

2021



cittadinanza  
onlus



Dear friends and supporters of Cittadinanza Onlus, In this very moment, while I am writing to you, a group of volunteers on a visit to the Paolo's Home project has just landed in Kenya. I want to start my letter with this news because thinking about our volunteers in Kenya fills me with optimism and makes me look to the future with even more hope.

After all, 2021 was still a difficult year for any activity because of the pandemic, both in Italy and abroad.

However, this situation did not paralyse us, but rather enabled us to reflect on new perspectives and lay the foundations for the future of Cittadinanza Onlus and the projects we are carrying out. Upon reflection, I would define 2021 as a year of investment.

**An investment in skills exchange.** We strongly believe in the importance of sharing competences between Italian, Kenyan and Ethiopian professionals. The impossibility of meeting in person was compensated for by frequent online meetings, which enabled us to discuss cases and priorities. It has also been a year full of new collaborations, such as those started with some local organisations such as the local health authorities of Bologna and Cesena and the Sol et Salus clinic.

**An investment in our staff,** another important step we had been planning for a while. After several years, we welcomed two new members. Enlarging our staff was a necessary choice in order to seize new opportunities and challenges, to improve our activities and reach even more people in need, thanks to our projects and fundraising.

An investment in people, the reason we exist. We often talk about disability or mental health issues, but we must never forget that the beneficiaries we address are people first and foremost.

Our efforts always prioritise people. How are the children, young people and adults who benefit from our projects? What do they need? These are the key questions we always ask ourselves, but this year, after the many emergencies we have experienced, we want to take a deeper look at these questions and their answers.

In Nairobi we realised the need to expand our services, in addition to the ones we already offer, specifically focused on nutrition as Covid-19

and the subsequent economic crisis had compromised children's health even more. We have also started evaluating new spaces in order to respond to the great need in another district, Riruta, where we already provide physiotherapy assistance, but many other services are needed. This is a great challenge that will certainly require dedication and perseverance in the coming months.

As Dr. Pizzato, a physiotherapist on a mission with us in Waliso, states: *"A person with a disability doesn't feel better only because of the physiotherapy they do, but also because they are seen, recognised, considered, perhaps their birth is registered. Social inclusion makes people feel better, if they are given the opportunity to grow and learn they will not feel like a burden because they will be able to acquire skills that perhaps will help them to have a job and thus contribute to their family's well-being"*.

This has always been Cittadinanza's focus, and we intend to remain faithful to it. Taking care of the individual, with attention and support that addresses all needs and issues, because it is unthinkable to separate every child, young person and adult from their family or social context.

Thank you for deciding to undertake this journey with us, and with them, day after day.

**Dr. Maurizio Focchi**  
(President)

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ABOUT US  
CITTADINANZA  
ONLUS

# About us

Founded in Rimini in 1999, Cittadinanza Onlus is an association that carries out and supports projects of international cooperation, training and awareness-raising for the welfare of people with mental illness and children with disabilities in low and middle income countries.

# Our mission

To return the feeling of being a citizen to all those who experience disability or mental health problems in a context of poverty. We work so that every child, young or adult can be included in their community, feel welcome, have access to quality care, take the first steps towards a dignified life, leave behind stigma, prejudice and isolation.

# Our vision

We believe in the world in which there are no second-rate citizens, but in which each individual can have his own rights.



# Our values

We believe that people with disabilities or mental health problems are entitled to::

- not be subjected to discrimination
- autonomy and self-determination
- free social and health services
- social, school and work inclusion

We undertake to observe:

- enhancement of partnerships and local skills
- respect for cultures
- communication that is not detrimental to dignity
- transparency.

# How we work

**Mental disorders** in poor countries are widespread and rank very low on the list of health priorities, where diseases with a higher direct impact on mortality take precedence. This is despite the fact that mental suffering and substance abuse affect almost 13% of the world's population (WHO data 2021). Similarly, according to UNICEF data the living conditions of almost 240 million of children with disabilities in developing countries are serious. Most of them do not have access to health care and education. Stigma, prejudice, shame and exclusion affect millions of people in almost all societies. In many areas of the planet mental illness and disability are often seen as a guilt, a punishment for immoral behaviour, sometimes an effect from evil

spirits. We work to ensure that people have access to quality health, psychological and social assistance, acting at multiple levels, through:

- the development of social and health services in collaboration with local actors
- investments in the training and supervision of local staff, a key element for obtaining long-term results
- the involvement of the community, schools and local authorities, to combat stigma, raise public awareness, combine rehabilitation with concrete opportunities for social inclusion, encourage reforms of services and legislation.



# Technical and Scientific contribution

We involve passionate and qualified professionals in our projects, who are able to guarantee a high-value scientific contribution. Psychiatrists, neuropsychologists, physiotherapists and rehabilitation

professionals in general collaborate with us through on-site missions, during which they deal with the training and supervision of local staff, the evaluation of children, the planning of future interventions.

Over the last two years we have developed remote supervision practices, through a monthly appointment with the local staff, via videoconference, and sharing of medical records and video footage.

