

Sentinelles

To the rescue of wounded innocence



Colombia

Women's circle:
a seed of change

Chad

Expanding access
to reconstructive
surgery

Burkina Faso

Fadima's dance

Editorial

When healing means being reborn

In Minas, Colombia, change did not come about through force. It gently blossomed within a women's circle initiated by Tierra de Vida. Over time, this circle has become a space of sisterhood, where the silence surrounding gender-based violence is broken, and where sharing is more than just a word. Here, it is the foundation that enables each woman to become an agent of change within her family and community.

This dynamic of rebuilding through bonding resonates with particular intensity when physical healing transforms daily life. From Ouagadougou to Dakar, via N'Djamena, the joy is palpable. It can be seen on Fadima's radiant face of, freed from obstetric fistula, dancing without fear or shame at last, after 20 years of suffering. Joy also bursts forth in Oumou's laughter, a Senegalese child who has undergone heart surgery and is now running towards her future. And how can one describe Possibo's genuine smile, who will soon be travelling to Switzerland to get a replacement for all or part of her prosthesis? These individual victories take on an even greater significance given the particularly difficult environments in which they occur. Extreme temperatures cause severe physical strain, the lack of specialist surgeons delays crucial operations, and isolation and insecurity limit the availability of medicines and healthcare staff.

Every operation, every workshop, every word exchanged weaves the fabric of a brighter future, for healing and regaining confidence also means reclaiming one's place amongst one's own people. Nothing would be possible without the power of alliances, without a network of solid and complementary partnerships. Thanks to the support of the Swiss Embassy in Madagascar, the collaboration of the Association d'entraide des mutilés du visage and that of Hilfsaktion Noma e.V., our group strength comes to the fore and changes lives.

Choosing to support Sentinelles means investing in sustainable and measurable solutions. Your solidarity enables us to uphold human dignity and ensure high-quality support for the most vulnerable people.



Marlyse Morard
Director



First women's meeting – 'icebreaker' activity, March 2025.

COLOMBIA

In Minas, a women's circle is fostering change

On the initiative of the Tierra de Vida Foundation, the first women's circle in Minas was established as part of the 'Andean Women, Weavers of Dreams' project. In this space designed by and for women, participants regain their confidence and learn to respect one another.

Created to empower, raise awareness of gender-based violence and promote women's rights in the context of a mining community, this space now brings together more than 60 participants. They meet once a month to share experiences and learn from each other. The topics covered are varied: the mental burden of raising children, learning about their rights, gender equality, developing self-love, acknowledging their feelings, the power to say no, how to become a female leader within their community... All in a spirit of sisterhood and trust.

The sessions are led by the foundation's psychologist, using collaborative and creative methods that encourage open discussion and self-reflection. These meetings lead to much greater self-awareness. Helena* says: "In the women's circle, we talk about our emotions, our boundaries and what we must no longer accept. Listening to the other women, seeing that they're going through difficult times too, makes me feel less alone. The workshops on violence have helped me realise that some situations I thought were normal actually weren't. Now, I try to set clearer boundaries within my family and in my relationship."

Little by little, the seed of change is beginning to sprout and spread through the homes of Minas. This fills us with joy and motivates us to carry on!

C.D.

* Pseudonym.



Inauguration of the family shelter at the Mandrosoa rehabilitation centre, attended by members of the prison service, the association Grandir Dignement, Sentinelles and the ambassador of Madagascar to Switzerland.

MADAGASCAR

Rebuilding bonds to build a new future

At the Mandrosoa Anosiala rehabilitation centre, the pressure never lets up. Designed to accommodate 70 residents, the facility currently houses 83 male juveniles. And there were times in recent months when the number rose to as many as 125. This overcrowding place a severe strain on the capacity of the institution, founded in 1903 and dedicated to supporting minors in conflict with the law.

