

PARENTS AND LOCAL COMMUNITY MEMBERS CAN IMPROVE THE CONDITION OF CHILDREN WITH MENTAL DISABILITY

By Angelus Ngatunga

KEY MESSAGE

Parents and local community members can play an active role in advocating and improving the condition of children with mental disability.

General Manager Sibusiso Foundation (program for children with mental disability in Arusha-Tanzania)

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Introduction

In Arusha region, there are many children with mental disability who live in poor condition. In 1994 The World Health Organization estimated that 3% of the world population is composed by people with mental disability. That is to say, if this estimation reflects the reality of the situation, 3% of the population of Arusha is composed by people with mental disability. Therefore, the number of people with mental disability (children and adults) is estimated to be more than 28,000 people. Statistics prepared by Sibusiso Foundation (a program that serves children with mental disability) shows that most of the people with mental disability, especially, in rural areas do not live long. This is because of poverty and inability to access important services such as healthcare. Therefore, most of the people with mental disability living in Arusha are younger people or children.

Some of these children live in special institutions and others stay with parents/relatives. You, parents and local community members, can play an active role in advocating and improving their condition. This article shows three strategies that can help you to advocate and improve the living condition of children with mental disability. These are:

1. Accessing information about mental disability
2. Understanding the condition of children with mental disability in the community
3. Forming support groups and economic empowerment

Accessing information about mental disability

Before any intervention, you need proper information about the condition of your children with mental disability. This information can explain the causes of mental disability, special needs of these children, how to take care of them and services available for them. This will help you to find the best ways to improve their life. Basically, what you need to understand is that children with mental disability are slow in their growth and development. Some of these children are severely mentally disabled and others are not. All of them need special help in order to stimulate their growth and development.

You can get good information about the condition of your children from different institutions that specialize in working with children who are mentally disabled in Arusha. These include Sibusiso, Uhuru primary school, Iliboru primary school, Patandi Mazoezi and Patandi Teachers' College of Special Education. Other institutions are Naurei Primary school, Kaloleni Primary school and The Tanzania Association of Mentally Handicapped persons (TAMH). These institutions teach people about mental disability by organizing meetings in different

communities and can also visit you. Some of these institutions organize open days whereby parents and other people can share ideas/information. In addition, you are all welcome to visit these institutions at any time for more information.

Understanding the condition of children with mental disability in the community

Experiences from other parts of Tanzania such as Zanzibar and Mwanza show that lack of proper information about mental disability contributes to children's poor living conditions. This is because many people are influenced by cultural beliefs that associate mental disability with curse or misfortune. For this reason, different people violate the rights of these children. For example, "Nipashe" of 8 October 8, 2004 reported that some people abuse the rights of children with mental disability in Mwanza. Hiding children away from the public, sexual abuse and other violation cases were reported to be very common practices. This is a clear indication that children with mental disability face many problems in different communities. You, parents and local community members can play a key role in identifying your children's problems and addressing them.

Forming support groups and economic empowerment

You can improve the living condition of your children by organizing yourselves in small support groups. For instance, parents' support groups are playing an important role in improving the condition of children with disabilities in other regions, such as Zanzibar. In this case, parents of disabled children share different issues and support one another to find the best ways to care for their children. That is to say, you can share your experiences, and other information, such as how you generate your income, with your fellow parents. For this reason, you need to mobilize one another to come together and work as a team with the same purpose.

In other words, you can contribute a lot in improving the management of the different activities organized in your different groups or communities in order to improve the condition of your children. Your involvement in the planning and implementation process can build confidence in you and for sure you can make a difference by addressing the needs of your children. Consequently, you will be able to help one another and the community at large to improve the living condition of your children.

Conclusion

Most of the children with mental disability in Arusha live in poor conditions. You, parents and local community members, can play a vital role in advocating for them and improving their living situation. You can access information about the condition of your children from specialized institutions working in Arusha. Reliable information will help you find the best ways to help your children. Therefore, it is important for you to form small groups in order to support one another. You can involve yourselves fully to plan and run different activities which will help to improve the condition of your children. By doing that you will show to the wider community that children with mental disability can live a better life like everybody else and everyone can contribute to this.