

Topic: Challenges Visually Impaired Children go through when they lack social support

Readers: Ministry Of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs

Message: Provision of social support for visually impaired children enhances community inclusion

INTRODUCTION

Visual impairment is prevalent among children in northern Sierra Leone especially in river communities where the vector of river blindness (black fly) breeds. Cataracts among other causative agents of blindness is also rife and most rural inhabitants are ignorant of existing Eye Care services which are also hard to come by in their localities. Unfortunately however, blind children have severely limited access to social services in their communities including education, health care and Rehabilitation and consequently abandoned by their families and other community members.

The Child Rights Act and the Persons with Disability Act 2011 among others make provision for the protection of the Rights of children with disability but what is now required however is the effective monitoring of the application of these legal frameworks to guarantee social support for blind children. This could be achieved through among others, collaboration with child-friendly agencies, development partners, the family and other community institutions. The story of Alasan Bangura a visually impaired boy illustrates the poor access to social services and what PWDS themselves could do in response to such social challenges.

Alasan Bangura, a native of Magbenthneh village in the Tonkolili District, Northern Sierra Leone became blind at the age of eight and lost his father a year later. His stepfather Mr Sankoh could not tolerate him in his premises as he perceived him to be useless and a burden on the family. His abandonment inevitably saw him roam about the village and beg for almost everything he needed for survival. Hunger and diseases compounded his misery as with no fixed abode; he spent his nights outdoors.

Fortunately, an adult blind beggar Yayah who lives in the same village and was aware of the existence of the Bombali School For the in Makeni came in contact with Alasan. Yayah encouraged the poor boy and rescued him from that horrible situation by taking him to the school for special primary school education. Alasan has since been enrolled in the mainstream Alarkan Senior Seccdary School in Makeni after successfully completing 6 years of primary school education and rehabilitation training. This development in Alasan's life has not only facilitated a re-union with his family but even more importantly, has helped to significantly change the mind-set of the community about blindness and the blind.

Since the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of PWDS and the passing of the Persons with Disability Act 2011, key steps have been taken to improve access to social services for PWDS. The on-going National Education Policy Review prioritises the specific needs of Persons with visual and other forms of disability and strongly supports Inclusive Education to address the challenges such as those endured by Alasan Bangura and many others like him. Yayah was only that supportive of Alasan

because of the awareness he had about the existing services which reinforces the compelling need for sustained community sensitisation and monitoring of the implementation of the relevant policies, law and programmes to provide social services for all persons.

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