

ANNUAL IMPACT REPORT 2023

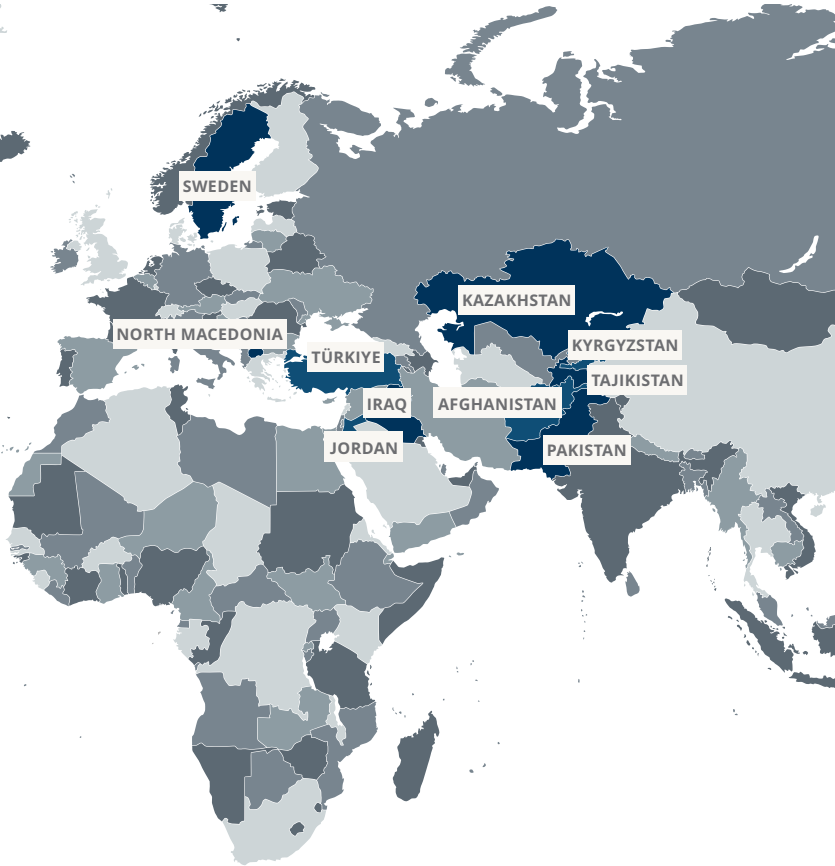
ANNUAL IMPACT REPORT 2023

OPERATION  MERCY



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WHERE WE WORK

GEOGRAPHICAL FOCUS:

We work primarily in Central Asia, the Middle East and North Africa. We aim to be bridgebuilders and peacemakers, approaching individuals with hearts of faith and trust, along with an attitude of learning. This mindset, together with our long-term strategies and focus on cultural and language acquisition, has made us an organisation that is respected and successful in community development, even in these often-neglected regions and their complex settings.

OFFICES:

Afghanistan, Iraq, Jordan, Kazakhstan, North Macedonia, , Sweden (International Headquarters)

PARTNERS:

Kyrgyzstan, North Africa, Tajikistan, Türkiye, Pakistan



WORD FROM THE DIRECTOR

The year 2023 was another year of disruptions and complexities. Whilst these experiences are something that Operation Mercy is familiar with and used to responding to within our settings, they are now becoming a worldwide phenomenon which our global partners are beginning to experience.

When the Operation Mercy country directors gathered in October 2023 in Germany and took stock of our work, our world, and our vision and calling, it was very clear that what we saw as crisis years with COVID, the war in Ukraine, and the return of the Taliban in Afghanistan are not passing things but symptoms of an increasingly complex and uncertain world we live in.

In 2023 we could replace the above events with earthquakes in Türkiye and Morocco, continued war in Ukraine affecting our partners in Central Asia, a new war in the Near East and the warmest year since weather records began. We have also seen inflation around the world, and increasing move to nationalism

and against immigration, asylum and international aid and development in some of our European supporting nations.

As we reviewed our organisational change process of the last five years, and assess(ed) our growth in capacity and resilience we can be proud. I especially want to draw your attention to page 12 of this report which celebrates our growth in numbers; numbers of people impacted, and funding received and spent directly in our communities. The growth in capacity to stand with our branches and partners also shows in the slight increase of funds spent at the international office - this is the result of strengthening and building up a professional team over the past few years, and it has already resulted in an increased ability to serve on the ground.

