

RISING FROM THE ASHES OF DESPAIR TO RESPECTABILITY

Simon Watkinson, Editor at The Leprosy Mission (TLM), talks to TLM England & Wales' National Director Warren Lancaster about the development of a new sustainability project for the impoverished in Sudan

'The environment in the Sudan is the harshest I've ever seen,' Warren Lancaster told me last month. 'My first impression was the lack of water – crops, which have to last a year, can only be grown in the four-month rainy season so hunger is inevitable. Life is also extremely tough for anyone with a physical disability.'

The whole purpose of Warren's fact-finding trip was to look at the development of a sustainable project to combine leprosy and general physical disability so that people with leprosy are included within disabled people's societies. To this end, there was extensive discussion with leaders of these groups. People with disabilities in Sudan have scant access to mobility aids, but membership of a disabled people's society enables a 50% reduction on train fares; free hospital admission and free travel within the towns. The El Fula Disabled People's Society had great success in lobbying the Sudanese Government for free elementary and secondary education and this was recently made readily available at West Kordufan University.

Many folk took refuge in the Nuba Mountains, but as the soil on these terraces is now completely exhausted, they are slowly drifting back to the plains.

'Even though the Nuba mountains in Kordufan have been subjected to conflict for the last 17 years, there has been a ceasefire that has held for the past two years. As people are becoming more confident of a lasting peace, now is the time to develop a sustainable project to meet the needs of the impoverished people in this area.'

A similar, very successful project is already running in Darfur and this needs to be duplicated in Kordufan – TLM has already submitted an application to DFID for a grant of £500,000 over 3 years for this.

'This innovative project will help people to become more independent and create an environment in which they can care for themselves. The disabled people's society will provide occupational therapy and physiotherapy,' Warren said. 'Then disabled people can take a stand within their own community and lobby for their rights.'

Though not primarily concerned with leprosy, the trip did encompass visits to two towns - Kadugli and El Fula – where TLM is already working. 'TLM's main role in Sudan is to make sure that all Government clinics have adequate supplies of multidrug therapy (MDT) and that medical staff know how to diagnose the disease, treat it and follow it up.'

The highlight of Warren's trip was the leprosy village in Kadugli.

'Though TLM doesn't encourage the development of leprosy villages, the people in Kadugli overcame tremendous hardship to build a vibrant community and so don't want to return to their original villages.'

Ten years previously when those with leprosy first came to Kadugli, they were ostracised and so they appealed to the City Governor for some land. He told them that they were welcome to the local rubbish tip!

'So they reclaimed this land themselves and, against all odds, set about turning a mountain of rubbish into a village with tukels (mud dwellings with straw roofs). As they don't have enough land to farm at the moment, and no real source of income, they're currently striving for more.'

HALL AT NADDER MIDDLE SCHOOL

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