We act in compliance with and for the promotion of the United Nations Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), inspiring our interventions to the bio-psychosocial model of diagnosis and treatment and to the Global Mental Health Movement and the practice of Community-Based Rehabilitation.

We work to contribute to the sustainable development goals. Particularly:



# Trasparenza inside and outside

As an association we are committed to bringing about a change in value and well-being in the realities and contexts in which we operate.

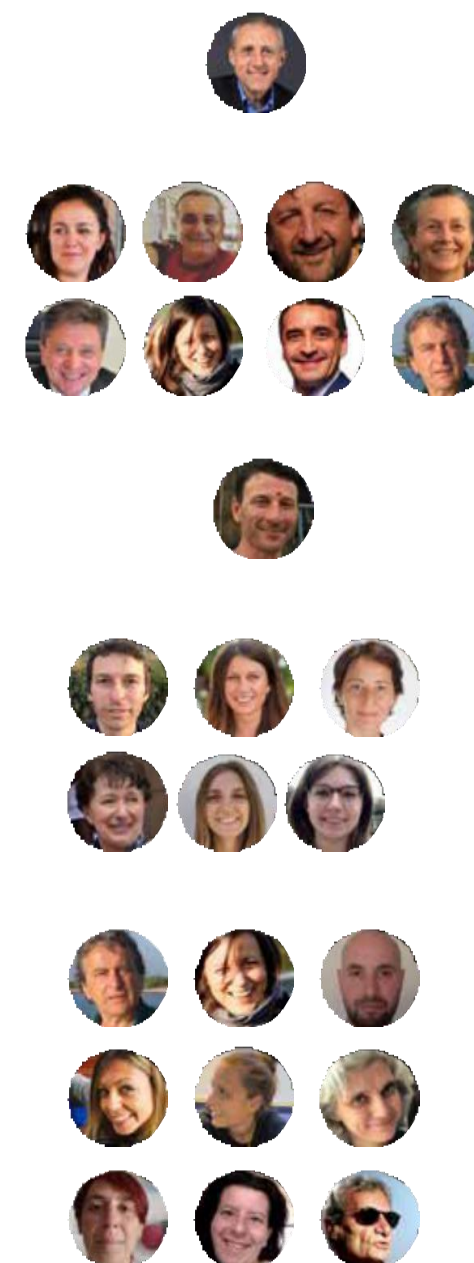
In the same way, we believe that it is important to start from our daily life, making choices that enhance individuals and respect their dignity starting from our territory and our workplace.

For this we are committed on three fronts:

- we are looking for collaborators, employees and volunteering experts who have our mission at heart and who work with passion and professionalism
- we invest in training and updating of human resources
- we allocate 100% of the donations to projects (we are able to cover the operating costs thanks to the contribution of some donors)

# Cittadinanza Structure

The paragraph refers to the current year, 2022



## President

- Maurizio Focchi

## Board of Directors

- Enrica Mancini
- Paolo Cesari
- Maurizio Casadei
- Monica Marcucci
- Franco Bulgarini
- Valentina Graziosi
- Karim El Hamel
- Andrea Melella

## Supervising Body

- Fabio Vanucci

## Staff

- Alessandro Latini (project management and coordinator)
- Cecilia Latini Corazzini (communication and fundraising manager)
- Giulia Tarducci (project manager)
- Bruna Sironi (local coordinator - Kenya)
- Marta Antonini (communication and fundraising intern)
- Cecilia Letta (volunteer in civil service)

## Volunteer

- Andrea Melella (psychiatrist and psychotherapist)
- Valentina Graziosi (neuropsychologist)
- Davide Filippi (neuropsychologist)
- Veronica Donnini (neuropsychologist)
- Giada Nidoli (neuropsychologist)
- Serena Pizzato (physiotherapist)
- Roberta Sala (physiotherapist)
- Barbara Bobba (child neuropsychiatrist)
- Gianni Ambrosetto (professor of neurology)