As we celebrate all this, we also become more and more aware that to continue to follow our vision to restore hope, build capacity and promote community in this growingly complex and unsettled world, we need more than ever agility and adaptability, partnership and networks, over own strength.

We embrace the complexities of this world – so that we can restore hope, build capacity and promote community within it.

As we celebrate the progress made, and the resources and strengths gained, we see them as something to bring to the table of partnership and collaboration.

We once more remind ourselves that we are called, that we have the vision to serve in the midst of chaos, in some of the most complex and high-risk places on this planet, because we do have a hope within us that enables us to do so.

We continued to explore new opportunities in Türkiye and the Sahel region, and to serve the people of Afghanistan through many ups and downs and ever-shrinking space for civil society. We finally opened our new office in Mosul, and we are ready together with you as our partners to do even more in 2024.

So as we move into the new year and develop our new strategy with our board and partners, we embrace the complexities of this world – so that we can restore hope, build capacity and

promote community within it. Thanks for standing and walking at our side as we do so.

I hope you enjoy the stories of how we together have impacted these places in 2023 in this report.

Yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Andrea Vogt', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Andrea Vogt,

International Director, February 2024

» Operation Mercy partners with others to **restore hope, build capacity, and promote community.** «



OUR MISSION

Operation Mercy partners with others to restore hope, build capacity, and promote community.

No matter where we look these days, from human development reports to the 2023 Global Sustainable Development Report, it is clear that however committed we are to UN's Sustainable Development Goals, these targets will most likely not be reached, with progress made being wiped out by the crises and complexities described in the introduction.

What will it take to see change – what will it take to restore hope? Old classic methods and strategies of capacity building, advocacy and other ways of influencing stakeholders no longer seem to work in an ever-shrinking humanitarian and civil society space.

Change and hope need to be rooted deeper, need to be more resilient, and need to be more persevering in the light of the world we live in today.

Where do we find these roots, and where do we find this hope?

For us in Operation Mercy, it has always been a deep rootedness in the knowledge of a loving creator God. It is in our faith, however we express it, that we know that we as development workers, as well as our project participants, are created with enormous dignity that reflects our creator – we are living in the world not by chance but because God has called us to be light in often dark or broken places. To be peacemaker and healer, to set a sign of hope and community despite the seemingly declining state of the world.

We continue to believe that in community, transformation is possible.

In pursuing transformational development, Operation Mercy aims to address the root causes of poverty and lack of human development. When we attend to these underlying issues, we witness relationship transformation and holistic restoration of

peace and well-being. This sets us up for positive, hopeful, resilient change – which can be a counterpoint to the decline of development around us.

We see evidence, anecdotal in our stories here, but also in long-term change in our countries and communities. We see changes in health and education for all, gender equality, clean water and environmental care. We see it as we add community education to our efforts of fighting hunger in Afghanistan.

We see change in women, girls and people with disabilities – those who are often excluded from accessing their rights and development in more than one way, so they are at the heart of many of our projects and programmes.

There is a way forward to restoring hope, building capacity – if we do it in and through promoting community!

WHO WE ARE

Operation Mercy is an international relief and development organisation with over 30 years of experience headquartered in Sweden. We are a community of professionals from many different nations who serve the poor and marginalised in twelve countries throughout Central Asia, North Africa and the Middle East through an array of community development and humanitarian aid projects.

Our community represents men and women, young and old, diverse languages, ethnicities, and faith backgrounds. Even though we are different, we are united in wanting to see people raised up, in and through community, because we share hope that enables us to look beyond the pain and suffering we encounter every day.

Our core values are human dignity, integrity, humility, compassion, faith and religious freedom. In and through these values, we strive for inclusive and equal participation of all people in our communities, projects, teams, and leadership.



CORE DEVELOPMENT PRINCIPLES

Our Core Development Principles are formed from our vision, purpose, and values. These principles shape the way we understand our contexts and how we design our programmes.

