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Students at the Missionary Sisters of the Holy Rosary's training school in Chipapa, Zambia, take their national exams in catering in November 2018. (GSR photo / Joyce Meyer)



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In Zambia in October, I attended a convening sponsored by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation where sisters from East and West Africa learned more about the strategy of the Catholic Sisters Initiative and the new opportunities they have to build their development skills. (The Conrad N. Hilton Foundation funds Global Sisters Report.)

Two sections of the program were of great interest to me. One was on the importance of data collection that can help sisters build a body of knowledge and experience about internal and external developments in their congregations.

Data collection, even about membership, has not been kept on a regular basis. Having such data can help them plan better for congregational development. Sharing such data with other congregations can often be a source of new ideas for other sisters around Africa in their efforts at development.

In the past few years, five sisters have been trained in this data collection and reporting at the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) in Washington, D.C. To hear their excitement about the value and potential of their new skills was inspiring.

Another section was a panel of sisters speaking about their experience of a new program at the Miller Center for Social Entrepreneurship at Santa Clara University in California. Participating sisters are learning how to become more businesslike in their ministries and that being businesslike does not take away from their spiritual motivation of working with God's people, but rather enhances what they can do.

As I listened, I recalled a perfect example of social entrepreneurship that I witnessed in November 2018 in a visit to Chipapa, Zambia. Chipapa is a rural area about 20 miles outside of Lusaka, the capital. Two projects I witnessed excited my imagination about the potential of sisters as entrepreneurs. One was a dairy collection center and the other a skills training center. Both of these evolved from a vision of Holy Rosary Sisters from Nigeria who wanted to help remote communities of Zambia discover their potential for development. Chipapa was a neglected region,

so it fit their mission perfectly.

Missionary Sisters of the Holy Rosary is an international congregation founded in Ireland in 1927, and the sisters' influence has reached into African countries and Latin and North America. Entrepreneurship seems to be in their DNA, as I have witnessed a number of their other creative projects in Zambia. They model outside-the-box thinking!

The dairy collection center they started allows local farmers to bring their milk to a dairy from the nearby town. The milk is then processed and sold in local markets. The farmers are paid a percentage of the income.

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The sisters did not stop with this dairy project. They moved on to finding other development projects to help people become economically sustainable. Developing the youth was a priority because both young women and young men needed skills that could help them sustain themselves and their families.

Chipapa now boasts a famous training school that each year graduates female and male students who can confidently enter the job market. The school opened about 10 years ago after extensive homework of the sisters visiting the communities of the region. The sisters wanted families to identify and articulate their priority needs. Families described high poverty rates, unemployment (especially among the youth), intense deforestation and dramatic food insecurity as most significant.

Food insecurity was not a surprise, as it affects many parts of Zambia as climate patterns continue to change. The primary food of the country is maize, a crop particularly vulnerable to drought. In recent years, rainfall has become more erratic than ever, inhibiting adequate food for even subsistence existence and contributing to a decreasing source of income.

In 2010, with this information in hand, four sisters were missioned to Chipapa from Lusaka to take up the challenges to provide students with skills that could address this disadvantaged environment. The sisters began searching for grants to build classrooms and dormitories, as Chipapa is far from accessible lodging. They also needed equipment and materials for the courses. A number of international foundations, excited by the project, supported the venture.

While the buildings were going up, the sisters designed a curriculum that included food production and tailoring. Young women applied for these initial courses, but it was not long before men also became interested.

All students must meet two qualifications before they can enter the program: They must have completed grades seven through 12 and must be between the ages of 16 and 30. Students came from the immediate area and from far away, giving evidence of need, popularity and excellence.



Students at the training school in Chipapa, Zambia, take their national exams in catering in November 2018. The Holy Rosary Sisters enhanced the catering curriculum when they learned that the tourism industry was seeking people trained in hospitality skills. (GSR photo / Joyce Meyer)

Listening to the needs of the country, the sisters soon learned that the tourism industry was seeking people trained in hospitality skills. They enthusiastically took on the task, enhancing the catering curriculum and introducing hospitality management education. These attracted even more students. After some time, the

school achieved national accreditation and now offers courses in tailoring, dairy and vegetable farming, farm rehabilitation, bakery and Eucharist-making.

The programs are holistic and include theory and practice, stressing values of self-reliance, creativity, entrepreneurship and hard work. Most students are residential and pay a reasonable amount for tuition and lodging. They cook and clean for themselves and maintain the lovely campus with trees and flowers planted here and there.

In the years the school has been operating, the majority of students find jobs throughout all regions of Zambia in restaurants, lodges or hotels. Employment has not only given the graduates personal advantages, but has raised the standard of living for their families. Their siblings can now pay their school fees. Some students have gone on to further their education, particularly in management. Following the example of the sisters, some of them have become entrepreneurs, starting their own catering businesses.

The day I arrived for my visit, the students were taking national exams in catering, so I witnessed the creative ways they had learned to prepare and present food. I had no doubt they would all pass with flying colors, as my mouth was watering to taste the things I could only look at.

Sr. Catherine Ogunonu, director of the program, and her sisters are proud of the work they do. Ogunonu came as an entrepreneur to be the leader of this beautiful school out in the middle of nowhere. She was educated in home economics, finance and development, all skills that have proved invaluable to developing this project. She has also become an expert in team-building as she added lay teachers to her team and managed dormitories where students learn to live and work together. She and the sisters have raised up many lives of many families through their efforts.

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This story appears in the **Sustainable Development Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth** and **Sustainable Development Goal 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure** feature series.