

A road to change in Benin

15 years of Franciscan action at the grassroots and the United Nations



Franciscains Benin



Franciscans International
A voice at the United Nations

The issue

Ritual infanticide of so-called “witch children” is a persistent problem in parts of Benin. Identified by various signs during or shortly after birth, newborns accused of witchcraft are believed to bring great harm to their families. To protect the community, they are put to death.

Born in 1930 in northern Benin, Father Pierre Bio Sanou became one of the first and most vocal critics of this practice in his own community in Sekegourou (Kouandé). Often interceding with traditional executioners, he is credited with directly saving the lives of over 200 children. However, he and others also recognized that a more fundamental change was needed to truly protect newborns accused of witchcraft.

“Faced with this scourge, I asked the executioner in my community to stop all killings and asked him to call me every time there was a request from a family for a child to be killed.”

Fr. Pierre Bio Sanou

Father Pierre Bio Sanou was joined in his struggle when Brother Auguste Agounpké, a Capuchin brother who was sent on a mission to the north of the country. Brother Auguste, accompanied by Sister Madeleine Koty, became involved at the grassroots to save children in imminent danger of death. Together, they also decided to seek the help of the international community to eliminate the practice of ritual infanticide altogether.



October 2007

A training, a sparkle

Brother Auguste Agounkpe and Sister Madelaine Koty follow a training in Geneva on how to engage with the different United Nations human rights mechanisms. Together with Franciscans International, they decide to take the issue of ritual infanticide to the international community.



March 2008

First submission to the UN

For the first time, Franciscans raise the issue of ritual infanticide at the UN during the Universal Periodic Review of Benin. In the submission, they propose to amend domestic legislation to better protect children at risk. Two States echo these recommendations during the review.





April 2012

Franciscains-Bénin is founded

The Franciscan sisters and brothers continue to strengthen their capacity to effectively work on the issue of ritual infanticide through a national forum on 28 and 29 March 2012 in Parakou, sponsored by the Ombudsman of the Republic of Benin.

Following another training in Geneva, they decide that a more formal structure is needed to engage with the authorities in Benin and at the UN. With the help of Franciscans International, the non-governmental organization "Franciscains-Bénin ONG" is established with Brother Auguste Agoukpé as the Executive Director.



November 2010

International & grassroots action

Franciscans in Benin organize a four-day seminar in Cotonou, bringing together different stakeholders ready to work on the issue of ritual infanticide. By now, several Franciscans in Benin have gathered enough expertise at the UN to start training their sisters and brothers. Together they develop an action plan that explicitly links sensitization campaigns at the grassroots to the advocacy that is happening at the UN.



October 2012

Advocacy efforts gain momentum

During Benin's second UPR, it is now fourteen States that raise the issue of ritual infanticide. Franciscans International also calls attention to the practice during the Human Rights Council and in an alternative report to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The committee members endorse the recommendations in the report and call on Benin to take concrete action to eradicate the practice.



December 2012

Taking the message to the grassroots

With the support of the French Embassy, Franciscains-Bénin organizes the first of what will become annual sensitization campaigns. Together with religious and traditional leaders, local authorities, and journalists, Franciscans visit 11 communities in Northern Benin to create more awareness about 'witch children'. They also start to create protection and support mechanisms for mothers and children.

"It isn't easy: We have to explain to people why one specific element of their tradition is harmful, while other parts still greatly benefit the communities."

Fr. Auguste Agounké



December 2014

Impacts are recognized

Franciscains-Bénin is awarded the 2014 Prize for Human Rights by the French embassy in Cotonou to recognize the difficult time-consuming work that goes into raising awareness and changing attitudes about children accused of witchcraft.

March 2013

Convincing others

Franciscans and UNICEF make several recommendations during the legislative reform process of the Child Code in Benin. The proposed amendments include better registration of newborns to prevent infanticide from being hidden. In Geneva, the Ambassador of Benin commits to raise the issue of ritual infanticide both with his government and the international community.