MUTUAL STRENGTH AND ASSETS-BASED APPROACH:

We focus on what is present, as opposed to what is lacking. Thus, we focus on assets rather than needs, and strengths rather than weaknesses within the partner community as well as within ourselves. Combining and complementing our strengths makes us stronger.

MUTUAL CONTRIBUTION:

We focus on the fact that every person has something to give. Our partners and programme participants are all joint contributors rather than givers and receivers.

MUTUAL TRANSFORMATION:

We focus on the fact that there is no transformational development apart from people who themselves are being transformed. We want all programme stakeholders to experience transformation, including our staff. We see ourselves as fellow learners rather than outside experts. We often remind ourselves that, "Transformed people transform people."

INSIDE-OUT AND BOTTOM-UP APPROACH:

We focus on exploring solutions from within the community as opposed to imposed, outside solutions. We want to see grassroots solutions and good practise impacting policy, as opposed to top-down interventions. Good things from the outside can only be effective if they are owned from the inside. We are often heard saying, "Approach it inside-out not outside-in."

PEOPLE EMPOWERMENT:

We focus on developing human capacity as opposed to buildings, equipment, or other fixed assets. We emphasise people and processes over products and projects.

SUSTAINABILITY AND REPRODUCIBILITY:

We focus on simple reproducible ideas that can spread quickly as opposed to expensive one-time projects. We believe that small, fast, and simple is better than big, slow, and complex.

MULTIPLICATION:

We want to see transformation happening on the DNA level of community, where we all multiply ourselves and the transformation we are experiencing. We want to see multiplication of ideas, innovation, and values.

ACCOUNTABILITY:

We endeavour to be a trustworthy partner to all our project stakeholders. We are committed to transparent and auditable financial and operational systems. We strive for continuous improvement in all we do.

VALUES-BASED AND RIGHTS-BASED APPROACHES:

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights echoes values we treasure deeply: dignity, equality, integrity, and the sanctity of life, among others. As we focus on dealing with root causes of poverty, we find hopelessness, aloneness, and injustice. Introducing people to their unique value and the rights they have, and inviting them to participate in advocacy and change, gives a voice and hope to the hopeless.

REALISTIC OPTIMISM:

We recognise that poverty is a massive and complex human tragedy, yet we remain optimistic as we witness positive outcomes in our work and that of others. We often remind ourselves to “celebrate the small steps, such as the single person experiencing change, who will be empowered to be a change agent in the long run.”



Total expenditure
in 2023

SEK **24 100 000**^{*}
€ **2 161 047**^{**}

International office costs vs
project costs:

11% vs **89%**

Total project
beneficiaries/participants

511 843

Ratio direct
project participants

women & children **78%**
men **22%**





Total Volunteer
Hours in 2023

119 275 hours

Valued at

SEK 23 258 625 ***

€ 2 085 601 **

Our motivated, long term, professional, and self-funded staff are among our greatest assets. They contribute 1/3 to the cost of each action completed!

THE CHALLENGE:

When **you give 500 SEK**, we add **500 SEK**-worth of volunteer hours. Together we impact 10 lives through restoring hope, building capacity and growing community.



Swish: 123 90 20 207
or mercy.se/give



* Figures not final. Updated report with audited financial will be available June 2024.
** Exchange rates 11,152 from https://sek.fxexchangerate.com/eur-2023_12_31-exchange-rates-history.html
*** Based on the Swedish average wage in December 2023: 195 SEK/hour (<https://tradingeconomics.com/sweden/wages>)

BACK TO THE BEGINNINGS:

EARTHQUAKE RELIEF IN TÜRKIYE AND MOROCCO

Operation Mercy was founded in 1991 by people who wanted to serve refugees on the border between Iraq and Türkiye. In February 2023 a major earthquake hit the region and once more we were called to serve the people of this region, among them refugees from Syria.

Our disaster response partner team worked to support local groups in rapid assessment and planning of the initial response. Our volunteers then worked with a team building a camp from scratch. Among those involved were several NGO workers and members of the Armed Forces. Through these connections we were able to build partnership, trust and respect with the people.

Twelve months later the work is moving from relief to rehabilitation and development. Our board has endorsed the plan to open an Operation Mercy branch office in Türkiye, that will be able to work to promote and enable the local community – while restoring hope in places where it seems nothing but sorrow and rubble is left.