At the official opening of the Family Shelter, built next to the centre, the facility's director, Captain Ando Dina Ravaliniaina, highlighted the scale of the daily challenges faced by her team. In fact, there are two distinct groups of residents: young people facing social difficulties, placed there at their parents' request following a decision by the juvenile court judge, and those who have committed criminal offences. All are aged between 9 and 18.

A strict but fair framework

Despite the overcrowding, the teaching staff ensure that a robust and structured environment is maintained. "Discipline is a fundamental element," emphasises the director, highlighting the institution's paramilitary nature. In this demanding environment, the young people continue their education within the centre and can prepare for the Certificate of Primary Education, as well as the Lower Secondary School Certificate. Training in bricklaying, welding, market gardening, motorcycle mechanics and literacy complements the general education, with a clear aim: to equip them with practical skills to build a professional future.

Forging new bonds

Beyond academic and technical support, reintegration also depends on the family. Maintaining, restoring and strengthening these bonds is a key factor in preventing long-term breakdowns. This is the spirit underlying

the opening of the Family Shelter, a space dedicated to welcoming and supporting the relatives of residents. Financially supported by the Swiss Embassy in Madagascar and run by Sentinelles, the project is fully in line with the foundation's commitment to rebuilding family ties.

The Shelter is not merely a reception centre. It is a genuine space for dialogue, listening, education and prevention. In collaboration with the Prison Service and the Grandir Dignement association, this centre also hosts a 'Parents' School'. Information sessions are offered there on parental rights and responsibilities, children's rights, positive discipline and educational responsibilities. Its aim: to restore parents' role in their child's upbringing and provide them with tools to support them in their new life.

For the Swiss Ambassador to Madagascar, Stefano Toscano, the promotion of human rights, particularly within the prison system, is a priority. The technical and financial support mobilised has thus made it possible to bring this project to fruition, conceived as a bridge between institutions and families.

Whilst the number of young people in care remains high, the issue of strengthening infrastructure remains crucial. The opening of the Family Shelter nevertheless marks a significant step forward: a more humane approach to rehabilitation, where support does not end at the centre's doors, but continues through the restored relationship between a child and their family.

M.P.

BURKINA FASO

Fadima's dance

Fadima's beaming face greets me as I arrive at the Sentinelles centre in Ouagadougou during a follow-up visit to our programmes in Burkina Faso. Seated on the terrace, she is embroidering alongside other women. Their conversations are lively and cheerful. It is hard to imagine that the ever-smiling Fadima has just emerged from a long ordeal: an obstetric fistula for which she has recently undergone surgery.

Terrible suffering all too often hidden

Her story, though unique, follows the same pattern as that of many other women: years of suffering in silence, isolation, and a lack of information. Fadima lived for nearly twenty years with permanent incontinence that began after giving birth to her first child. It was a difficult labour, which took place at home, women from the village. The baby boy was too big and did not survive. "After the birth, I couldn't stop urinating. I told the midwife, who said it would stop. My husband went to fetch herbal teas. He went from one healer to another, but to no avail. I stayed like that for years."

The Centre of Hope

Still without any medical assistance, Fadima went on to give birth at home, to five more children, all of whom, thankfully, were in good health. But her condition was getting worse. It was only during her last pregnancy, thanks to the opening of a health centre in her village, that she finally dared to speak of 'this nasty disease that casts you out of society'. She confides: 'I didn't dare go into places where there were people or sit down in public, because they might see that I was wet. Even when standing, urine would run down my



Fadima, recovering in our care centre following her successful operation.

legs. It was only this year, during my antenatal check-ups, that I found the courage to speak to the director of the health centre about it." He then got in touch with Sentinelles.

A few months after giving birth, Fadima travelled to Ouagadougou with her baby, accompanied by her sister-in-law. At Saint Camille Hospital, Dr Moussa Guiro, a surgeon working in partnership with Sentinelles, successfully repaired

the fistula. After her hospital stay, she spent a month recovering at the care centre and was then able to return home.