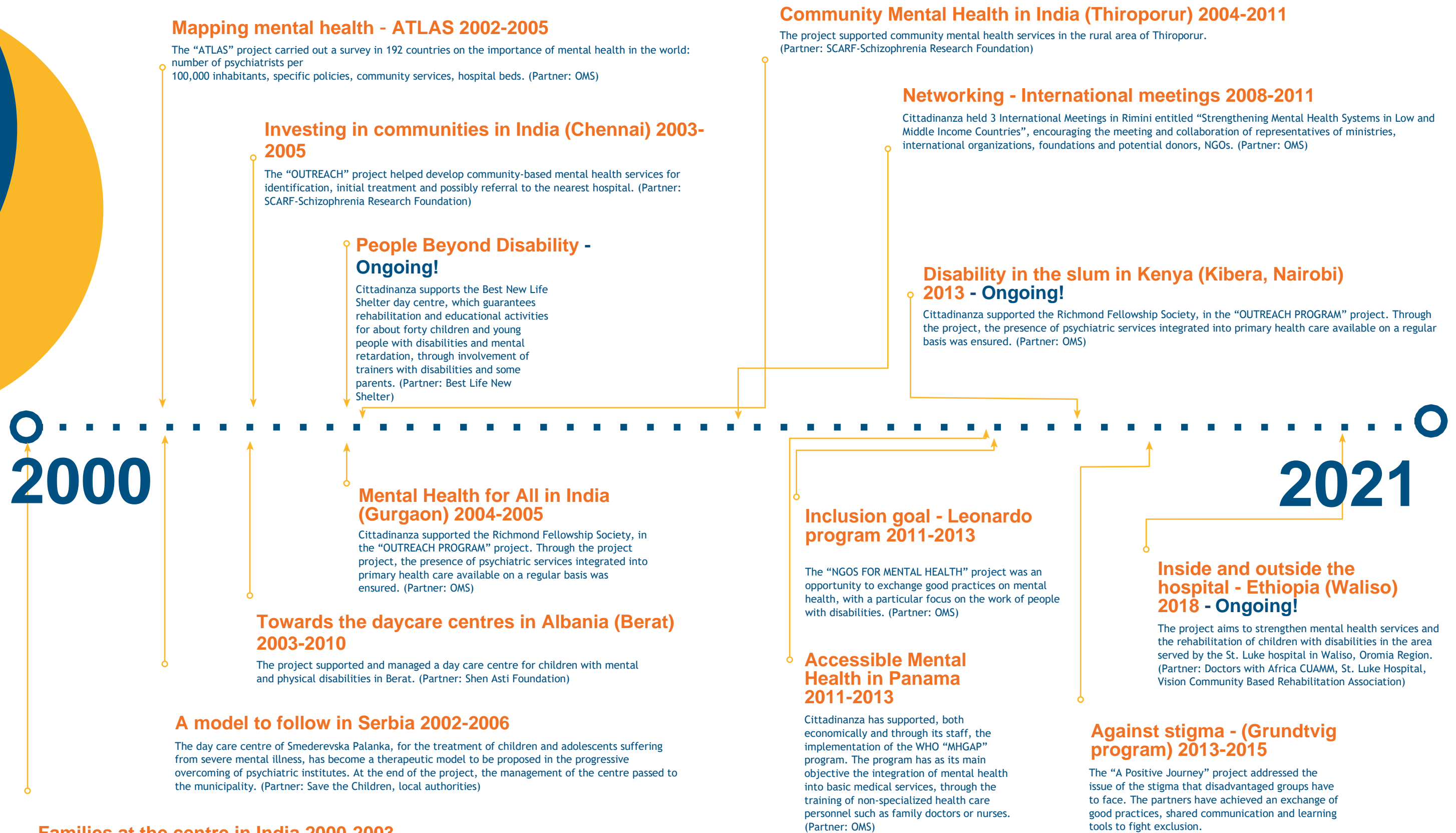
In 2022 we collaborated with:

**Institutions & foundations:** Emilia Romagna Region, Municipality of Castelfranco Emilia, Municipality of Verucchio, Irma Romagnoli Foundation, Waldensian Table, Missionary Work Camp Association, University of Bologna

**Partners:** Koinonia Community, Best New Life Shelter, ANSVI, Educaid, Amani for Africa, Doctors with Africa CUAMM, CEFA, COONGER, St. Luke Catholic Hospital, VCBRA, SCARF, Miti Alliance, Arci Servizio Civile, Icaro Communication, AUSL Bologna

**Other volunteers:** Impronta digitale (graphics), IN.TRA - Inclusive Translation for Community Engagement: Arianna Mambelli, Alice Bagorda, Marialucia D'Arcangelo, Marian Fabbri (translations), Andrea Bologna (photography) StudioAzione (web design), Caterina Ceredi (communication) Alberto Maestri (management) IN.TRA - Inclusive Translation for Community Engagement: Dallas Hopkins (translation and revision), Karim El Hamel (management)

# Cittadinanza's timeline



2000

2021



## KENIA | NAIROBI

### PAOLO'S HOME - CENTRE FOR DISABLED CHILDREN IN KIBERA

# The problem and the context

Kenya is a country with a population of about 55 million, of which 36.1% live below the poverty line (World Bank, 2020) and 38% are under the age of 14 (UN Data, 2021).

There is no national indicator for the prevalence of child disability in the country, but UNICEF estimates that it is 13.5% of children and young people aged 0-21. Infections during pregnancy, malnutrition, conditions of childbirth, diseases and infections in the first months and years of life are among the principal causes of disability (UNICEF, 2017). Cerebral palsy, spina bifida, skeletal malformations, delays in motor and cognitive development, relational disorders such as various degrees and forms of autism are widespread. **Insufficient and inaccessible are the rehabilitation services for those experiencing a disability**, neurological or psychiatric disorder. The problems worsen in a reality as disrupted as Kibera (Nairobi), one of the most densely populated, poor and problematic shanty towns of all sub-Saharan Africa. It is estimated that the population of Kibera, difficult to census precisely, amounts to at least 400,000 people, more than half without a job. The inhabitants live in conditions of **extreme poverty**, in small tin shacks, separated by narrow lanes in clay, without access to essential services like water and toilets. This fragile reality has been hit even harder by the economic crisis that followed the pandemic.