One of our partners from the initial work in the camp is helping to arrange meetings with the relevant government offices. When we met with the governor recently, he introduced us saying, “These people came and helped without waiting to take praise from anyone; they helped people, all the peoples.”

“These people came and helped without waiting to take praise from anyone; they helped people, all the peoples.”





Building these shelters meant that not only were the people protected from the wind, rain, and snow, but it also meant that family units could stay together. It also ensured protection for women, children, and other vulnerable groups.

In September, a similarly devastating earthquake hit Morocco. As in Türkiye, we were able to send our disaster response partner team, and, after assessing the situation and taking advice, they decided to focus on a shelter project.

Building these shelters meant that not only were the people protected from the wind, rain, and snow, but it also meant that family units could stay together. It also ensured protection for women, children, and other vulnerable groups.

One of the partners wrote, “When returning to villages we had built shelters in, it was so special to see the joy and thankfulness of those who now had a transitional shelter in which to call their temporary home. Many families had done a lot of work to create for themselves more of a home. Being invited inside some of these shelter-homes and seeing the pride of the ‘owners’ as they offered us tea and bread was very rewarding. There were



many heartfelt and even tearful expressions of thanks given for helping these families gain dignity and the protection that comes from having their own space. For the nearly 100 families we built shelters for they can now start planning and preparing for the rebuilding of their homes without the stress of coping with either living in a tent or being with dozens of other people in the same space.”

As Operation Mercy, when we do relief, we want to serve the most vulnerable and marginalised even in a disaster. We want to do relief so that it builds relationships and partnerships for ongoing long-term development work. We want to restore hope and catalyse transformation that lasts beyond us being there. •

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KEY PRIORITIES:

1

PRAYER.

**SEEKING GOD'S
PRESENCE, BLESSING
AND INVOLVEMENT
IN OUR LIVES AND
WORK**

PAKISTAN

Accomplishing her Dreams

The Scholarship Programme was created by our partner organisation to provide educational assistance to marginalised students in northern Pakistan who otherwise wouldn't be able to attend school.

Fatima* recently completed her mathematics master's degree thanks to a scholarship from the programme.

Things could have been different, as in 2013, when Fatima completed high school, a relative told her mother that it was not good for girls to get higher education, and that it would be better to "find a boy and marry your girl off."

"When I heard that lady, I was so disappointed," Fatima recalled. "I thought all my dreams were going to be ruined. I wept before God and asked Him to make a way for me. I said to God, 'I want to live a successful life. I want to be a teacher to enlighten the lives of children in the community.'

"I decided to talk with the Scholarship Programme staff and they granted me a scholarship for a university education. Now I am teaching mathematics at a local high school. I believe that through my profession, my community is also going to be blessed. Many times, children who face difficulties in mathematics come to me and I help them in their studies.



"I said to God, 'I want to live a successful life. I want to be a teacher to enlighten the lives of children.'"

"I am grateful to the Scholarship Programme that has played a vital role to help me accomplish my dreams. Sometimes I think without the help of these scholarships my life would be within the walls of the house, but today I am a determined and confident woman – because of the Scholarship Programme." •

* name changed



Aida decided that she had had enough of her lifestyle and asked us to pray with her in the middle of the brothel

KAZAKHSTAN

The Courage to Leave

Our Sparking Freedom anti-human trafficking team in Kazakhstan engages with women working in the sex industry to show them their worth as people. The team gives them food and toiletries, asking about their lives and their families. Sometimes just remembering someone's name helps them to feel loved and important, and lets them know that support exists for them.

In trafficking situations, women are often not able to get the medical attention they need, or they can't afford to eat enough. By being a friend to the friendless we are caring for those in need in Kazakhstan.

When Aida* decided to leave the sex industry, circumstances led her to go back to the brothel. The team continued to work with her, and once she asked if

they would continue to love her even if she stayed in the industry. We didn't hesitate to tell her that we would try, but God will continue to love her unconditionally.

