

Addressing the causes and consequences of Disability in Sierra Leone

PRIMARY READERS: Family, community people, local government and Persons with Disabilities.

MESSAGE: Drawing the attention of the main stakeholders about the causes and consequences of Disability in Lugbu Chiefdom.

Introduction

According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) 2008 Persons with disabilities include those who have long term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. It is estimated that 80% of people living with disabilities are poor. In that sense, poverty is one of the root causes of disability.

There are many causes of impairment, such as;

- Infectious or parasitic illnesses like poliomyelitis and leprosy.
- Congenital malformation such as club foot
- Amputation, which may be of upper or lower limbs as a consequence of accidents, burns, illnesses, conflicts and war, for example bomb blasts.
- Brain injury due to pre-natal or birth distress, which may be caused by an umbilical cord around the neck or long and difficult delivery
- Poverty is also another main cause of disability.

PWDs encounter a lot of consequences, such as discrimination and abandonment, labelling them by their disabilities like cripple, one-legged man, one-eyed woman and so on. They also suffer from poverty because they sometimes find it difficult to get employment and move around to earn a living due to physical barriers like long and winding stairs.

A Case Study of a boy who is physically challenged in Kpetewoma Lugbu Chiefdom.

Sheku Kamara is a 16 year old boy who is physically challenged in both legs and as a result cannot walk by himself except with the help of non-disabled persons. He lives with his parents in Kpetewoma in the Lugbu Chiefdom. He also has other relatives around him.

According to his parents, when he was four years old and asleep at night, he suddenly woke up shouting and crying while pointing at something which no one else could see. Sheku immediately caught fever and was taken to the nearby Health Centre the following morning where the doctors diagnosed him with Poliomyelitis. This caused him to have a physical disability because nothing could be done in time to save him from the consequence of the disease. As a result, his family abandoned him, which made the situation worse since they thought they could not do anything more for him.

Sheku's situation came to the notice of Mr Fuad, a CBR worker who intervened to counsel the family members and Sheku himself. He assured them that not all was lost and there was a lot to be done

for Sheku. Mr Fuad also pointed that Sheku had a right to education, food and medical care. At the time, Sheku was called Cripple and not his name but when Mr Fuad counselled the family and his colleagues, he started being referred to by his actual name.

Sheku was later sent to school where he met and made new friends, enjoyed a social life and became highly interested in football games and film shows. For instance, Sheku always tells his companions to form a football team in which he is the goalkeeper. However, his movement was still restricted. Realising this challenge, Mr Fuad informed Handicap International, a charity organisation supporting persons with disabilities. Fortunately, Handicap International came to his aid by first assessing him and was giving him a Pet, similar to a tricycle. It enabled him to move freely and he used for quite a long time until it got damaged. Handicap was again informed of Sheku's predicament and this time they provided him with a wheelchair. Later on, the wheelchair also got spoilt and Handicap International came in again and gave him a pair of crutches to aid his movements, although it was not easy at first. Sheku is now in Junior Secondary School at Kpetewoma Lugbu in Bo District.

In conclusion, Persons with Disabilities should be given their rights, encouraged through guidance and counselling and have their social needs met. Furthermore, similar attention should be paid to other people with different disabilities in the Lugbu Chiefdom and the interventions of charitable organisations like Handicap International and CBR workers as Mr Fuad should be reinforced. For instance, disability accessible structures should be built, families and communities should support persons with disabilities emotionally and psychologically and CBR workers should be facilitated to reach more people with disabilities in communities.

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