, missionary priest and surgeon. In the early 1980s Father Stefano went to work in Africa; since 1984 he has been in Ambanja, in northern Madagascar. Madagascar is one of the poorest countries in the world, with a population which is exploding. The entire health structure in the country is pathetically under developed. Father Stefano decided to do what he could to improve the situation.

He started by opening a dispensary, which became a clinic with 100 beds, where 3000 operations are carried out annually.



At the same time he opened an orphanage, for both parentless and ill-treated babies and young children, which currently houses 150 children until the age of 13, when they go on to secondary school in Antananarivo. In 2002 he set up dispensaries in three villages – dispensaries which treat up to 2000 cases each month. The following year he established a School to train nurses, which was taken over by the State in 2016 and became a University School.



Since 2018 he has been in charge of the State Hospital, which was extremely rudimentary, and which he is working to build up.

In the late 1990s a group of friends in Milan met Father Stefano, and deeply impressed by his work, started to follow and support him. In 2010 they formed the Association “Hafaliana la Gioia” to offer systematic support. In recent years a growing number of young volunteers, mainly medical students and young doctors have cooperated with the Association in raising funds for Father Stefano; many of them go to work as volunteers in the Hospital or the orphanage.

In Madagascar women tend to have 6 or 7 children, and are frequently single mothers. They have their babies in their homes, which lack running water and electricity. They start young: 20% of the mothers are not even 20 years old, and 9% are younger than 16. The death rate of these young women during pregnancy or at birth is **nine** times higher than in Italy; infant mortality (before they are five) is fourteen times higher than in Italy. Father Stefano was very aware of the crying need for proper pre-and post-natal care, in a fully-equipped medical dispensary, in order to reduce those shocking figures.



In 2019 Hafaliana la Gioia turned to our Association, seeking funding to convert a run-down building given to them by the State into a dispensary for mothers and babies. The plan provided for a waiting room, consultation before and after birth, and a conference room for courses to prepare for maternity as well as continuous training of medical staff. Family planning, vaccination and distribution of medicines were also foreseen. There would be 10 trained staff for up to 800 pregnant women with their families.



FdE found this project irresistible, and now, two years later the dispensary is built and functioning well. Every photo tells a story, and the dispensary can be seen in the virtual Project Ceremony. The people of Ambanja must thank heaven for sending them Father Stefano – and for FdE it was a real privilege to participate, even in a minor way, in his work.

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