

Creating Awareness of Rehabilitation for People who Cannot See in Mufindi District , Tanzania

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MESSAGE: The community can be made more conversant with the concept of rehabilitation for the blind.

INTRODUCTION

Mufindi district is one of seven districts in Iringa region. It is situated in the southern highland of Tanzania. It has a land area of 7123 square kilometres, with a population of 283032 (2002 census). Administratively, Mufindi district has 5 divisions, 28 wards, 135 registered villages and 582 sub villages. Therefore, the area of Mufindi is wide and people are scattered. Some people in the community have negative attitudes towards blind people. For example, they exclude them from social and economic activities and they have a narrow chance of marriage.

This article aims to educate the community about the concept of rehabilitation of blind people and present strategies to make the community conversant about the rehabilitation of blind people.

1. Creating community awareness through education

More effort needs to be put into the coordination and involvement of blind people in community activities. There should be continued education on how to:

- Maintain hygiene
- Prevent blindness causing diseases like trachoma, xerophthalmia, ophthalmic neonatorum
- Attend health facilities like dispensaries, health centres and hospitals for early treatment
- Utilize rehabilitation services for irreversibly blind people.

Community awareness is necessary to give the community knowledge about blind people. Members of the community can be educated through meetings and posters. Seminars for Ward Executive Officers (WEOs), Village Executive Officers (VEOs) and CBR workers (CBRWs) can give them the ability to advocate and educate communities. Use of different positive pictures showing activities carried out by the blind, such as cultivation, fetching water, cooking, washing clothes, can prove useful in awareness creation. The task of promoting awareness can be effectively carried by involving well trained CBRWs. CBRWs can support the programme by training clients about orientation and mobility and daily living activities.

2. Community mobilization

Experts, such as doctors and nurses, can organize meetings at community level, where communities can ask questions related to blind people. This will contribute positively to the lives of blind persons. At the same time, community mobilization will change peoples' poor notions and create clear understanding and love towards blind people. Currently, blind people are not integrated in the community and not given chances to participate in community affairs such as:

- Religious activities,
- Community meetings,
- Funeral events and

- Government votes.

Therefore, blind people can be integrated in the community and enjoy the same rights as respected members of the community. Blind people can attend village meetings and be given the chance to share ideas.

3. Formation of support groups

Rehabilitation of blind people requires advocacy in the formation of support groups. These groups can be identified and formed in the community. The groups can be of women, religious people or youths. The groups can help to spread information on support and encouragement to blind people. Blind people can also be given the chance to hold different positions in the group. For example, in 2002 we visited a CBR programme in Kericho Bomet, Kenya, where we saw two blind persons, one who was a chairperson and the second, the cashier of a women's group.

4. Government involvement

In addition to the things the community can do, there are also things that the government and NGOs can do. The collaboration between the government and Sight Savers International (SSI) needs to be strengthened because these organizations can help to support training of CBRWs and support the programme financially. Collaboration can be strengthened by:

- conducting seminars and organizing meetings with government leaders
- submitting regular reports to relevant government officials, which will sensitize them on the importance of the CBR programme.

The report should include the:

- Number of blind people identified and screened,
- Number of client engaged in rehabilitation training,
- Type of seminars conducted and their expenditure,
- Achievements and problems and
- Annual activity plans and strategies.

Collaborating with key partners like ministries of Health, Education and Social Welfare makes programmes sustainable through the provision of staff and finance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we would like to encourage all people working with communities to continue educating about the integration of blind people into community activities. We all need to positively support people who are blind.