

Problems Encountered by Persons with Disability in Kenema City- Eastern Sierra Leone

Message: Including PWDs in mainstream development can reduce the level of problems they encounter

Primary Readers: Duty Bearers in Kenema City Council, DPOs

Introduction

Before the devolution of some functions of the central government to local councils, support for persons with disabilities (PWDs) was low and centralised in the capital city of Freetown. Disability issues is one of the functions that has now been devolved into the city and district councils. It is rather unfortunate that the Kenema City Council has not yet included the disability needs into their development plans and budget. The motive of decentralisation, in brief is to bring development to the door step of the local communities through city and district councils. Since Kenema City Council is yet to include disability issues in their development plans, their problems continue to multiply on a daily basis. Kenema has a school for the blind and a training centre for polio victims, providing training opportunities for a few PWDs on voluntary basis without getting any support from local and central governments. There are a lot of PWDs in Kenema who are not getting any services whatsoever. Those who cannot gain admission into the existing institutions resort to street begging and are seen as a nuisance in the community.

PROBLEMS

It is difficult to include people with disabilities in all aspects of life because of the barriers that exist. These include environmental barriers, such as inaccessible public and private buildings, schools, offices and so forth. For example, the government hospital in Kenema is not easily accessible by wheelchair users. A child of a wheelchair user was admitted at the hospital and the parent cannot enter the ward but had to get out of the wheelchair and crawl into the ward to visit his sick child.

There are also attitudinal barriers; some people in Kenema view and treat PWDs with prejudice in varying degrees. They regard them with pity, as incapable, inadequate, pathetic, tragic and aggressive. A social worker from the Ministry of Social Care went with a newly elected Disability Commissioner to buy a welding machine with a generator, however, the shopkeeper stopped them at the entrance and requested them to wait for Friday, which is a day for giving alms to the poor and disabled. They were surprised when, after being allowed admission into the shop, they were able to buy the welding machine and generator without even bargaining on the price.

Economic barriers – PWDs are disadvantaged when it comes to economic opportunities, like access to loans, land and property in Sierra Leone. For instance, a polio survivor was denied microfinance credit because she could not produce a house plan to serve as collateral. Some parents cannot take their disabled children to central institutions in Freetown when they cannot gain admission within the local institutions.

More so, there are cultural barriers in that people with disabilities are looked at as a product of witchcraft. For instance, a blind woman had an argument with her landlord and soon after the landlord's

son fell sick. The house owners thus believed that they had been bewitched by the blind woman and she was given an eviction notice to vacate the house immediately.

CONCLUSION

For us to break through the above mentioned problems, it is important for the chief administrator, mayor and councillors of Kenema City Council, paramount chiefs, social workers and NGOs including caregivers of persons with disabilities to be sensitised on disability issues and their educational needs.

The Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children Affairs and the disabled person's organisations in Kenema should champion this by organising workshops, roundtable conferences and radio panel discussions for them.

In conclusion, establishing disability unit headed by a social development worker in the city council charged with the responsibility of rolling out and popularising the Disability Act 2011 can go a long way of bringing the PWDs into the mainstream of development, thereby reducing their dependence rate and number of street beggars amongst them.

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