



Chawata, NGO for disabled that teaches beggars business

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By Special Correspondent writing for Tamwa

At Safari Hotel in Mtwara town, Abdalla Athumani Chiwaula, gets busy putting final touches on the food and liaising with employees to make sure everything is ready.

It is lunch time and customers stream in for their meals, and Chiwaula limps over and ushers them to their seats.

Chiwaula has a disability: he cannot properly use his two hands and legs. One side of his body is semi-paralysed and he walks with a pronounced limp.

He is happy to receive the customers, particularly because earlier he had been unable to find a job on account of his disability.

"As a person with a disability, I am happy to receive visitors. It gives me a sense of belonging," he says. Because disability was traditionally viewed as a bad omen and a curse on the family, people with a disability were regarded as inferior, incapable of performing most activities.

Chiwaula, the branch secretary of Chama cha Walemavu Tanzania (CHAWATA) in Mtwara, is delighted at the success of his business and the way residents have responded to his campaign for greater integration of disabled people into society.

"For sure the community here has responded well to me. I have seen my colleagues fail in business because the society fails to understand and support them," he adds. But the understanding has come with continuous sensitization of society on the appreciating the talents of people with disability.

"CHAWATA has worked hard to educate the community on the perils of discrimination and segregation of the disabled. I am a living testimony to the change in attitude; my business is progressing and am viewed like any other member of society," he affirms.

Mentally and physically disabled children were often denied a chance to mix with their peers, and in maturity they could only be beggars in town because they did not get a chance to proper schooling.

Before CHAWATA engaged on a vigorous campaign to enlighten the community in Mtwara on the needs and abilities of the disabled, there were more than 60 beggars in Mtwara town, the branch secretary noted.

CHAWATA embarked on this campaign by inviting 60 street beggars who they trained on their rights and how they could seek means of livelihood outside begging. There are 160 CHAWATA members in Mtwara branch. "CHAWATA first called a meeting and decided to reach out to the community. The first thing we did is to reach out to the disabled people on the streets, then the society," he adds. With the help of local government in the area, CHAWATA gathered street beggars and held a workshop on how to maintain businesses by disabled people. The workshop was held in 1997.

After interaction, training and sharing of experiences, 53 ex-beggars were able to identify self-employment projects they could engage in. Training included the use of loans offered by local government and other institutions in the area.

CHAWATA has benefited immensely from a Finland-supported local government project that seeks to enhance self-employment in Lindi and Mtwara regions.

The Rural Integrated Project Support (RIPS) Programme is part of this bilateral cooperation between Tanzania and Finland in Lindi and Mtwara regions.

The RIPS Programme has been assisting in poverty reduction through training in participatory processes, human rights

and democratic participation.

The 'How' Rather Than the 'What' of Development

Among other aspects, the RIPS Programme focuses on the 'how' of development, 'software' aspects such as changing of certain societal attitudes.

The programme also provides the 'what' of development, for example, it provided the initial funding which facilitated the training of street beggars.

The training was successful in that the disabled people got a 'new' understanding of their situation, and developed ways how they can engage in business and improve their lives.

These achievements of the Mtwara branch of CHAWATA are a testimony to the fact that when a society needs to change its way of viewing certain groups, simply investing in physical things, the 'what' of development, may not be enough to change attitudes.

Some people maintain that instead of contributing money for capacity building and outreach programs, it is better to provide funds directly to the people with disabilities for income generating projects.

This argument may seem palatable for cost conscious impatient, but it will also be appreciated that changing a community's way of handling people with disabilities will benefit the entire community even after donor or government support ends.

Focusing on changing attitudes will usher in new societal thinking that accepts people with disabilities and integrates them in different sectors of societal activities, be it sports, farming or business.

This perception of development departs from the earlier view that mainly thought of development as the number of machines or bags of farm produce.

By emphasizing changing attitudes, members of CHAWATA were elected to positions of responsibility in political, business and professional life. This, he says, is a tremendous improvement from the previous view that 'disability is inability'.

Because it is imperative to build the capacity of existing members in terms of awareness of their rights, CHAWATA also focuses on young, disabled children who may be neglected in their homes, away from the public eye.

