



JRS Psychosocial Occupational Therapists meet in Maban Refugee Camp

Change and living through uncertain times

Noelle Fitzpatrick, from Cavan has been Country Director of JRS in South Sudan for over a year now. We asked her a few questions about the challenges she and the organisation have faced in that time, as Covid-19 added another layer of complexity to her role and to life in general.

Q1; What was the effect of the Covid-19 threat on JRS programmes and on refugees?

The shutting down of international and internal travel made visiting project sites and moving supplies difficult and this affected our ability to keep normal programming going. Closure of schools and all institutes of learning meant that teacher-training work had to be suspended for a time until we could

figure out a viable way to deliver tuition remotely. The risks associated with Covid-19 were many in that the longer children are out of school, especially girls, the higher the risk that they will not return. Protection risks for children grow when they do not have structured support and learning.

The regions in South Sudan felt vulnerable to the risk of Covid-19 from travellers coming from the capital Juba

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since that was the primary locus of infection. This is particularly true in Maban where the health system is fragile. Unfortunately, refugees began to be demonised as the ones bringing the risk of Covid-19 infection – both refugees from DRC passing into Yambio where JRS operates and refugees from Sudan passing into Maban.

Refugees have so many other threats to their existence and wellbeing to

deal with Covid-19 remained relatively low on the list of their many concerns. The ability to socially distance within the camps is very limited, and people struggled to know how to respond concretely to a threat which in reality has not materialised on the ground in the same way as it has in Europe.

Q2; What impact did it have on people's mental health?

In the initial months there was a lot of anxiety, some of which was stoked by the government response to the threat - closure of bars, stalls, limited numbers on public transport – all of which put severe economic pressure on people who live day-to-day. Since those restrictions were lifted, for most people it is the economic threat of Covid-19 that causes the most stress.

JRS got involved in risk communication and community engagement work giving the facts of Covid-19 to people

and people were grateful for the opportunity to clarify exactly what the virus was and how it differed from Ebola. We did this through our home visitor team also through call in radio programming.

JRS was recently asked by UNHCR to take the lead on providing Psychological First Aid training to front line health workers involved directly in positive Covid-19 cases.

The closure of churches had a big impact on people since this is a largely Christian country, and its very much part of the fabric of life to go to church at weekends and choir practice etc. during the week. Having all that shut down had a very detrimental effect on people's coping ability by depriving them of their normal social outlets.

Q3; What change have you found the most difficult to deal with?

Covid-19 has slowed down all plans and processes – from planned recruitments to teacher training schedules. Not knowing when schools might re-open made it difficult to plan, and the stalled political process meant no governors were in place, therefore there was nobody to lead on the response at ground level.

It can be difficult to keep the team focused and motivated when there is no clarity about how long the schools will be closed, and when staff are concerned about their own families. In it all we have to remind them that we must keep focus on what we can control rather than what we can't in it all, and how we try to protect those who are most vulnerable amongst us from infection.

Another challenge is managing financial risks as bank liquidity is an issue – how to move money, pay salaries, and manage cash flow – all consequences

A Word from the Director

We celebrate Christmas 2020 during a time of change of living and relating, uncertainty and fear during this pandemic of Covid-19.

In the midst of the darkness of our anxieties Jesus comes as a light and a comforter and a source of real hope. Let us gaze on the baby in the crib with his hands outreached seeking to be held by us, and be comforted by Him who is our companion and friend.

Change and hope are the themes of this newsletter. In South Sudan, the past year has been a challenge. JRS Country Director, Noelle Fitzpatrick writes about the effect the pandemic has had on both the refugee community and on JRS staff.

A major change is underway in the governance structures of the Jesuits in Southern Africa, as ten countries merge into one Province in 2021. Leonard Chiti SJ, Provincial of the Zambia-Malawi

Province shares his reflections about the benefits that this will bring. We wish them well knowing that by uniting they can be of greater service to the communities they serve.

The article from Allan Ggita SJ, Director of Development in Eastern Africa outlines the difficulties of staying safe from infection in communities where people often do not have access to running water.

Our Christmas campaign to provide 'Tippy Taps' – small wooden structures to hold a water tank which can be operated by a foot pedal – to households and communities, will help to alleviate the problem and save scarce water. Small inventions can make a real difference.



Change in Hong Kong during the year was not just due to Covid-19 but because of the erosion of its civil and democratic structures, as our article from a Jesuit in the country explains.

Wishing you and your families a peaceful and joyous Christmas. The new year brings hope by the good news of a Covid-19 vaccine. Let us continue to look out for one another. We do not know what 2021 will bring, but let us welcome it with open arms because God is with us.

of the economic impact of Covid-19. Coping with elevated security risks and the economic deterioration which has led to increased criminality in general have also been significant hurdles over the past few months.

