

Taking *aksyon* (action) against malnutrition in Haiti

Haiti may not be a big country, but some communities deep in the mountains are so isolated that they are completely cut off from the roads that connect the major towns. Occasionally, by following narrow footpaths, a motorcycle can bump and wind its way to these villages. But to reach many of them, the journey must be completed on foot. That is the case for the community of Ma Gro Cheval where Jergens and Jerson Sainriste, two-year-old twins, live. When Olga Dumeus found Jergens and Jerson, she was shocked by their frailty. Olga had recently been trained by USAID’s AKSYON Program (Community Health Action for Improving Nutrition) to identify and refer malnourished children to health clinics.

The Fonkoze Foundation, a Haitian non-profit organization, works with its sister organization—Sèvis Finansye Fonkoze, S.A. (Fonkoze Financial Services)—to identify microfinance clients like Olga to become Community Health Entrepreneurs (CHEs). These CHEs open small *boutik sante* (community health stores) in their communities selling over-the-counter health products. Fonkoze’s team of registered nurses train them to deliver monthly health education sessions in their communities and to administer basic screening services—such as malnutrition screening under AKSYON. Since the screenings began three months ago, CHEs have tested 2,841 children for malnutrition, of which 125 were “moderately” malnourished and 23 were “severely” malnourished.

When Olga visited Jergens and Jerson, she learned that they were orphans whose mother had abandoned them shortly after giving birth, leaving the boys with their aunt in Ma Gro Cheval. Their aunt has two children of her own—a five-month-old and a six-year-old—and she and her husband struggle to feed all four children by performing odd jobs when they can find them. The small plot of land that they farm does not provide enough nutritious food for the whole family. The twins’ aunt knew that the boys were unhealthy, but she did not know how to help them. She worried about how she would pay for transport to take them to a health facility, and she was not even sure where she should go to get them treated. Olga encouraged the aunt to bring the boys to the next malnutrition screening session she was holding.

But on the day of the screening in the nearest large town of Fonvèret, the aunt did not show up. After all the other children had been tested, Olga (the CHE) insisted for the Fonkoze nurses to travel to Ma Gro Cheval to screen the twins. So, together they took motorcycle taxis as far as they could and hiked the rest of the way—another 45 minutes—on foot.

It was immediately clear that both boys were suffering from severe malnutrition, and they were accompanied to a health center in Oriani, the closest clinic to their village. Under AKSYON, Fonkoze works with clinics like the one in Oriani to distribute “Plumpy’Nut”—a peanut-based paste used to treat severe acute malnutrition. The twins, like other malnourished children, received it for free. AKSYON paid the transport for their aunt to bring them to the clinic every eight days to receive their supply of Plumpy’Nut. Olga and the Fonkoze nurses provided one-on-one counseling to the twins’ aunt and her husband about how to ensure that the twins received adequate nutrition—both during their recovery and afterwards. After just two months of treatment, the boys were clearly on a path to good health. Now, they only need to travel to the clinic every 15 days to receive their supply.

Olga and the Fonkoze nurses will visit the twins regularly for the next three months to ensure that they maintain their health. Olga will also work closely with the twins’ aunt and her husband to help them establish a livelihood that enables them to feed and provide for their family. She will counsel them in the types of local product they can grow that will yield nutritious food, and she will invite them to join Fonkoze Financial Services’ lending program, through which they can take out a small loan to jumpstart their economic activities. Perhaps most importantly, the twins’ aunt now knows that she can turn to Olga and the health clinic in Oriani if she ever needs guidance. Having this knowledge has empowered her and her husband to better meet the needs of their family.



Before and after: Jergens and Jerson Sainriste were diagnosed with severe acute malnutrition on January 25, 2017. Two months later, they were on the path to recovery.



Olga Dumeus is committed to helping Jergens and Jerson recover from malnutrition. She is a Community Health Entrepreneur trained by AKSYON.