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Vernachlässigte Krankheiten

Do not turn a blind eye to blindness...

The consequences of being blind in Ghana

Von Louis Dogbe

While many aspects of blindness are important in various ways, the one that interests me most is the consequences of blindness, with particular reference to Ghana.

The education and training of the blind in Ghana were initiated and founded by Scottish missionaries, the Harkers and the Benzies respectively, in 1942 and 1945. Before that, the blind in the country, without any training and source of income, could not participate in all the activities necessary for the survival of their family, such as helping in the farm, participating in household chores, fetching water and firewood, and more, but also in giving much needed financial and material assistance to their family members and other relatives. Thus, most of the blind were only there to be fed, clothed and served. This situation was psychologically and socio-economically bad for everyone concerned. In nearly all cases, however, the Ghanaian family did not abandon its handicapped member but did its best looking after him.

Hence, the commencement of the education and training of the blind in Ghana was hailed as an important break-through. It was hoped that this new development would enable the blind there to become economically and socially independent and make their contribution to society. This, in fact, was and still is the sole aim of the education and training of the blind in Ghana.

Initially, this hope was largely fulfilled. As a result of their education, training, personal determination and perseverance, many blind people got jobs as stenographers in Government offices. Others are working as trained teachers and handicrafts instructors in schools for sighted pupils. A few have qualified as university graduates and got important positions in the country - one is a university lecturer, another is a music studio engineer, others are directors of organizations - all of them playing very useful roles in Ghanaian society.

Unfortunately, however, certain developments have been hampering the progress of the blind in Ghana. The following are only a few of the many examples that can be given:

- Being blind means that one must have special equipment and material in everyday life and education. The essential equipment and material required by the blind are, however, not

produced in the country and have to be imported - mainly from Europe, South Africa and the United States. The prices of these items have become much too high for most of the blind in Ghana due to their generally low wages. There are also frequent sharp falls of the value of the Ghanaian currency (the Cedi) against other currencies. Each fall leads, automatically, to a rise in the import prices of those items. For example, the price of a simple manual Braille writing frame is 32 CHF currently in Switzerland. This represents one month's wage for a blind person in Ghana. It costs 500 US Dollars to import a manual Braille writing equipment (the Perkins Brailier) from South Africa to Ghana. This is the equivalent of 20 months' wages for a blind person in Ghana. Needless to say, no blind person can afford either of these items from his/her regular monthly wage.

- There is no State invalidity insurance from which the blind in Ghana could obtain money to purchase their required special equipment and material.
- The Government's annual grants to the schools and training centers for the blind have not been increasing enough to catch up with the rising prices. The grants have, thus, proved to be inadequate for the increasing needs of those institutions.

The undesirable consequences of being blind in Ghana consist, further, in the following:

- The schools are all ill-equipped for the special needs of the blind - from the lowest (the Schools for the Blind in Akropong-Akwapim and Wa, Northern Ghana) up to the highest (the universities of Legon, Winneba, CapeCoast and Kumasi). This makes it difficult for blind learners to develop their full potential and achieve their optimum, and leads to frustration. An example: a year ago, the Ghana Society for the Blind, Accra, opened a computer training center to enhance the job opportunities for the blind in Ghana. The Center has only three computers, and only three trainees can be instructed in an hour, while others are waiting in a queue. To demonstrate to prospective employers how a blind person works with a computer, the instructors have to convey their entire computer to and from the place of the demonstration. Obviously, a laptop, equipped with a speech or Braille monitor, would be the solution. Similarly, such a laptop would enhance the studies of a blind university student, owing to the speed and volume of work involved.
- Another source of frustration for the blind in the country is the job market. It is very difficult for a blind person to obtain a job, even with the best education and qualification. This is because employers have strong prejudice against employing a blind person.

All these unpleasant realities have further negative effects for the blind person's economic livelihood, the quality of life and social standing, to the extent of forcing some of them to resort to begging in the streets, unfortunately. This, in turn, has negative effect on the image of the blind in general.

These consequences of blindness are seriously neglected in Ghana and other countries because blindness does not cause any direct offence on sighted people, including politicians. They can and do, therefore, turn a blind eye to the undesirable consequences of blindness in the Country.

Having been through primary school at the Akropong School for the Blind, having trained at the Akropong Teacher training College, taught at the Akropong School for the Blind, attended various universities in Britain and taught sighted students at Club-School, Migros, Basel and also at my own school, I have knowledge of and personal experience in the difficulties confronting my fellow-blind people in Ghana. In view of this, I founded the Association for the Project-Blind-Ghana here in Switzerland in 1992 and its branch in Ghana in 1993.

The philosophy behind this Association is to help the blind in Ghana to stand on their own feet. In view of this, our organisation has been supplying essential equipment and material, as gifts, to institutions for/of the blind, as well as blind individuals in Ghana, averaging 12'000 CHF per annum, since its establishment in 1992. The items include: Braille writing frames, Perkins Braille writers, ordinary manual typewriters, Braille writing paper, cassette recorders, Braille watches, white canes, computers, musical equipment, mathematical sets and books. However, our efforts have proved to be a drop of water in an ocean - the need is that big.

Please assist us, in whatever form you can, to enable us to help the blind in Ghana to help themselves.

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