Q4: How did JRS pivot to meet the challenges of the past year?

Many of the team from Maban are working from the Country Office in Juba on rotational basis doing remote tutoring and counselling by Microsoft Teams while construction work continues on new staff accommodation. Before people shared tents but that is no longer possible given the Covid-19 risk so the whole team cannot relocate until that accommodation is finished. It has forced us to fast track better IT options – online learning platforms to complement the classroom learning because even when schools do re-open fully it will have to be under some changed conditions. We have been involved in the distribution of radios for small group learning by children listening to education programming

on radio – and JRS providing tutors to follow up those small groups.

We engaged in Covid-19 risk communication work. We did it in the very personal way that is the JRS approach – to complement the loud hailer approach of other organisations – and we realised that how messages are framed and how questions are posed to communities matter a lot to their ability to understand and respond. Just advising people they have to socially distance is not enough – people do not know what that means or what to do with that information.

Q5: What are your hopes and predictions for next year in South Sudan?

I've learned that it is extremely difficult if not impossible to predict how things will go in South Sudan. Political deadlock persists – the two big men leading opposite forces within government have been on opposing sides for so long and may not be able to ever break out of that dynamic. There is huge risk

that economic deterioration directly linked to the global economic impact of Covid-19 will destabilise the very fragile political situation. South Sudan is an oil-based economy, and the slump the demand for oil globally which will continue until there is economic recovery will continue to affect the country's stability.

Q6: What insights or wisdom did living through the changes in 2020 bring?

The importance of supporting the JRS team, keeping them briefed of plans, progress, supporting, bringing in Covid-19 protective measures, supporting those sick or anxious about someone sick. Evolving strong local staff capacity to empower them to be proactive in adapting and re-orienting and keeping things moving amidst change. The pandemic has been a great opportunity to make progress in IT-based knowledge and learning which will benefit everyone. The year has also taught us to know our limits and to develop positive coping mechanisms to maintain our equilibrium.

Hong Kong Solidarity through Covid-19

A member of the Jesuit Hong Kong community has updated us about the changes that the virus has brought to the island, which is overshadowed by the news of increased Chinese government restrictions. For security reasons, we cannot publish his name, but we thank him for this article.

'A few days ago I came across a comment in an English-language newspaper that attributed the way in which Hong Kongers deal with the Covid-19 outbreak to their 'conformity' and obedience to authority. Although these stereotypical assumptions may not be malicious in intent, they are inaccurate and do not reflect my experience of living here.

Just yesterday, a woman I spoke to at a parish meeting laughed as she recalled what had happened when she had forgotten to wear her mask on the journey there. People on the bus looked

at her quizzically, reminding her of her mistake. Another person told me that on the way into the building the doorman had reminded him to put his mask on. Trivial incidents, but ones which indicate the true Hong Kong spirit which is that we are all in this together and each of us is our brother or sister's keeper.

In Hong Kong we have great experience of preventing the spread of disease, particularly during the SARS epidemic in the early 2000s, which gave us a 'practise run' at being careful and considerate of others without any objection to infringement of personal

freedom. This 'conformity' has kept our numbers of infections and deaths, overall, quite low. It has also made hand-washing and sanitising part of daily life. Needless to say, unenlightened politics have had an obstructive influence on some aspects of the anti-Covid battle. Our Chief Executive [head of local Government] was rather slow to close the border with mainland China to control infected travellers, citing our 'special relationship' with the mainland.

As for the future, economic recovery is, of course, an important element.

But the most worrying element is the future political reality of the territory under the new National Security Law imposed recently by Beijing. This, in effect, gives more control over Hong Kong affairs to the Central Government in China which has questionable intent in fulfilling international agreements about the degree of autonomy to be enjoyed by Hong Kong following the return of the territory to Chinese sovereignty in 1997. There was a great exodus

from Hong Kong in the years before 1997 and another exodus is slowly developing. Where there is no or very little hope, an exodus is inevitable. The agreement of 50 years of 'no change' has become as much change as Beijing wants.

Covid-19 restrictions have of course affected religious services and activities but the online Zoom app has proved to be a great boon for overcoming problems of gatherings. On

Sunday evenings in my small chapel here in the Jesuit residence, I celebrate Mass with three or four Christian Life Community members and their children. We broadcast the Mass by Zoom for my family in Derry and some Chinese friends in Dublin.

I now get to see my family and chat with them once a week instead of once in four years on my infrequent visits to Ireland. It is indeed an ill wind that blows no one any good!



Restructuring in Southern Africa

By Leonard Chiti, SJ, Lusaka, Zambia.