**The stigma towards people with mental illnesses is still very high, children who suffer of them live closed in their houses and often die prematurely**, in numerous and extremely poor families. **The belief that children can be possessed by evil spirits is still rooted**. In this context Cittadinanza has been working for years with the association **Koinonia Community**.

# The response of Cittadinanza: The centre Paolo's Home

Since 2013 we have been supporting the centre Paolo's Home, which assists children with psychophysical disabilities in Kibera. The centre was opened in **2008** by the Association **Koinonia Community** and since then **it has reached 995 children with different conditions**. In 2013, next to the physiotherapy clinic was inaugurated the day centre, which follows daily 20 children with a continuous and individualised path.

The project is led by local professionals, assisted by the commitment of Bruna Sironi, a Cittadinanza volunteer resident in Nairobi, in charge of on-site coordination and under the scientific supervision of volunteer experts who alternate between remote supervision and short missions in Nairobi.

The centre Paolo's Home can rely on a multidisciplinary staff of Kenyan professionals, including physiotherapists, occupational therapists, psychologists, social workers, teachers, speech therapists. Staff members work at the Kibera site and at the Kivuli Centre, in the Riruta neighbourhood, and carry out regular home visits and awareness-raising interventions **in order to engage the community and counteract isolation**, discrimination and prejudice, which affect children and their families.



## In memory of Paolo...

**The centre Paolo's Home is named after the memory of Paolo Borioni, from Fabriano.**

*"It was June 2013 when I decided, right after graduation, to leave for Africa. I had a goal for this journey, understanding the state of the project of the Centre "Paolo's Home". I wanted to see the developments and bring my parents a testimony of a project that, until a few years before, was just a project for them and for the people like us who loved Paolo. I'll say just a few words about him because it seems right to do so in order to better understand what lies behind this project. Paolo was the person who taught me to love life. A boy full of an unconditional love for life. When he was only a few years old, he was diagnosed with muscular dystrophy and within a short time the disease forced him into a wheelchair and eventually rendered him completely ill. Only one muscle continued to work for all his life, his smile muscle. Paolo, a very dear friend of my parents, was there for my birth and watched me grow up. When I was in middle school I would spend many afternoons with him, I liked being in his company.*

*I liked seeing him attack life with a passion for computer science and without any shame or embarrassment in front of anyone. He used to go out with his wheelchair, rather hi-tech at the time, and he would go on long walks with my father, and I liked being with them. He fought all his life for the rights of disabled people, to obtain the acknowledgement of dignity, which unfortunately sometimes takes a back seat. Paolo loved life and I remember him as a river full of ideas, good thoughts, optimism, desire to always discover new things, to fight for the right of the weakest. I never heard him complain even once about his condition, and this left a deep impression on me. After years, in moments of discouragement, I think back to him and his will to live and always be happy, and he keeps teaching me life lessons". (Valentina from Fabriano, 32 years old)*



# The centre's activities

The path towards the development and inclusion of children and their families is made up of small steps, with activities that complement each other to answer the needs of those who turn to the centre:

## Children

### HEALTHCARE PROGRAMME

guarantees specialist medical visits and instrumental examinations at local and affiliated health centres, to define the diagnosis and understand the therapeutic path to follow. The programme guarantees also free access to medicines for chronic conditions as epilepsy.

### PHYSIOTHERAPY PROGRAMME

for children who attend the clinic and the day centre, to reach motor autonomy.

### DAY CENTRE

for 20 children who every day receive 2 meals and personalised rehabilitation and educational activities to reach cognitive and motor development.

### SPEECH THERAPY PROGRAMME

to create a greater interaction with other children and facilitate inclusion at school.

### SCHOOL INCLUSION PROGRAMME

which includes the contribution to tuition costs, canteen, uniforms.

## Adults

### PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT PROGRAMME

dedicated to young mothers, with individual and group sessions, to help them overcome traumas, understand and accept their child's conditions, know the real causes of disability and walk tall again, without experiencing shame in front of the community.

### ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMME

aimed at mothers, to initiate professional training courses, create income opportunities through the production and marketing of products, involve them in the savings and revolving loan group.

### MENTOR MOTHERS PROGRAMME

to involve mothers in their children's rehabilitation process, offering them the opportunity to work in turn at the centre in the preparation of meals and the care of children in the day centre.

### TEACHER TRAINING

to reach and facilitate school inclusion of children with disabilities in classes with other children.

### AWARENESS PROGRAMME

to raise awareness in the community about the rights of children with disabilities and fight stigma and superstition, through door-to-door campaigns, radio programmes, events and an annual march through the streets of Kibera in occasion of the International Day of People with disabilities (3rd December).



