

**SOW THE SEEDS OF LOVE; LEND A HAND –MAKING THE WORLD A  
BETTER PLACE TO LIVE**

During my year as a Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Scholar, the Rotary theme was Sow the Seeds of Love after which it appropriately progressed into Lend a Hand. Sowing the seeds of love in real life scenarios results into lending a helping hand because at the end of the day the seed produces a useful fruit that helps the beneficiary in different ways. This aptly describes/summarizes my experience with Rotary.

I got information about the Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Scholarship while sowing a seed of love. As a medical doctor I have a special compassion for people living with HIV/AIDS, especially women and children. I go out of my way to provide counseling, care and support for the infected and their families. It was during one of such occasions that a Rotarian overheard that I had difficulty accessing funds for a postgraduate study in the United Kingdom. Without a word the Rotarian went off to the Rotary web site, downloaded information and forms for the Ambassadorial scholarship and had it sent to me within 24 hours. I was awarded an Ambassadorial Scholarship which was provided through The Rotary Foundation's generous Scholarships Fund Pool for Low-Income Countries. The outcome today of that singular act of sowing a seed of love is a wealth of experience, exposure, open doors, opportunities and above all friendship.

The University College London where I studied during my scholarship is an international school. It has a long-standing history of bringing together the best scholars from all over the world not only for academic purposes but also to enable students to learn about people cultures and different ways of life. So I had an opportunity of improving professionally but most importantly I got first hand experience of the British people, their culture and hospitality. I made friends both within and outside Rotary circles. Today I can boast of having a friend in every continent of the world. I believe I have also transferred a lot of knowledge about the people and culture of Nigeria to all the people I interacted with, thus promoting world peace. Unlike my other classmates (Non Rotary Scholars), I had an opportunity to travel all over London and to several cities in Britain for one

enjoyable Rotary event after the other (*Picture at rotary club meeting*). I felt at home because I had it behind my mind that I had a friend at every location. My hosts, Sponsor counselors and Scholar coordinators were a perfect example of Rotary hospitality. The Link weekend where all Rotary scholars from all over Great Britain and Ireland came together for a Rotary orientation weekend was particularly memorable. It is an event I shall never forget. (*Picture at link weekend*)

On my return to Nigeria after the scholarship, I was full of vigor and enthusiasm. A renewed vision of sowing the seeds of love and lending a helping hand to the most vulnerable of Nigeria, particularly women and children. I knew I needed a higher platform to be able to reach out to this large number of people. When an opportunity to work with UNICEF came up I was convinced this is the right platform. Why? UNICEF is all about lending a helping hand to the governments and people of all nations. UNICEF is mandated to advocate for the protection of children's rights, to help meet their basic needs and to expand their opportunities to reach their full potentials. Just like Rotary has the 4 Way TEST, UNICEF has some basic guiding principles namely,

- The best interest of the child
- Rights to survival and development
- Non discrimination
- Participation

Rotary and UNICEF have a long time history of working together reaching out to the poorest of the poor especially in the area of polio. Rotary like UNICEF is lending a helping hand to the government of Nigeria in the fight against polio. (*Picture of UNICEF/Rotary staff immunizing children in Nigeria*)

With all these ideals in mind and the confidence that my newly acquired skills would be put to good use, I accepted the challenge to serve as a Protection and Participation Officer at the UNICEF C Field Office, Kaduna. My work involves planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluation of Protection and Participation projects and supports to government, non-governmental organizations and families. Protection and Participation involves programming for:

- Protection of the rights of children and women through providing an enabling environment of child protective policies. Special protection issues being handled in Nigeria include child labor, child and women trafficking, early marriage, birth registration, children with disabilities, orphans and vulnerable children, especially AIDS orphans (*Picture of orphanages we have supported*)
- Ensuring that women, youths and children are allowed to participate in the processes of governance and decision making, therefore ensuring that their health, social and development needs are met.
- A comprehensive reproductive health and HIV/AIDS Project with a particular focus of partnering with youths. This component also reaches out to orphans and vulnerable children and ensures provision of minimum standard of youth friendly health care and services.

My work involves quite a bit of traveling to the rural areas where a majority of vulnerable women and children live. I find out first hand what support they need and build their capacities to be able to help themselves while advocating with policy makers to develop rights based interventions for them.

The UNICEF C Field Office covers an area of 327,401 square Km (or 35% of Nigeria's total land mass) and is inhabited by about 29 million people. It has within it 8 states and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. It is situated in the Northwestern and the North central part of Nigeria (*Map of Nigeria showing geographical location of C Field Office.*). So I am the officer in charge of ensuring the protection and participation of women, youths and children in this area. This is a huge and challenging responsibility, but I am up to the task because I have been empowered to lend a helping hand to my own dear nation.

One of the major things I am involved in at the moment is mobilizing all stakeholders, lobbying and advocating with policy makers for the passage of the Child Rights Act. This is a legal framework that ensures the provision of a protective environment for children and, indirectly, women. . Another project is the youth participation and HIV/AIDS

awareness project. In this project all Nigerian youths graduating from all tertiary institutions while on campus are provided with correct and complete information on HIV/AIDS and life skills to promote behavior change. Some of these youths further volunteer to be trained as peer educator trainers. They are deployed to secondary schools where in addition to their primary assignment of teaching other subjects, they are required to train and mentor at least 40 pupils for one year. These pupils in turn go on to affect their peers in various ways. This project has been very successful. About 80,000 Nigerian University graduates are reached (2 Pictures of corp members on camp) with information and life sustaining skills every year. These go on to affect millions of young people between the ages of 12-24. With the HIV prevalence highest in this age group I believe this is the key to stalling the spread of HIV in Nigeria.

Lives are being affected. An example is the case of a woman who was at the verge of death - living with HIV/AIDS, her spouse was already dead, and she had a sick child to take care of. After receiving counseling from one of the NGOs we support, she got a new lease on life, she is now living positively, has access to the drop in day care center and making plans for the future.

As a result of raised awareness on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, 2 landmark judgements involving young women who had children out of wedlock, whose judgement was to be stoned to death, were reversed and the women released to freedom.

In all my work I get a lot of fulfillment and a sense of purpose because a Nation is being developed. The Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Scholarship offered me the exposure, confidence and skills needed for my job; I have become very versatile. I am committed to mentoring and building the capacity of the young people and women I have access to. The job provides me the opportunity to know my country and its needs better, I interact with both the poor and vulnerable and the high and mighty. With all my

interactions I have come to realize that the common denominator with all people is the need for love and one form of help or the other.

I commend Rotary International and The Rotary Foundation for its wonderful initiatives; for sowing seeds of love and lending a helping hand to all the peoples of the world. Through your scholarships and other projects you have affected many lives, more than you can ever imagine. You are making the world a better place and I pray that all you have sown comes back to help you in the future, for all that goes around comes around.

***Please continue to cast your bread upon the waters and in  
Due time it shall come back to you -- in form of  
World peace; a better world to live in!***

Thank you very much for listening.

Dr Victoria Isiramen

Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Scholar, 2001/2002