



Street Children Programme



When we started looking for support for the SVP's education programme in Sudan the belief that "knowledge itself is power" was enough to convince me that it was a worthwhile cause. I assumed that the cost of sponsoring a child through primary or secondary education would simply cover school fees and thought the figures quoted seemed reasonable. But the education programme is the SVP's oldest programme in Sudan and provides far more than schooling.

The SVP runs four 'foster homes' for girls and three for boys. The civil war and continuing internal hostilities have caused the break up of hundreds of thousands of families in Sudan. As families are forced away from their homes children are often separated from their parents or, in some cases, abandoned because parents cannot afford to look after them. Many of these children end up on the streets of Khartoum where they have no protection or shelter. Street children often seek solace in glue sniffing or substance abuse to block out their fears. Separated from their family unit, survival on the streets is centred on the philosophy of "every child for himself".

The foster homes run by the Society aim to give these young children the opportunity to enjoy



the childhood which circumstance has tried to rob from them. Ian and I visited the Yormok boys' home which can support 25 boys at any one time. The home is run by a foster father, Benjamin, and his wife Lucia. The couple have children of their own who are brought up alongside the boys who have come to them from the street. In the short time we were there it was clear that the boys are raised with the same love and discipline as the couple's own children and in return respect for their foster family is plain to see.

At the homes the children receive shelter, food, clothing, education, special equipment if they have a disability and medical care. It is easy to put a price on these elements of the programme but it is impossible to put a value on the family environment into which they are immersed. It is difficult to imagine what these children have gone through: the pain of losing their parents, abuse on the streets, hunger and illness. It was incredibly moving talking to the boys, many of whom had no idea if their parents were still alive or even who their parents were because they had lived on the streets for so long. Some thought they might have brothers and sisters but could not tell us their names or where they were.

Several of the boys at the home had physical scars on their faces, arms and legs. These may have been from the war or signs of life on the street. As Benjamin explained his role it became clear that all the boys were hiding psychological scars. Bedwetting,

nightmares, and fear of the dark are common problems for example. As well as support from the foster family the children in the SVP's foster homes have access to counselling as well as regular visits from a doctor.

One of the most positive achievements of the homes is the support the children offer to one another. There are approximately 50 ethnic groups in Sudan with over 500 different tribes and there has been much internal conflict between these groups. At Yormok seven different tribes were represented but this did not cause any problems. As Vincensio – the educational programme manager – pointed out, "the homes are communities where many do not even recognise the meaning of the word tribe". On the streets the boys may have had to look after themselves but at Yormok the philosophy changes from "each man for himself" to "one for all and all for one".

Education itself is of course a major part of the SVP's educational programme but I really feel that these other elements make it much more than a schooling project. In the rooms where the boys sleep some have scribbled a few words on the walls by their beds. On closer inspection we discovered that they had written the number of their class at school which reveals the pride they take in their education: an education they would not enjoy were it not for the homes.

FACTS

- 4 homes for girls, 3 for boys
- Over 600 street children benefit from these projects
- Provide shelter, clothes, education, food, family life