# A few numbers



**995 children** have been assisted by Paolo's Home from 2008 to 2021

**in 2021**



**224 children** reached by physiotherapy



**44 children** assisted with visits and medicines



**24 children** followed in school inclusion



**51 young mothers** reached with individual, group and home psychological support



**113 parents** trained through workshops



**10 meetings** of remote supervision with Italian psychologists



**71 parents** involved in savings and credit groups for the creation of income generating activities



**48 teachers** trained through two courses on disability



**more than 1,000 people** reached by the awareness events organised by Paolo's Home

Cittadinanza's intervention benefits from the contribution of the Irma Romagnoli Foundation, Otto per Mille funds from the Waldensian Church and many private supporters. Starting from July 2021 Cittadinanza's activities in Nairobi are part of the project SPARK 2 - Health Protection, Access to Food, Rehabilitation, and empowerment for children with disabilities and their mothers in disadvantaged areas of Nairobi (Kenya) Phase 2 - CUP n. E49J21016600009 financed by the Region Emilia-Romagna.

# The challenges for the future

- Equipping adequate spaces to offer more than 100 families in Riruta the same services that have been developed successfully in Kibera (psychosocial support, economic empowerment, individual therapies, speech therapy and cognitive development, home visits, day centre)
- Increasing the capacity of Paolo's Home to network with health services, government offices, rights, and advocacy associations
- Strengthening collaboration with schools, which remains a fundamental step for the effective inclusion of children with disabilities
- Consolidate, through on-site missions and remote meetings, collaboration and exchange between Italian and Kenyan professionals, both on counselling and cognitive and motor rehabilitation.



# Phalesia's story

Phalesia, or Mama Ezekiel, as everyone calls her at Paolo's Home, is only 22.

She lives in Kibera, on the edge of the city of Nairobi. After giving birth to little Ezekiel, who was immediately diagnosed with cerebral palsy, she was abandoned by her partner, who now lives a few shacks away.

So Phalesia found herself having to go back to her mother's house, together with two brothers and her child with special needs. The house is a tin shack, as many others in Kibera. It is composed of just a single room, too small for 5 people.

Phalesia's mother, Ezekiel's grandmother, wants to give custody of the child to his father, as is the practice in Kenya in the case of separations. As a very religious person who is influenced by popular belief, as many others in the slum, she believes that the child is victim of a curse or is possessed by a spirit. Moreover, Ezekiel's grandmother forces her daughter to give her all the money she earns with her job.

Marion, the centre's psychologist, listens to Phalesia's doubts and helps her to elaborate and heal her wounds. *"What will I do now? Who will want me if I have Ezekiel? Everyone blames me for his disability. My mother always tells me - bring the child here to this shaman, bring him here to this other one - convinced that they can take away the spirits and she wants me to give the child to his father's family. But giving Ezekiel to a father that doesn't even acknowledge him means throwing him away"*.

**For Phalesia Paolo's Home was a breath of fresh air.** At the centre she found acceptance, answers to her questions on the conditions of her child, scientific explanations that push against her mother's beliefs, the solidarity of many mums in the same situation as her, who can discuss their similar situations and offer each other help. **She found services that improved the condition of her child and a savings and revolving loan programme** that is helping her get free from her toxic relationship with her mother.

Marion, who has been following Phalesia since her arrival to Paolo's home, describes her: *"She's really trying, she is a very strong woman and a hard worker. She works as cleaning lady in three different homes, walking many kilometres to earn something for herself and her child. Despite this, she's always smiling, she is a very positive person. Even when she has dark days, she recovers and regains energy. She really loves her child, she is not ashamed of him, she brings him with her everywhere. She really is a great example for every mother of Paolo's Home."*

**ETHIOPIA | WALISO**  
**ST. LUKE CATHOLIC HOSPITAL  
AND HEALTH CENTRES**



# The problem and the context

With an estimated population of 116 million, Ethiopia is the second African country in terms of population. 80% lives in rural areas, where access to healthcare services is very limited. The condition of chronic patients, psychiatric patients and people with disabilities is seriously neglected. About the latter, according to a study by UNICEF (2018) conducted in Ethiopia, it is estimated that almost 7.8 million people live with some form of disability, that is 9.3% of the total population. The United Nations Committee on the rights of the child, in its closing remarks regarding Ethiopia on the state of implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, confirmed **the problem of discrimination against children with disabilities**, and the numerous **obstacles** that they have to face to **access education and adequate social and healthcare services**. For what concerns mental health, the few psychiatrists (less than 100) are concentrated in the capital. In rural areas there are very few clinics and patients undergo traditional practices as “holy waters”, springs of holy water to which healing properties are attributed.

The main problems identified concern the lack of specialised healthcare staff in the local health centres, the scarce awareness of the community and of the services about the condition of people with psychic disability and suffering, the cost of transportation and medicines, other than the frequent availability problems of the latter, which expose chronic patient to risks of relapses and intensifications.

The economic crisis that followed the pandemic and the conflict between government forces and the forces of TPLF, which inflamed the country during 2021, have challenged further the resilience of Ethiopian rural population, already severely affected by drought and locusts.



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# The response of Cittadinanza

The intervention strategy in this first phase (2018-2021) focused on **the enhancement and development of the expertise** of two key entities in Waliso.

