

# CAMEROON

## THE TALE OF AN ENCOUNTER



Maria Rosaria Natale Ph.D.





She stood out. And that is why I easily noticed her. What was Mireille Yoga doing, a gorgeous camerunese lady, dressed in traditional clothes along the mountain paths of Val D'Aosta? I could not restrain myself and I asked. "I came to visit my brother in France. Now I am here to breathe in beauty" (*"Sono venuta a trovare mio fratello in Francia. Ora sono qui per respirare la bellezza"*)

That's literally what she answered, in Italian.

I instantly felt a connection.

"Pleasure meeting you - it was truly a pleasure - my name is Maria Rosaria. Why do you speak Italian?" She told me she was working in a centre dedicated to helping homeless kids in Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroon.

"An Italian missionary works with us: father Maurizio Bezzi, he was the one teaching me" Then she passionately added "Our hub is not like the others handing out food and clothes. It is a site of encounters, where no one judges you. It is a place where you can talk freely to anyone and everyone. A place where you can win back your dignity.

It is based on two fundamental concepts: **freedom and responsibility**. You know, you ought to be free to be yourself and therefore responsible for your own choices"

That struck me. "I beg your pardon, can you please repeat?"

"Freedom and responsibility: this is the only way you can become more human".



Do you believe in fate? I do. That totally felt like a sign. During that period, we were working on those same principles with our Innovation&Leadership Community, an international community of top managers: freedom and responsibility to create value. That is when our connection turned into something more than a mere feeling. We started to talk about it. Matters and thoughts dancing in the fresh air of that height, interrupted only by a “look there!”, every time our stream of words was set aside to take in the beauty of the view. I immediately talked about it with my husband. “It’s a concrete example, not just theory. Freedom and responsibility can change people’s lives! We have to talk about this with our Innovation & Leadership Community!” “All right, but first let me go and check it for myself”

## Freedom & Responsibility



It’s not that easy to travel there. There are visas and vaccines to do. So, after pills, injections, papers, and a few layovers, my husband passes the custom of Yaoundé, welcomed by Marc and father Maurizio. Marc was a homeless child with a talent for music. Maurizio was a worker in Foresto Sparso, in the Bergamo province, with a talent for the nurture of human souls.

In Yaoundé, thousands of children and teenagers are left on the streets. They escape from the oblivion of villages to end up in the living hell of cities. They are not able to find a job due to their lacking educational background. They face difficulties to integrate into the society and find themselves at its edges, forced to live by their wits. Surviving becomes their biggest challenge.



The Edimar community centre is located right in front of the railway station. A place swarming with numerous activities and continuous movements and where young people fight for survival.

“Look, he is 8 years old. In the village, his father beat him because he claimed he is possessed by evil spirits. The child could not take it anymore and fled. He jumped on the first train, with no money nor precise destination and without knowing anyone. It was still better than dying at his own father’s hands. Yaoundé is where his journey stopped. He joined the community and he now comes back here every day. He is learning how to read and write in French.” The community centre is named after Edimar: a street child who had decided to change his life after talking with an educator. As a result, he was killed by his gang leader.



All educators are from Cameroon, like Mireille. Some were homeless kids, and some suffered in jail. They are aware of what is out there, they know famine, fear, pain. They are aware that in order to walk away from it you need to know who you are. You need to know what it means to have dignity. You need to know that change is possible even in those circumstances.





This consciousness seems impossible to achieve when you lack basic means of subsistence. It can only brew from a relationship. A relationship with someone who does not judge you, believes in you, and stays by your side.

This is exactly what Mireille, father Maurizio and the educators are doing. “Ours is a pedagogical and educational project. It aims at restoring consciousness of the Person’s value and at facilitating the young people’s reintegration into family, society and professional environment. To make them quit drugs, petty crime and violence once and for all”. The philosophy of this hub contrast violence with friendship, and suspicion with trust: almost 200 young people spontaneously visit the centre every day. This proves the effectiveness of its method.

Unmatched shoes and bare feet characterise the endless football games which strengthen friendships and are usually played in the courtyard. At the centre’s school, both elementary kids and young adults together learn to read, write and count. There is also a library: three old-fashioned pieces of luggage full of aged magazines and fusty books. Silence and deep concentration reign.

There is also an infirmary which is always active in disinfecting, healing and sewing wounds.

Pieces of soap are distributed to bathe and wash clothes. Taking care of yourself is one of the first steps towards a newly found dignity.

I then notice a queue of kids in front of a door: “That’s where you can speak with an educator face-to-face, and there is also...a psychologist. If you or the educator starts crying it’s fine, no one judges you.”

Some of them make it. They are able to get their life back, find a job, reconcile with their family and start their own.

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These people are the living proof you can succeed. That a space like Edimar is highly needed. A place where you can experience freedom and, thus, become responsible for your choices in order to build your own life. My husband's words when he came back were: "It's exactly as we thought it would be. We have to tell this story to our Innovation & Leadership Community!"



As a consequence, we introduce Mireille and Father Maurizio to the top managers and entrepreneurs of our Innovation & Leadership Community. A touching encounter that moves following the same streams of energy: in any context, people need a space to live freely and by taking responsibility in order to feel alive. It results in a passionate effort to change our working realities while creating the best conditions for our people.

The following year was characterised by art and beauty overlooking the relationship pathway. That year, we got to know Sara Landriscina, artist and painter who lives in Kenya and on lake Iseo, and is extremely fascinated by Africa. We look at her paintings, portraying women and children in their everyday life. We fall in love with them. We buy some of them for our office, and an idea is born to organise a charity auction for the Edimar Centre. It is a success that makes everyone ecstatic: Mireille and her boys, the people who talked with Father Maurizio during the night. They now carry with them gorgeous paintings with bright smiles and crystal-clear eyes.

Then, the exchange of experiences carries on: Mireille asks YBP to reach Yaounde and carry out a series of workshops with the Centre's educators in order to "increase awareness on what we are doing and improve our reciprocal cooperation". Music for our ears. And just like that, two of our senior consultants, Enrico and Lorenzo, work in the Centre and its people for a week, joining their daily life and facilitating workshops at the end of the day. Once again, achieving mutual enrichment.

Look at what can happen while wandering in the mountains!

A STORY TO BE CONTINUED...



# QUI SUIS-JE?

## REFLECHISSONS

- ① EST-CE QUE JE TRAVAILLE EN ÉQUIPE ? Oui  
parce que nous faisons de la  
une riche pour nous éduquer
- ② COMMENT  
m'apporte  
travailler l'apport que ch  
ma manière de



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