Comfort after loneliness

Her sister-in-law speaks of the realities of village life: the distance from healthcare facilities, unattended births, and the burden of silence. "Going through labour leaves you utterly exhausted. After the delivery, you're in pain.

What is an obstetric fistula?

It is a perforation between the bladder – or the rectum – and the vagina, most often occurring after difficult or prolonged labour. It causes continuous leakage of urine or faeces, or even both, through the vagina. In the long term, this leads to chronic medical problems, as well as social isolation.



Photos from video clips: Fadima's dance of joy is a moment of pure celebration.

For my sister-in-law, it only got worse after each new birth. Thankfully, a health centre was set up in the village. Women are finally receiving advice. Nowadays, they are more likely to seek medical advice whereas in the past, even when we were ill, we wouldn't talk about it. We've put all that behind us. My sister-in-law cannot thank you enough."

A year after the procedure, a medical check-up confirmed Fadima's recovery. She is now planning to start a business preparing and selling meals. Above all, she is keen to raise awareness among all those in the same situation. "I was in the dark. I didn't know it could be treated. Now, if I meet a woman who is suffering like I did, I tell her to go to the hospital."

Fadima wants to celebrate her new life by dancing. A testament to her joy, her happiness at being able to move without fear of losing control of her bladder. You can watch a clip of her dancing here.



Valérie, Programme Manager, Burkina Faso

News from Possibo

You will no doubt remember Possibo, a young woman from Burkina Faso who was involved in a terrible road accident in 2012, resulting in the amputation of part of her left leg. In 2018, thanks to your support, she was able to come to Switzerland to have a high-quality below-knee prosthesis fitted.

Today, this prosthesis allows her to get about and carry out all her daily activities. She works in the fields with the help of her family and is developing small income-generating activities, such as raising guinea fowl in her yard. However, Possibo cannot remain active all day: the heat causes her leg to swell, forcing her to regularly remove her prosthesis for a few hours to rest it.

In Burkina Faso, the very hot and humid climate that prevails for much of the year puts a severe strain on the prosthesis's flexible internal components. A service is therefore scheduled for 2026 in Switzerland. According to the assessment carried out, certain components, or the entire prosthesis, will need to be replaced. The cost of the trip and the replacement is estimated at between CHF 4,000 and CHF 8,000.

You can help us support Possibo by specifying

'Possibo prosthesis' in your donation. Thank you for your support!

CHAD

Reconstructive surgery helping patients in Chad

Sentinelles has recently launched its activities in Chad. Following a pilot project for reconstructive surgery held in February 2025, the second campaign in November 2025 comprised successful operations on 25 patients, including 10 who were suffering from the after-effects of noma.

Bringing people together

A surgical mission is first and foremost a collaborative endeavour, and is organised in response to needs expressed by local specialists, who do not know how to treat certain patients. Repairing noma sequelae is an excellent example, as it involves highly specialised surgery that is rarely performed anywhere in the world. More generally, plastic and reconstructive surgery is not widely available on the African continent. For example, in Chad, there is only one plastic surgeon in this country of 21 million inhabitants and he has never operated on noma sequelae. By way of comparison, in French-speaking Switzerland, a region with just over 2 million inhabitants, 79 practitioners are registered with the Swiss Society of Plastic Surgery. In view of the lack of local expertise, Sentinelles turned to the Association d'entraide des mutilés du visage (AEMV) to operate on people suffering from the after-effects of noma in N'Djamena.

All the missions we organise include a component focusing on training and capacity-building for local surgeons. In order to be able to treat a large number of patients during this campaign and to mentor the next generation of surgeons, we also called upon our long-standing partner, Hilfsaktion Noma e.V., and its specialist noma surgeon, who operates on all the children treated by Sentinelles in Niger. So, for this mission, we put together a team comprising three surgeons from Chad, one from Niger and two from Switzerland, along with a team of anaesthetists and nurses.