The first is St. Luke's Hospital in Waliso in the Oromia region, a 3-hour drive from the capital, which serves a target population of 1.2 million people. The collaboration with Cittadinanza involves the Psychiatry clinic, which carries out about 6000 visits per year with over 2000 patients and the Physiotherapy clinic.

The second is the Vision Community Based Rehabilitation Association (VCBRA), which is faithful to the principles of Community Based Rehabilitation and in line with the participatory approach of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Over the years, VCBRA has developed a model of **community intervention** that integrates **rehabilitation, social inclusion, psycho-social support, economic empowerment**, and community involvement. Cittadinanza supports these two institutions, both from a technical and financial point of view, also increasing coordination between them.

## What is community-based rehabilitation?

Community-based rehabilitation is a **rehabilitation approach** that the World Health Organization has been fervently supporting for many years. Its purpose is simple: in low-income countries and especially in the countryside **there is a lack of professionals** to cover large areas, so physiotherapists or other **professionals share their skills** with other people: educators, volunteers, members of the patient's family, people who can be trained with basic techniques, therefore allowing rehabilitation to actually reach people with disabilities.

In this way, stimulations and care can be carried out at home, while hospitals or health centres remain reference points where the situation can be regularly assessed, and the next steps planned. It is a **form of intervention** that combines **medical and social approaches**. Thanks to this social contribution, the person is recognized and registered in the civil registry, families receive support, mothers can receive microloans. In some ways, professionals share their professionalism with all the other people that revolve around their family.



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# Activities: inside and outside the hospital

The Cittadinanza project therefore integrates actions both inside and outside St. Luke's Hospital

## Activities in the hospital

### MENTAL HEALTH CLINIC

to assist, listen and treat an average of about 30 patients per day from Monday to Friday

### STAFF TRAINING

through the involvement of psychiatrists from Addis Ababa, to offer an increasingly better quality of service

### TECHNICAL SUPERVISION

with the help of Dr. Melella (volunteer psychiatrist of Cittadinanza Onlus) and in presence, through the involvement of psychiatrists of the Black Lion Hospital of Addis Ababa, to support operators

### MEDICINE FOR EPILEPSY

to guarantee free visits and medicines for children and teens with epilepsy under 18 years of age

### RAISING AWARENESS IN THE WAITING ROOM

to teach people about mental health disorders and to avoid superstitions and prejudice

### PHYSICAL THERAPY

for the rehabilitation of children with disabilities in the Physiotherapy department but also to guarantee training for operators, equipment, and small aids

## Activities outside the hospital:

### IDENTIFICATION OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

to map those living with a disability even in rural areas

### MEDICAL EXAMINATIONS

to guarantee children access to specialist visits, minor corrective interventions, aids

### COMMUNITY-BASED REHABILITATION

to offer home care and support to identified children

### ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

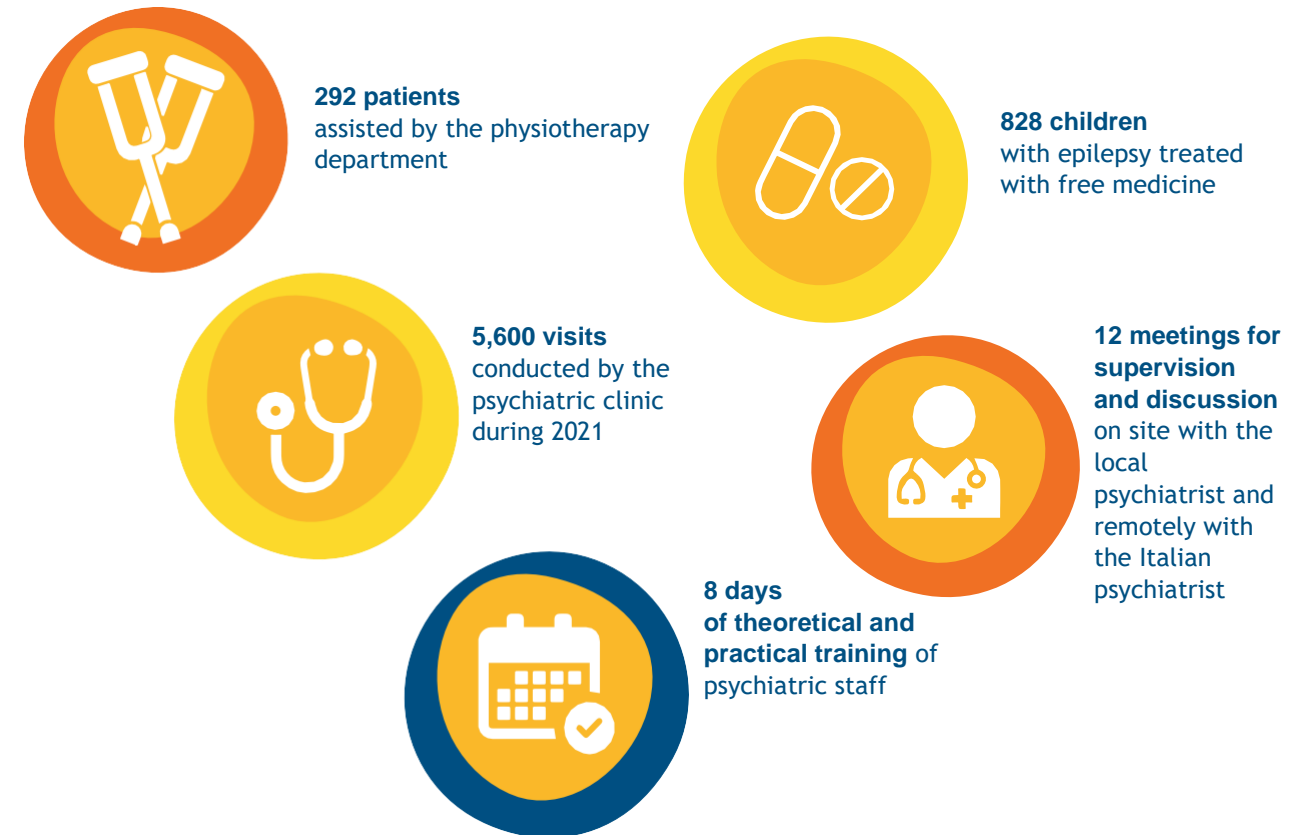
to help a group of parents achieve economic independence

