

Operation Smile – Volunteer Mobilisation

Volunteerism

The Operation Smile Mission in Kenya (OSMIK) is a medical non-governmental organisation with a unique mandate to provide free corrective surgery to children born with cleft lip/cleft palate deformities. The organisation has been successful as a result of its strategic focus on volunteer resources mobilisation. In the last decade the mission has made great strides towards mobilizing the power of humanity through volunteerism both locally and internationally to give these children and young adults a chance to live a normal life.

With the mission's focus on volunteer recruitment initiatives, awareness campaigns and the commitment of management and team members, the mission has been able to garner support from referral hospitals, local communities and a host of international medical volunteers who assist in the clinical operations. 1 in 500 children in Kenya is born with cleft lip and/or cleft palate deformities, a condition that poses huge challenges to the children, ranging from breathing difficulties to the ability to laugh, eat or speak and as a consequence many of the children suffer from malnutrition, medical and psychological problems.

The Success

The mission has developed staff-friendly initiatives which have seen the organisation attract great people. These initiatives motivate and inspire volunteers, both internationally and locally, by establishing a governance Code of Conduct that ensures transparency and accountability by its leadership, the governing board, staff and volunteers.

To incentivise the volunteers the mission honours all participating volunteers with free American Heart Association (AHA); certified life support training in Basic Life Support (BLS); Paediatric Life Support (PALS) and Advanced Cardiac Life Support (ACLS) at various government hospitals across Kenya. The volunteers are also given opportunities to participate in international Operation Smile missions outside Kenya and Africa.

These incentives are not limited to volunteers and OSMIK has developed staff-friendly initiatives to motivate staff and appreciate their contributions to the mission. This includes sending Programme Co-ordinators to the headquarters in Virginia US to share and learn from their counterparts and all other staff members are accorded an annual regional conference in Cape Town, South Africa to participate in the Operation Smile annual regional conference.

With more outreach and engagement with local doctors, formation of Operation Smile clubs in colleges and universities, establishing partnerships with county hospitals and local communities, OSMIK has greatly intensified and enhanced the service delivery throughout Kenya and in particular in the marginalised areas, bringing the total of children and young adults who have benefitted from reconstructive facial surgeries since 1987 to over 8000.

Challenges

The OSMIK dream of putting a smile on the faces of those in society born with facial deformities and unable to afford corrective surgery, a dream of positively changing lives, does not come without challenges. OSMK has had certain challenges inherent in the mandate of the mission ranging from operational, cultural perceptions to scarcity of resources and challenges of recruiting enough volunteers to match the requirements of the mission.

As a small NGO in a crowded market competing with better known NGOs for the attention of donors, being heavily reliant on volunteers is a challenge. Most of the volunteers are working medical professionals who will normally be required to spare up to one week of their time to travel to operation mission centres. OSMIK also attracts a small number of college, university and medical students who volunteer to assist the doctors during operations, as well as learn from the professionals and contribute to making a difference in someone's life. The Mission undertakes to cover their travel costs and upkeep during missions. This requires financial resources which are in short supply. Other challenges include cultural inhibitions coupled by high levels of poverty leading to poor turn outs during screening sessions and the actual operations as communities shy away from bringing out children with such deformities for fear of stigmatization.

To mitigate these challenges OSMIK has formed partnerships with organisations that have previously worked with Operation Smile foundations in other countries such as the UNICEF mission in Rwanda, the Peace Corps and World Vision. They have formed these partnerships to reach out to communities and spread awareness of OSMIK activities in Kenya and how affected people can access assistance. One of OSMIK's local partners, Saatchi & Saatchi, a well known PR firm, has designed generic posters to be distributed countrywide in order to raise awareness about cleft lips and palates and to inform the public that help is available. For Free.

Commitment of management and the governing board of OSMIK has seen the rollout of a volunteer program that has connected and touched people in very special ways. It has connected those in need with volunteer professionals who have greatly changed the lives of others which in turn has impacted their own lives as well. In the words of one American volunteer:

"I still get that feeling, after the surgery, when you look at what you've done and then at the child's pre-op picture. There's great satisfaction that you've achieved that. Because it's not just the children you transform, you yourself feel better, and it energizes you to try to do more."