Finally, Aida decided that she had had enough of her lifestyle and asked the team to pray with her in the middle of the brothel. There are days when she wants to go back, especially when she is facing financial troubles, but when she goes through those times she knows she can phone one of the team members to ask for help and for prayer. A few weeks ago she told us that she is getting married soon. We rejoice with her, knowing that marriage won't solve her problems, but also glad that Aida persevered and is making a good life outside of the sex industry. •

**name changed*



IRAQ

Truth Boost

In spring 2023 we partnered with another NGO. Their local staff were running a centre in the old city for children with learning disabilities. They wanted to integrate children with physical disabilities and asked our physical therapist (PT) and our occupational therapist (OT) to work specifically with these children.

Over the course of a few weeks we taught their staff about basic Physical Therapy and Occupational Therapy principles and were even able to do a few home visits, visiting the families together with the local staff.

During one of the home visits two local staff members took our PT and OT to the home of Bassam*. He was severely physically and mentally disabled, and his mother had left when he was young. Bassam, 13, had stopped coming to the centre and we wanted to find out why.

After greeting him, we got him out of his bed and set him on a chair, but it took both of us to keep him seated in his chair as he started to fall backwards.

My teammate suggested that he needed a “truth-boost”, so I knelt next to him, and

The words of truth had an immediate, tangible impact.

looked him into the eyes. His stare was empty, hopeless.

“Bassam, I know you have been disappointed by people. But I want you to know that God will never forsake you. He sees you and he loves you,” I said.

Immediately, the boy’s posture improved as he straightened his back and started supporting himself. In what appeared to have been a major shift, we could let him go and watch him sit on his own. The words of truth had an immediate, tangible impact. •

**name changed*

KEY PRIORITIES:

2 PROFESSIONALISM

**- PROVIDING HIGH
QUALITY SERVICES
GUIDED BY APPLICABLE
INTERNATIONAL
CODES OF PRACTICE**



Young farmers are rising to the challenge by working to capitalise on their work in agriculture as a social good.

JORDAN

Agricultural Development

Innovation and creative marketing are key – and necessary – skills of young farmers in Jordan. Faced with severely restricted natural resources, they are rising to the challenge by working to capitalise on their work in agriculture as a social good.

The Agricultural Cooperation for Development (AC4D) programme partners with small farmers, locally run NGOs, and agricultural research groups to provide smallholder farmers with cost-effective technologies which are immediately adoptable, and with best management practices.

The solutions being adopted are hydroponics and active deferment with cover cropping in the open fields. These practices directly address the most salient water and soil quality issues in our region.

One of our AC4D project's early hydroponic adopters in Jordan is building an

agrotourism business around his family's conventional farm. He is installing highly efficient hydroponic greenhouses which he is allowing tourists to work in in exchange for room and board in the Jordan Valley.

Another young date farmer, just out of college, whose farm neighbours ours, is using highly efficient underground irrigation systems to build a legacy for his family.

Our AC4D team has also spent the last two years working with an Arab women's NGO to help a young woman develop a rooftop hydroponic farm which produces microgreens.

Educating farmers about land and water management strategies is an important factor in their ability to provide high quality food in an environment of ecological and marketing changes. Supporting farmers with strategies to improve the quality, quantity and price of their produce constitutes a tangible support to the populations that they feed. •



KYRGYZSTAN

Midwives in the Mountains

Maral* looked nervously around the room. Fourteen other women sat around her, eager to hear what the speakers from Kyrgyzstan's capital city had to share. The women had travelled to this mountain village from the surrounding area, hoping to learn more to improve the lives of the women they worked with.

All 14 women were midwives or nurses in their own villages. Three of our partners had flown to southern Kyrgyzstan and then driven for four hours through the mountains to reach the conference. For the next five days they covered topics such as maternal nutrition, exercise, birthing positions, treating anemia, and preventing and treating other complications.

But that wasn't the only goal of the seminar. The three staff workers assigned each of the participants to a coach. They were then given materials and taught

how to share what they had learned with others.

Maral was used to helping women in her village, but she had never considered teaching them. Now she is preparing to teach 15 to 20 pregnant women about caring for themselves throughout the pregnancy and birthing process.

Our partners will return to the village to give a second seminar on whichever topics Maral and her fellow participants feel are most needed in their area. Coaching will continue until they all gather one last time for a celebration and receive certification for completing the coaching programme. Our partners look forward to hearing the stories that will be shared and the impact each of these healthcare workers will have in their own communities! •

** name changed*

TAJIKISTAN

Opening doors to equality

Children with disabilities (CWD) are being given the chance to learn at mainstream schools thanks to one of our partner organisations in Tajikistan.