### RAISING AWARENESS WITH COFFEE

to turn coffee ceremonies, very participated collective moments, into opportunities for raising awareness of the rights of people with disabilities.

# A few numbers

## At Saint-Luke's Hospital in Waliso:



## In the countryside around Waliso:



# Challenges of the future

further developing mental health services in local clinics (health centres) in rural areas to reach the share of the population that does not have access to the hospital due to distance

improving, through the training of hospital staff, the ability to diagnose and treat children with seizures

progressing in physiotherapy training (also thanks to the Semi di Futuro - Integrated Intervention to Fight Malnutrition - AID 11880 project, funded by the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation)

expanding community-based rehabilitation services for children with disabilities to new rural areas

increase the production capacity of aids of both the hospital workshop and the VCBRA workshop

ensuring access to health screening for the children with disabilities identified by VCBRA

The work of Cittadinanza benefits from the contribution of the Irma Romagnoli Foundation. As of November 2021, Cittadinanza activities in Waliso are included in the WAVE 2 project - ACCESS TO HEALTH SERVICES FOR THE VULNERABLE POPULATION OF THE WALISO AREA - ETHIOPIA - PHASE 2 (ID 43) - Ethiopia (main country) - CUP no. E19J21010880009, funded by the Emilia-Romagna Region, and in the CHANCE project - Access to Care for Childrens with disabilities in Waliso - Ethiopia, supported with the donations given to the Waldensian Church. There are also many friends and supporters who care about the growth and development of the project.

# Sifen's story

Sifen is six years old and Giulia, who met her in Ethiopia, describes her as "a very sweet child". Sifen was born in the countryside around Waliso, far from health services and with a diagnosis of cerebral palsy. Her parents soon started feeling hopeless: having a child with a disability has excluded them from any activity due to prejudices and the two even went so far as to deny having a child with disabilities in an attempt to once again be part of the community. According to the latest updates they moved to Addis Ababa and did not take Sifen with them, leaving her in the care of an aunt. Sifen found herself alone, locked in her hut, spending her days lying on a mattress. **Everything changed when a Vision worker, Getu, started taking care of her.**

Within a year Sifen has made progress that no one would have ever imagined. The girl began to eat, to dress, to go to the bathroom on her own. The project provided her with a special chair to sit in and a wheelchair so she could leave the house. According to Dr. Serena Pizzato, a mission physiotherapist who visited her, the child has lots of potential and could walk with the help of braces and a walker. Maybe next year Sifen can go to school.



## INDIA | ARCOT BEST NEW LIFE SHELTER DAY CARE CENTRE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WITH

# The problem and the context

India is one of the countries most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic between 2020 and 2021. **Schools and institutions** have been closed for a long time, the **economic situation** of many families has **worsened**, and the living conditions of **vulnerable segments of the population** have become even more difficult. The estimated number of children with disabilities ranges from 40 to 90 million. Just over a third of these have access to education. The medical services available focus on the prevention and treatment of pathologies with a higher risk of mortality, neglecting those who experience a disability or a mental health problem. Although India is among the first signatories of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2007), in practice the laws do not produce the desired effects.

According to Census data on the state of Tamil Nadu (South-East India), more than one million people live with some form of disability. This is less than 2% of the population, with a higher rate in rural areas. However, it is very likely that this figure dramatically underestimates reality, as many families take years before embarking on and completing the process to obtain a disability certificate. Malnutrition, problems during pregnancy and childbirth, inadequate medical care and risky environmental conditions favour the onset

of neurological disorders from birth. Family members receive insufficient support and no training to cope with their children's problems. Having a child with a disability is often synonymous with big burden, in a context in which the resources to guarantee him/her adequate care are not sufficient and opportunities for integration are rare. In fact, integration into the community presents various problems and children and young people with disabilities are often marginalized or victims of violence and exploitation.

