News
News
Ministry



Srs. Florence Anaso (left) and Mary Atema of the Little Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi tend to baby chicks in Jinja, Uganda. The Association of Consecrated Women in Eastern and Central Africa is empowering Catholic sisters through social entrepreneurship to remain sustainable. (Doreen Ajiambo)



by Doreen Ajiambo

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It is 3 p.m. and Srs. Rose Thumitho, Florence Anaso and Mary Atema prepare to deliver their chicken meat and eggs to local restaurants in this eastern town, located 70 miles from the nation's capital of Kampala.

One year ago, these Little Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi received support from the Nancy Ottoboni fund from the Miller Center for Social Entrepreneurship at Santa Clara University in California and started a poultry farming business. So far, they are among the biggest suppliers of eggs and chicken meat to the local restaurants in and around Jinja town. Ottoboni was a Catholic philanthropist and wife of John Ottoboni, a university executive and senior legal counsel.*

"Our chicken business is now doing very well," said Anaso, who oversees the poultry business. "We have got contracts with several restaurants around here where we supply chicken meat and eggs daily."



From left, Srs. Rose Thumitho, Florence Anaso and Mary Atema of the Little Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi deliver chicken meat to their clients on Feb. 23 in Jinja, Uganda. (Doreen Ajiambo)

The St. Francis of Assisi sisters are among the 11 congregations that have already put to work the hands-on entrepreneurial skills they acquired in 2019 after receiving training from the Miller Center in collaboration with the Association of Consecrated Women in Eastern and Central Africa on how to transform the sisters' social ministries into enterprises in a region where more than 30,000 religious sisters serve vulnerable populations.

Congregations of Catholic sisters have been unable to finance themselves and have depended on outside donors to sustain themselves and their ministries. Lately, they have seen signs of increasing donor fatigue. To address this, the regional consecrated women's association, known as ACWECA, along with the Miller Center developed the Sisters Blended Value Project in 2018 during the Third Vatican Conference on Impact Investing in Rome with an aim to move congregations of Catholic sisters from being donor-dependent to self-reliant.

The Sisters Blended Value Project — "blended value" because it combines profitability with social benefit — is intended to help Catholic sisters acquire skills in starting and managing income-generating activities to sustain the activities of their religious congregations.

"We felt that there was need to look for more ways of earning income," said Sr. Cecilia Njeri, the association president and regional superior of the Little Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi. "We therefore, decided to train the sisters on the necessary skills in regards to business."

The partnership between Miller Center and ACWECA is largely funded by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation's Catholic Sisters Initiative. In January 2020, for example, Miller Center was awarded $550,000 by the Hilton Foundation grant to support the Sisters Blended Value Project.

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"At the Hilton Foundation, we are working to support Catholic sisters in becoming recognized as global leaders in sustainable human development while building a global sisterhood," Angelique Mutombo, senior program officer for the Catholic Sisters Initiative, said in a statement in January 2020. "Miller Center's Sisters' Blended Values Project supports that goal."

Global Sisters Report is also supported by the Hilton Foundation.

The project has two essential components: the Sisters Apprenticeship and the Sisters Accelerator. During the apprenticeship, sisters are trained by local social enterprises on their successful business models, and then replicate these to start up their own businesses, said Sr. Celestine Nasiali, Blended Value project coordinator.

The association leadership invited three local social enterprises to work with the sisters at the apprenticeship stage after completing a Miller Center accelerator program. They include Eggpreneur, which works in rural communities to build sustainable egg farming ventures that help families end the cycles of poverty; the National Union of Coffee Agribusinesses and Farm Enterprises in Uganda, known as NUCAFE, which prepares sisters for coffee farming; and Teach a Man to Fish, an organization that trains sisters and teachers to spur schools and youth groups worldwide to create functional youth-led businesses that are educational and profitable.

Nasiali, who is a member of the Oblate Sisters of the Assumption, said the Sisters Accelerator component positions sisters to build out their own business strategy to steer their growth while following the Miller Center's curriculum structure. After finishing the accelerator, they are allowed to apply for loans and grants, she said.



Sr. Celestine Nasiali (left), coordinator of the Sisters Blended Value Project, with sisters from the Daughters of St. Therese of the Child Jesus (Banyatereza Sisters), celebrate the coffee harvest in Fort Portal, Uganda. (Courtesy of Celestine Nasiali)

In the future, she added, sisters will replicate these entrepreneurial initiatives within their congregations and for other congregations.

"This project was designed to address the biggest challenge the religious congregations are going through, and that is decline in funding," said Nasiali, while noting that the project has so far attracted 18 congregations drawn from Uganda, Kenya, Zambia, Malawi, Tanzania and Zimbabwe.