School accessibility is one of the most important components of providing inclusive education and promotion of the rights of children with disabilities. Training sessions give opportunities for participants to discuss accessibility, integration and inclusion of CWDs at mainstream schools.

After a recent training, one school's newly-appointed director put what she had learned into practice to help Sahar*, a 12-year-old girl with cerebral palsy who uses a wheelchair.

Her mother, Munisa*, told our partners, "I am very glad that my child will continue going to high school. She is an outgoing girl and has many friends at school. She also shows progress in her study and is ready to learn and experience new things.

"Due to the transition to a higher grade, her classroom was located on the second floor, where it would be difficult for her to get to the classroom. This problem was solved with the help of the school transition coordinator and the great support of the school director and teachers after the training for directors in August.

"The director took into account the special need of my daughter and placed her class on the first floor. Moreover, the



"The director took into account the special need of my daughter... The school has built a ramp which makes access to the building much easier!"

school has built a ramp which makes access to the building much easier!

"I appreciate what the staff and the administration of school have done for Sahar. So, now, she can continue her education along with her classmates." •

* name changed



KEY PRIORITIES:

3

PEACEMAKING

- FACILITATING THE
RESOLUTION OF
RELATIONAL CONFLICT

AFGHANISTAN

Farzana's Success

One day, a community promoter from our nutrition programme visited Farzana's* home and saw that her youngest child Mohammed* was very weak and sick. They referred him to our staff at the nearest clinic where he was examined and found to be in the range of moderate malnutrition.

Farzana's husband works as a taxi driver, but can't make enough money to cover rent, water, electricity, and food. She said, "I didn't have enough milk to breast feed. We don't have enough money for me to eat enough food so that I have milk and don't have enough food for me to even cook dinner."

Farzana was sent home with therapy food to give to Mohammed so he could gain weight, but she didn't return for a follow-up appointment. The clinic nurse contacted Farzana, who explained that when she tried to come back to the clinic with Mohammad, her mother-in-law got very angry and refused to let her, saying that therapy food would only make him worse.

The nurse explained that if Mohammed didn't get treatment, in the future he could be very sick or crippled, or even die. Armed with this knowledge, Farzana talked to her family about the dangers of not finishing Mohammad's treatment, and her mother-in-law actually changed her mind.

Many of the things we teach in the communities go against the traditional practices that people have used for many generations.

Soon Mohammed was back to a normal weight and Farzana was delighted to see her son playing again, standing and moving, and having an appetite.

Many of the things we teach in the communities go against the traditional practices that people have used for many generations. However, when beneficiaries are supported and encouraged to discuss these issues in their families they are finding that the older generation are willing to listen and to change. •

** name changed*



Harrowing tales of final messages and words are present as if they happened yesterday.

NORTH MACEDONIA

Ties that Bind

The STEP programme helps women from the north side of the city literally take a step and to move forward together with others. The Life Skills curriculum offers a track on “Forgiveness: Moving on from Loss and Trauma”. These classes then lead on to a “Taga” (grief) Group, which helps the ladies deal with their loss in a healthy and appropriate way in order to come to a place of peace, so they can move on.

For the participants, making peace with yourself and others – finding or giving forgiveness – takes many forms. The hurt could include damaging actions in the domestic context, or where women have witnessed appalling violence done to their families during the Kosovo (1998-1999) and Macedonian (2001) conflicts in the break-up of the former Yugoslavia.

Albana* and Jetmira* both saw many of their clan gunned down in a massacre just across the border. The women were spared but brothers, uncles and fathers were murdered by incendiary devices placed in a house. Harrowing tales of final messages and words are present as if they happened yesterday.

Just having the opportunity to give voice to the distress of the post trauma, still very much present even after decades, is a new reality in the Grief Group. Having a chance to express pain of profound loss, and a place to take that pain to, is a first step in finding some peace with the past and its horrors. •

** name changed*

KYRGYZSTAN

Grateful Parents

On the outskirts of Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan's capital city, children with disabilities from the city and surrounding villages attend therapeutic horse riding. Our partners work with trained horses to help children with special needs such as cerebral palsy.