# The response of Cittadinanza

We support the **Best New Life Shelter (BNLS)** day care centre which over the years has welcomed and offered rehabilitation and assistance to around 220 children and young adults. The centre is located in the rural area of Arcot, in the **Ranipet district, in the south-eastern state of Tamil Nadu**.

For many children, the Best New Life Shelter has represented in these 18 years the only opportunity for assistance and socialization, an outstretched hand in the midst of indifference. Here they found **indiscriminate acceptance**, beyond any caste or faith affiliation and opportunities for growth and development of autonomy. Besides the children attending the centre, many hundreds of others received assistance in the paperwork for obtaining the certificate of disability and government subsidy.



The centre was founded in 2003 by Catherine Inbarajan, mother of a boy suffering from severe spastic tetraparesis resulting from meningitis infection. The most common diagnoses are mental retardation, cerebral palsy, autism, Down syndrome, and other multiple disabilities. In 2019, after more than 15 years of supporting the centre's activities, a new five-year phase of the collaboration between Cittadinanza and BNLS was approved. During these five years, Cittadinanza is committed to assisting BNLS towards independence.

# The centre's activities

## FOOD PROGRAM

is designed to guarantee a complete and nutritious meal every day so that patients don't go hungry and grow healthy.

## INVALIDITY PAPERWORK ASSISTANCE

is an assistance service in the paperwork for obtaining the certificate of disability and government subsidy, the first steps to obtain a small recognition and support from the state.

## MEDICAL EXAMINATIONS

are meant to monitor the health situation of each child. Those who have not yet registered at the centre can also accede to the visits.

## PHYSIOTHERAPY AND MOTOR PROGRAM

is designed to offer physiotherapy, occupational therapy and yoga sessions to develop fine motor and manual skills. When the centre, just like the schools in Tamil Nadu, was closed to the public due to the pandemic, such assistance was provided at home, with twice-weekly visits.

## EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM

designs customized activities and objectives built on the abilities of every boy.

## SCHOOL SUPPORT

is a service of follow-up of some BNLS children enrolled in school to help them in preparing for state exams.

## PROFESSIONAL TRAINING

is meant for young adults to learn simple tasks and facilitate their access to work.

**SUPPORT TO EVERYDAY AUTONOMOUS ACTIVITIES** is meant to increase independence in daily activities and the ability to live both in family and in the community.

## INVOLVEMENT OF PARENTS

is a service to update parents on the activities of the centre and involve parents in the rehabilitation process...

# Home activities and new approaches

Tamil Nadu authorities have imposed long periods of closures of the country's educational institutions, which have forced BNLS to halt its daycare centre activities. To ensure that no child or family was left alone, the BNLS staff continued the home-visiting programme started in 2020, which provided continuity in the rehabilitation and education of about 20 children. Each parent was trained on the work to be done with their children. For example, physiotherapy exercises were carried out with the equipment available at home, and the staff recommended involving children in household chores such as cutting, cleaning, folding clothes, etc., as well as making sure they carried out the daily self-care activities learned at BNLS. Based on what was available in the house, the staff also organized the teaching aids. BNLS staff continued its mission to inform and raise awareness among parents about good safety and hygiene practices to protect themselves from the pandemic. The BNLS centre has always involved parents in the education of their children, as a successful journey for the child is only possible if the parents are involved and aware. In November, the centre was finally able to open its doors again and resume all activities in person.



# A few numbers

since 2003



221 children and young adults hosted and assisted by the centre



38 young adults assisted in the world of work



122 subventions obtained for the families of the centre's children



About 15,000 individuals with disabilities were supported by BNLS together with other associations in applying for certificates



115 children followed in school inclusion

in 2021



31 days dedicated to identifying children, young people and adults with disabilities from surrounding communities



29 families reached thanks to home services, following the closure of the centre

# Tharika's story

Tharika is eight years old and has a severe intellectual disability. Her first experience in the primary school she attended in Tamil Nadu, the Indian region where she lives, was not positive at all.

Because of her disability, Tharika was marginalised by both her classmates and teachers. Unfortunately, there is still a lot of stigma around people with disabilities and the little girl often found herself alone in a corner of the classroom.

Thankfully, her parents soon realised that the school was not right for their daughter and sought a place where Tharika could feel **welcomed, included and valued**.

In 2018, they enrolled Tharika at Best New Life Shelter. Since that day, her life has improved: Tharika enjoys going to school, has a lot of friends at BNLS and takes an active part in the activities proposed by the teachers. Physiotherapy is also helping her with her foot issues and the muscle weakness in her legs.

Tharika finally has a real opportunity to grow and improve with activities tailored to her growth and development.





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Cittadinanza Onlus

Legal Headquarters:

Via Cornacchiara, 805  
47824 Poggio Torriana (RN)

Operational headquarters:

Via Cairoli, 69

47923 Rimini (RN)

+39 0541 412091

mob. 342.5695222

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**Photographs:**

Andrea Bologna

Elisabetta Acquaviva Fotografie  
diàne\_Ilaria Scarpa\_Luca Telleschi

Matteo Osanna

Alessia Boldrini

Sara Fattori (Sarà Fatto Art)