2014 - 2015

Maintaining sustained advocacy

Franciscans International continues to raise the issue of ritual infanticide through various human rights mechanisms in the UN, pushing for legislative change in Benin. This includes interventions at the Human Rights Council and the Human Rights Committee

December 2015

A revised Child Code

Benin enacts a new Child Code: the revised legislation now specifically contains provisions to incriminate the practice of infanticide, including ritual infanticide.



January 2017

Government commits to change

Franciscans International provides technical assistance to organize the first UPR pre-session at the national level in Cotonou, gathering civil society actors and diplomatic representatives. Following sustained advocacy in Benin and by raising the issue again during the country's third Universal Periodic Review, the government commits to take action to ensure the effective implementation of the new Child Code.



September 2016

A key follow-up mission

After Benin's examination by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, Franciscans co-organize a high-level follow-up mission in the country inviting a member of this Committee. Meetings and conferences are organized to push for the dissemination of the UN recommendations on child rights and their implementation on the ground by the government and other domestic stakeholders.



June 2018

Ritual infanticide in the new Penal Code

Benin enacts a new Penal Code, in which the National Assembly incorporates provisions to repress ritual infanticide (Art. 477). However, stronger action is still needed to eradicate killings of children accused of witchcraft. Franciscains-Bénin develops a strategic plan that does not only includes awareness-raising campaigns and education on the new provisions in the Child Code but also focuses on social work, ensuring education for girls and abandoned children.

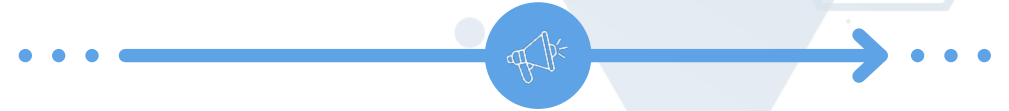
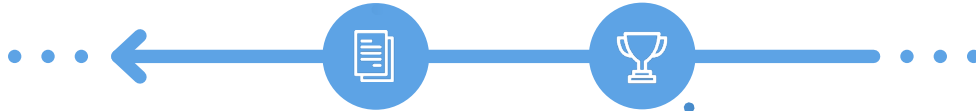




May 2019

Refocusing toward the future

Although the work of Franciscains-Bénin refocuses to supporting efforts at the grassroots, they continue to engage with the UN when necessary, for example by raising gaps in the implementation of legislative measures with the UN Committee Against Torture.



2019

Franciscan efforts recognized as 'best practice'

UNICEF cites the collaboration of Franciscans in Benin and at the United Nations as a best practice for making an impact by combining grassroots activism with international advocacy. The report concludes that "the increasing replacement of infanticide by abandonment is believed to be the result of the work of Franciscains-Bénin."



November 2019

Building community resilience

Franciscans International joins an awareness raising campaign in the villages Kika, Tobré, and Bokossi peulh. These annual events continue to challenge preconceptions of "witch children" but also provide a safe space for women to discuss the issue. The Franciscans in Benin have also set up an emergency support network that mothers can access if they think their child is in danger.

A telephone, operational 7 days a week, is available to local communities for reports of ritual infanticide or children accused of witchcraft abandoned by their families. In the eleven communes of northern Benin, Franciscans-Benin has trained and set up watch and awareness committees to ensure constant vigilance in villages and hamlets, in collaboration with local elected representatives, traditional chiefs and heads of Social Promotion Centres

Looking ahead

After 15 years of sustained UN advocacy and grassroots campaigns, Franciscans achieved real, tangible change in Benin by engaging positively and constructively with communities, authorities and the international community. Where necessary, they continue to raise issues relating to the safety and well-being of children accused of witchcraft with the UN, including at Benin's Universal Periodic Review in 2023.

While ritual infanticide is increasingly rare, the stigma of witchcraft persists. Franciscans continue their awareness-raising campaigns, and Franciscans-Benin is currently building a refuge to offer a safe haven to children and mothers rejected by their communities.