The parents of these children hosted a celebration to say thank you to all our partners. They took turns describing the impact that this project has had on their family.

One father said, "Every time we go to the doctor or other therapists, they scold us, shame us and give us false promises that never come to fruit. You have shown our

children genuine love and care without asking for money."

Another added, "When I come to therapy, I breathe the fresh mountain air and relax because I know my son is in good hands. I always look forward to coming and we see real progress in our children."

A mother said, "So many times people forget that we, the parents, need help too! You always treat us with dignity and respect rather than shaming us".

Another mother added, "When you told me that [the disability] was not my fault, I didn't know what to do with my feelings because everyone else said it was my fault. When you explained what

"Every time we go to the doctor or other therapists, they scold us, shame us... You have shown our children genuine love and care."

cerebral palsy is, I felt like a huge weight was lifted off my back."

Everyone had something encouraging to say and our partners were crying along with the parents. Our partners then shared how honoured they were to work with these children and their families. •





KEY PRIORITIES:

4 PERSEVERANCE

**- STAYING ON-TASK
LONG-TERM DESPITE
DIFFICULTIES AND
DISCOURAGEMENTS**

AFGHANISTAN

Access to Clean Water

In November 2023 Operation Mercy in Afghanistan started building a solar water supply network in a district in Kabul. We were joined at the opening ceremony by local officials and members of the community.

One villager said: “Today, my family and I are very happy because one of our wishes will be fulfilled, and we are very hopeful as we are witnessing this opening. The issues with safe drinking water are widespread.

“Most of the families in this village lack access to clean drinking water, and it is extremely difficult for our women and children to get water from a distance.

A lot of times our wives also carry little children. The children also struggle to get water, and in the past, we have seen fist fights about who gets the water. Thankfully through your provision this will not happen anymore.”

Operation Mercy started this project in 2020, before the change of government in Afghanistan. The project has survived the challenges of temporary closure, difficulties in re-engaging donors and funding, delays and frustrations in trying to get permission for the project from the new government, and a seemingly never-ending list of technical requirements and design changes.

“Most of the families in this village lack access to clean drinking water ... in the past, we have seen fist fights about who gets the water.”

Our team in Afghanistan are glad that they can provide a new solar powered water network for 90 houses. The water in the former wells was not good for drinking. They also are providing hygiene training for men’s groups. •





Perseverance despite difficulties

To increase physical and emotional development, Operation Mercy encourages those we serve to join a peer group, along with one of their family members.

By bringing together people with disabilities who have similar diagnoses and ages, and their families, peer groups provide encouragement and the knowledge that is needed to thrive not just physically, but also emotionally and relationally. Sustainable communities are formed as participants visit each other in their homes and share life together.

In one peer group, four men with special needs met to get to know one another and for encouragement. They slowly gained each other's trust when they shared stories from their life and how hard it is to live with a disability. In this peer group the Operation Mercy team facilitated discussions around different topics such as perseverance and the value they have in their lives.

When we started to work with each of these men, they were without hope, but through these discussions and sharing

When we started to work with each of these men, they were without hope... but they started to see how valuable their life is.

life they started to see how valuable their life is. Every week they meet with the Operation Mercy team and talk about certain topics like how to look for hope in the most difficult circumstances, how to encourage each other, how to care for each other, how to respect other's opinions, and how to listen well to each other. Trust is being built and each of them shares deeply about their life. They share feelings and stories that they had not shared with anyone else before. •

JORDAN

Refugee Health Response

In our Community Health Project in Jordan, we are seeing lives transformed through health screening and education. We work in partnership with local organisations, medical professionals, and medical students to offer community health screening and health education for beneficiaries who are poor and marginalised.

Last year we restarted a women's exercise and health discussion group which had been forced to close a few years ago. We worked hard to write material that was simpler, more engaging and practical, based on our first experience. The women really enjoyed it, and we ran it a second time, with some new members.

We are now running it for the third time, with the same group of women, because we saw trust beginning to build between them. In the group, there are Iraqi, Syrian, Palestinian, Gazan, Turkmen, Jordanian, and Egyptian women. One week they started spontaneously sharing about their mutual experiences of being outsiders and refugees in this country.