Large numbers of patients

Once all these stakeholders had gathered in N'Djamena, it was the patients' turn – having heard about the initiative through word of mouth, social media and healthcare staff – to come to the Mother and Child University Hospital for their first consultation. On the appointed day, even though only about ten people had been expected, there were so many of them that they blocked the corridors of the paediatric surgery department. The thing is, our consulting room is at



In the operating theatre with three surgeons.

the far end of the corridor! Some wait patiently, sitting down, whilst others approach the doctors trying to reach the consulting room. In a ward made available for the occasion by the hospital, a crowd instantly forms around Djouma, the nurse tasked with drawing up a list of the order in which patients will be seen for this consultation. All day long, dozens of families file past the doctors, in their quest for suitable treatment. Of the 60 people seen, only 25 will undergo surgery during this mission, including 10 children and adults suffering from the after-effects of noma. Surgery is not always the answer to the problems of those who come for a consultation, and they often need to be referred to other specialists who can offer the right treatment.

For those who undergo surgery, there is still a long road ahead of them. Indeed, reconstructive surgery often requires several operations, particularly in the case of noma, which is so difficult to fix. The injuries caused by burns are also a real scourge in Africa, where cooking is done over wood fires, right on the ground. And, like anywhere else, accidents happen. Safia, a 19-year-old girl, was the victim of a gas cylinder explosion that caused third-degree burns to 80% of her face. Although she sees the prospect of surgery as a relief, it is heartbreaking to explain to her that, despite these procedures which will lead to some improvements, she will never regain her original appearance.

Among the patients who have left a lasting impression is six-year-old Zara, who is missing a large part of her face due to noma. She was identified by an organisation working in a Sudanese refugee camp on the other side of the country. Zara travelled to the capital aboard a UNHCR



A young woman who suffered from noma and has just undergone surgery to reconstruct her face.

flight to undergo surgery with our team. Will her new face help her find the strength and resilience she will need to face the near future?

Noma surgery: rarely performed, yet still essential

Although the WHO officially declared noma a public health problem in 1994, even now in 2026 there are still, countries where corrective surgery is simply unavailable due to a lack of expertise, equipment and resources. The inclusion of this disease on the WHO’s list of neglected tropical diseases in 2023 is likely to bring to light other countries where there are cases. Like Chad, Mozambique is a country where recent research has confirmed the presence of noma and thus the need for surgical treatment.

In order to continue strengthening the skills of surgeons in West and Central Africa who treat these patients, Sentinelles has joined forces with the AEMV and Hilfsaktion Noma e.V. to offer training in reconstructive surgery for noma sequelae. The programme was launched in 2026 and is scheduled to run over two years. The first cohort comprises nine male and female African surgeons. This will help to train the next generation of surgeons in the sub-region which, despite significant economic development, continues to face structural problems that condemn part of the population to living in extreme poverty, conducive to the development of noma.

C.H.



Post-operative care for a young boy with an AEMV nurse.



Young Zara during her first consultation with a Chadian surgeon.

SENEGAL & SWITZERLAND

News of Oumou

After undergoing heart surgery in Switzerland in July 2025, three-year-old Oumou is now in excellent health. Having made a full recovery following her operation, she was able to return to Senegal in September and be reunited with her family.

In January 2026, our programme managers visited the area as part of our ongoing monitoring of our projects. During this visit, they met with Oumou's mother to catch up on how she was doing. What a joy it was to see such a radiant little girl, who

can once again run and play like all children her age! She has even started school, returning to the normal routine of a child's life.

In Senegal, waiting lists for cardiac care are long, and Oumou's condition required urgent intervention. Without it, her life would have been at risk in the short term. Thanks to Sentinelles' support, she was able to be treated in time.

Meeting Oumou and her deeply grateful mother was a touching and heart-warming moment. We also had the pleasure of meeting one of her older brothers.

The social worker from the Healthcare project will continue to monitor Oumou's medical progress for as long as necessary.

We wish her every happiness and good health as she grows up, and a bright future with her family.

M.V.V. et J.D.



Oumou, her mum and her big brother.

Sentinelles

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