Keith Warner, a Franciscan Friar and the director of education and action research at the Miller Center, told Global Sisters Report the pilot project was done by three congregations: Little Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi in Uganda, Assumption Sisters of Eldoret in Kenya, and Religious Sisters of the Holy Spirit in Zambia.

"When the project began, we offered training to the sisters on how to turn their ministries into income-generating activities," said Warner. "We involved different organizations that offered apprenticeships to the sisters and, after the training, we encouraged and supported the sisters (financially) to build their own businesses."

Anaso said the training enabled sisters from congregations in East and Central Africa to start up their own business enterprises. In Jinja, for example, the three nuns were

trained by Eggpreneur to develop a poultry production social enterprise, as were the Assumption Sisters in Kenya.



Sr. Rose Thumitho of the Little Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi tends to chickens on their farm on Feb. 23, 2021, in Jinja, Uganda. (Doreen Ajiambo)

During the training, the sisters learned how to administer medicine to the chickens and house them properly. They were also taught about the importance of nutritious feed, marketing techniques and bookkeeping, said Anaso.

Matt Dickson, the founder of the Eggpreneur Initiative, said he developed the plan to empower women, and end extreme poverty and malnutrition.

"Eggpreneur is a business enterprise that I developed to help poor women to earn an income," he said. "So when Miller Center approached us to train sisters on this, I was delighted because the sisters are serving the poorest people and this was the main reason I started Eggpreneur Initiative."

Anaso said the sisters in Jinja received a $2,000 grant in April 2020 after their training. They bought 200 chicks and the congregation bought another 100. Within 18 weeks, they had started laying eggs, she said.

In January this year, the sisters applied for a loan and were given $8,000 – $4,000 as a loan to help boost their business and $4,000 as a gift. They have 24 months to repay the $4,000 interest-free loan, she said.



From left, Srs. Florence Anaso, Rose Thumitho and Mary Atema of the Little Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi hold crates of eggs after harvesting them on Feb. 23 in Jinja, Uganda. (Doreen Ajiambo)

The sisters used part of the money to buy poultry farm equipment, such as a charcoal stove, infrared bulbs, brooder hover lamps, a linear feeder, incubator, fencing, coops and cages.

"Right now, we have over 2,000 birds, though we are concentrating on broilers [birds raised for meat] for a short span, but we have more than 500 layers," said Anaso.

"Our business is turning out to be more profitable than we thought. There is high demand for chicken meat and eggs. In fact, the more we produce, the more we sell."

Anaso said they now have started training local women in their parishes to help them start their own poultry farming businesses with an aim to reduce poverty in a country where 41% are affected.

"Our ministry as sisters is to serve the poor, and therefore sharing our skills with the poor women, especially those living with HIV, and widows, will help them come out of poverty," she said.



Sr. Rose Thumitho of the Little Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi educates women in Jinja, Uganda, on how to transform poultry farming into business as a means of ending poverty. (Doreen Ajiambo)

In Zambia, the Religious Sisters of the Holy Spirit are training high school dropouts and children from poor backgrounds in agroecology to help them start their own businesses.

Sr. Edna Himoonde, the project leader of Emerging Farmers Initiative that offers agroecological apprenticeships to youths, said last year that the training was a way to end poverty on the continent. Last year, for instance, the sisters embarked on their project to train youths to get practical knowledge in growing crops and rearing animals.

"Social entrepreneurship is a path out of poverty into self-sustainability for human dignity and replenishing Mother Earth. This project is a sure hope of giving value to underutilized resources for mission, and for meeting the congregation's needs," she told Warner of the Miller Center in an interview for its website.

However, when COVID-19 hit the world, training sisters and monitoring their projects came to a halt, said Nasiali. Sisters were allowed only to attend some of the meetings virtually.

"We really don't know how the sisters who had already begun their accelerator program are doing" she said. "We would also like to add new members to this initiative, which is not happening right now."



Srs. Florence Anaso (left) and Rose Thumitho of the Little Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi feed pigs on their farm on Feb. 23 in Jinja, Uganda. (Doreen Ajiambo)

Despite the disruptions caused by the pandemic, the sisters are determined to continue with their projects to ensure they don't rely on aid in the future.

"Doing poultry business has really taught us to be self-sustained and not to depend on donations, which rarely come," said Anaso. "We are planning to expand our business to include crop farming and a piggery to ensure we are able to finance our ministry."

**This paragraph has been updated to include clarification about the fund.*

This story appears in the **Sustainable Development Goals Overview** and **Sustainable Development Goal 17: Partnerships for the Goals** feature series.