We rarely, rarely see women listen to each other. Usually, one person's story is a chance for another woman to 'one-up' them with her story, or to offer a lot of unsolicited advice, but on this occasion, they just listened and empathised and cried with each other.

One week they started spontaneously sharing about their mutual experiences of being outsiders and refugees in this country.

It is very exciting to see progress being made in our desire to see women building trust with each other, dreaming together for a future where change is possible and where they have a role to play. •





KEY PRIORITIES:

5 PARTNERSHIP

- INVOLVING THE
ACTIVE PARTICIPATION
OF ALL STAKEHOLDERS

NORTH MACEDONIA

Together for the neighbourhoods

One school director partner has been a pathfinder for Operation Mercy's youth dimension of the STEP programme* in the toughest neighbourhood in the city. Through her oversight, we have been able to work not only with women and mothers but also with young people, teaching dressmaking, majority language classes and leading football training for boys who come from the most economically depressed homes in the capital.

The 2023 football season culminated in an interschool fixture with the local Freedom school team – most of whom play with local club teams. As we were walking together to the inaugural interschool

match, I asked our kids, “Have you ever played an actual normal game of football in your lives?” For all the players but one, the answer was a clear “no”.

Despite this, the team scored a great goal, but lost the game. Our coach, who is also a physiotherapist, half-joked that the result was a catastrophe. I fed back to him and his assistant that no, this event was a big success – an unknown precedent in our part of town. The assistant agreed as he never had the chance to play football in the ghetto, but now was all in to volunteer to help the team. Once very quiet, he is now the voice of an empowering uncle to the young players. •

**STEP: Skills/Startup Training Empowerment and Practice programme*



“Have you ever played an actual normal game of football in your lives?”

For all the players but one, the answer was a clear “no”.

PAKISTAN

Partnerships Transform Families

Sharif* grew up in a very conservative village. He was bullied at school by students and teachers. His family had heard of our partner's Scholarship Programme and their partnership with the local center to provide housing and support for students just like him.

In September 2023, after completing his high school studies through the Scholarship Programme, he was accepted into a nursing programme at a local college. He is the first person in his family to attend school – and he is determined that he will not be the last!

Through local partnerships like the Scholarship Programme and the student

hostel, young people and their families are being transformed.

The Scholarship Programme was created by our partner organisation to provide educational assistance to marginalised students in northern Pakistan who otherwise wouldn't be able to attend school. Education is not free in Pakistan, and for many marginalised groups in the region, education is very difficult to access.

The scholarship covers basic needs for the school year including tuition, uniforms, books and school supplies. These scholarships equip students with the foundational training and confidence needed to break the cycle of poverty for their families and for future generations.

Education is not free in Pakistan, and for many marginalised groups in the region, education is very difficult to access.

Our partners believe that through working with communities to provide education, training and development, marginalised communities in Pakistan can be equipped to move from poverty to prosperity. •

** name changed*



TAJIKISTAN

Never too late to learn!

In September, staff from our partner organisation in Tajikistan conducted a masterclass session for mothers on rehabilitation exercises for children with disabilities. During the session, mothers and grandmothers were involved in practical physical and speech development exercises, which help to improve their children's conditions.

After the session, Yana*, who has been bringing 14-year-old Yama*, who has cerebral palsy, to a teenagers' group every week, said:

"When I first came here I was very distressed and not know which door to knock for help. Through the years, with the support and help from the staff I learnt how to take care of a child with disability. I also learn how to take care of my own health physically and emotionally.

"Although Yama's physical condition is difficult, when he comes to the Teenagers Club group every week he is very happy. He understands and feels everything, when his teacher communicates with him. He likes seeing the teachers and exercising with them."

Mehri*, whose five year old grandson Jawid* suffers from mental and speech delay, was pleased to learn exercises she could use at home.

"After Jawid came here and started to have exercises to improve his cognitive skills, he gradually learned to pronounce certain words," she explained. "From today's session I learned about the effectiveness of playing games and doing exercises to improve his motor skills. We will continue doing the exercises at home." •

** name changed*



"He understands and feels everything, when his teacher communicates with him. He likes seeing the teachers and exercising with them."



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Dozens of organisations and hundreds of individuals partner with Operation Mercy each year. Besides funds, our partners provide expertise, material goods and free or discounted services.

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