The restructuring of Jesuit Provinces in Southern Africa which will result in the formation of one large united region has been underway since 2014 and is an attempt to adapt to changing circumstances and to care for the persons engaged in the Jesuit mission there in ways most appropriate to the times.

This exercise in Southern Africa is expected to culminate in the formation of one administrative unit or Jesuit Province on 25th March 2021. The new Province will be comprised of ten countries: Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Malawi, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland/Eswatini, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

This process was started following instructions from the 35th General Congregation of the global Jesuit community (GC35), in 2008 '...to commission a process of reflection on provinces and province structures which will lead to practical proposals to adapting this aspect of our governance to today's realities. This commission's responsibility should include a comprehensive review of the criteria for the establishment, reconfiguration, and suppression of provinces and regions.'

So far, the course of restructuring in Southern Africa has gone well.

Many Jesuits in Zambia and Malawi have joined their counterparts in Mozambique, South Africa and Zimbabwe in planning and discernment meetings. These have taken place over a period of several years and some important decisions having made. One example is a joint novitiate in Lusaka, Zambia which was inaugurated several years back and now takes in novices from the whole of Southern Africa.

Two new ministries have been established: migrants and refugees and environmental justice, in response to the priorities of the global Jesuit community at this time. A Curia for the new Province will be based in Lusaka, Zambia and joint commissions have now been set up. At the time of writing the process of choosing a new Provincial has reached an advanced stage.

Given recent guidance from the last two general congregations and Fr General's own encouragement, the restructuring of the provinces and region in Southern Africa is bound

to enhance the Society's Apostolic endeavours. Armed with a fresh understanding of the needs and aspirations of the people of Southern Africa which came via a comprehensive social analysis exercise

I am hopeful that Jesuits in Southern Africa are now better equipped to serve the mission of God, *missio dei*, with renewed zeal and commitment.

In terms of benefits to the Zambia-Malawi Province of which I am part, I can see that we will be more focused on 'core Jesuit ministries' - education, social justice, and spirituality. With more Jesuits available from other parts of the region, it will be possible to find people to mission to critical areas of need which has been a problem up until now. Jesuits from Zambia and Malawi will also have an opportunity to participate in ministries outside their

current Province and in the process will enrich other cultures and be enriched in return.

Ultimately for me the greatest benefit to the amalgamation is an opportunity for the Society of Jesus to participate in the mission of God through a 're-imagination' of the contribution that we can make to the concrete apostolic needs in the region.

The discernment process so far has shown that Jesuits in Southern Africa are in tune with the Spirit of the Lord, which has been leading the process. It has been characterised by a peaceful and prayerful atmosphere that is in many ways in tandem with what the universal Catholic Church is engaged in, including caring for the common home, the importance of a vibrant and purposeful youth ministry and a commitment to a poor church.

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Malawi: The Jesuit Centre for Ecology and Development aims at improving food security and helping communities to adapt to climate change and to mitigate its impact.

Tippy Tap Christmas Campaign

This year the Covid-19 pandemic has brought the issue of handwashing to the fore. People are probably washing their hands more than ever they did before!

Handwashing is much more important than just as protection against Covid-19. Up to 80% of common infections are spread by hands as we all frequently touch our eyes, nose and mouth without even realising. Research shows that washing hands with soap and water reduces the risk of many types of diseases, but it requires access to running water which many people - especially in the Global South - do not have.

The 'Tippy Tap Campaign' will provide handwashing facilities to 11 Jesuit organisations in five countries: South Sudan, Ethiopia, Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya. Tippy Taps will be installed at rural and urban homes including those of the elderly and vulnerable. Having these facilities near toilets/latrines and places where people eat, and promoting proper handwashing will go a long way towards the reduction of infection and disease.

The campaign will also install more robust facilities at various institutions where larger number of people congregate. These will be installed in schools, churches, community halls and workplaces. Many people in these places don't have access to running water. These facilities will be locally produced and adapted to suit the size of the water tanks used; this being dependant upon the number of people likely to use them.

One of the schools where these facilities will be installed is Ocer Campion Secondary School in Gulu in northern Uganda. As many of these



students come from homes without running water we wish to instill proper handwashing practice as a habit which the students will continue into adulthood. In conjunction with the handwashing facilities we will promote the WHO guidelines on hand hygiene and explain clearly the connection between washing hands and the prevention of infection and illnesses.

At Christmas we share gifts. I would like to thank those contributing to this

appeal – your gift is contributing to the good hygiene, handwashing and improved health of those we serve. We anticipate that this campaign will benefit up to 12,000 people across East Africa.

May God Bless you and your families at this time.

Fr Allan Ggita, SJ
Director of Development, Jesuit AOR Province.

Please pass this newsletter on to your family and friends so we can share the positive impact of our work with them.

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