In participatory processes, the community is tasked with identifying the challenges and solutions to the problems. Participatory processes enabled CHAWATA to identify the society's problems and work on finding solutions, he elaborates.

The problems were identified as the society's lack of understanding on issues affecting people with disability, inability of members to access loans, and a lack of cash to travel to visit other branches in the two regions.

With assistance from the RIPS Programme, CHAWATA was able to visit other branches and to offer tips to its members on maintaining business capital.

Regarding loans, it was discovered that members were not taking advantage of the loans offered by the Town and District Councils in Mtwara Region.

Oswald Mhecha, the Mtwara/Mikindani town council planning officer, says the council sets aside 10 per cent of its annual budget as loans to members of the local communities.

"The council has improved its relations with the community. Loans are accessible to everyone regardless of their physical conditions," he says.

The Mtwara/Mikindani council has granted loans to over 50 people with disabilities to advance their businesses. The loans range from shs 100,000 to 1 million. Chiwaula applied and got a 500,000/- loan, which he ploughed into his business.

Indeed, loans are a stiff problem for aspiring entrepreneurs who either fail to get loans due to lack of information, or default on repayment due to business failures.

Education as starting point

After success in training their members on various aspects of life, the next hurdle lay in convincing the community to treat disabled children like other children and accord them the rights they deserve, such as education the CHAWATA official says.

The CHAWATA branch emphasises education for all children, which has involved visiting all 34 branches in the region

and calling meeting in the communities or visiting the homes.

There was some resistance to putting disabled children in school, but CHAWATA pledged to assist in shoulder some of the costs, and also campaigned for education for uneducated children who are over primary school age.

Even in instances where parents accepted that it was all right for the children to go to school, it was hard for the girls because the parents always insisted on the "special needs" of the girls compared to the boys.

In this respect, parents still prefer educating a disabled boy compared to a girl. This is one negative attitude that the society needs to change, he says.

"All children need education. Whether it is a boy or a girl, they all need a chance to be independent one day, and that starts by educating them," he adds.

The need for sensitizing the society about the importance of education is underscored by Mohammed Channile from Kiromba Juu village, who says that after raising awareness in the society, disabled children can now freely access education and health services.

"In the past, parents and relatives used to hide their disabled children. Today, they are free to join other children in school or at the dispensary," he adds.

While some disabled members of society are segregated and denied their chance to participate in day-to-day gainful activities, this was not the case for Jafaar Mohammed Hassan, the proprietor of George London Tailoring in Mtwara town.

Jafaar says that though disabled, he has participated in societal activities but has faced some harsh words or looks from some quarters.

Also a CHAWATA activist, he says that his business is an emblem of success in tailoring thus earning the nickname 'George London' because of his tailoring skill.

Jafaar joined CHAWATA to pursue his quest to improve the condition of the disabled. He wanted to serve them better and act as a mentor to others who may have a dream of succeeding in this trade.

But he admits that succeeding in business is not easy, granted the hard economic times and lack of proper business training for some of the members. Even with the capital, it needs proper monitoring to make sure the business lasts, he says.

"Maintaining capital has been the major challenge to all of us. Some businesses have succeeded while others have failed because of capital," says Hassan. Capital may pose a challenge, but health problems also affect the disabled.

For instance, Hassan Awaz Mpiku, a former branch chairman of CHAWATA, has a cassava roasting business that suffered when he fell ill and left his business to other people.

While CHAWATA has made progress in integrating its members into society, Chiwaula admitted that participatory processes, which require transparency and involving all members, have yet to take root within the society.

Leaders do not yet appreciate that when members demand information, this does not pose a threat, but is actually good for CHAWATA, he says.

But members still need to learn more about maintaining business capital. It is evident that continued training is needed on how to maintain businesses and identify emerging business opportunities.

CHAWATA was established to address societal inequalities and convince the society to recognize the abilities of the physically and mentally challenged people of Mtwara.

It has proved that attitudes can be changed through raising awareness and continued support for all members of society, disabled or not.

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