

Kakuma's first raffle

Menbere Dawit with the Kakuma Syndicate Disabled Group

In the face of continuing funding cuts to programmes, residents and staff in Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya have had to find new ways to support persons with disabilities.

From 2007 UNHCR and its partners scaled down their activities in Kakuma refugee camp, believing that southern Sudanese repatriation would lead to the closing of the camp. Although by the end of May 2009, approximately 36,000 southern Sudanese refugees had indeed repatriated to southern Sudan, Kakuma has since experienced an influx of organised relocations to the camp and spontaneous new arrivals from Somalia, Darfur, DRC and even some from southern Sudan.

A reliable register of persons with vulnerabilities in the camp is imperative to identify their problems/needs and to design effective programming with their direct participation but, with 25 community-based rehabilitation workers having been laid off at the end of 2007, there are now no staff to record the number or needs of persons with disabilities in Kakuma.

The gap in services has widened and people have been requesting assistance such as prescription glasses, Braille facilities, hearing aids and other devices which will assist them to become more independent as well as consultation meetings and income-generating/livelihood training sessions.

Funding cuts have brought a previously established orthopaedic workshop for persons with disabilities to a virtual standstill. Staff try to assist those who need their assistive devices repaired (wheelchairs, crutches, children's walkers, etc) but they and the workshop lack materials. They require wood and tools to repair and make devices as well as to be able to offer skills training in activities such as carpentry, embroidery, leatherwork and sewing, and in small business development. This centre was the only place where persons with disabilities could get together for work, training and leisure.

Trials and challenges

There are many extremely difficult and humiliating circumstances that persons with disabilities endure on a regular basis. Children lacking wheelchairs are trapped at home or sit in the bottom half of small suitcases and push themselves around. Some caregivers, who look after persons with disabilities on their own, sometimes tie that person to a tree or bed to prevent them from hurting themselves or disturbing neighbours.

The majority of camp residents have communal latrines and too often people do not clean up after themselves. Consequently, many persons with disabilities whose mobility is limited and who do not have wheelchairs are forced to crawl in, invariably soiling themselves. Pit latrines should be constructed with seats for individual persons with disabilities and there should be wheelchair- and tricycle-accessible ones too.

Some people suffer exploitation and abuse because of their disability, either being housebound and alone during the day or not having the capacity to shout out or defend themselves. This is especially true of persons with mental challenges who fall victim to the abusers in our communities.

The lack of funding and scant awareness of involving persons with disabilities in managing their lives, being self-reliant and influencing their own futures has contributed to their 'invisibility'.

If caretakers, families, relatives, friends and community members are taught coping mechanisms and given training and material support, the beneficiaries would not only be persons with disabilities but everyone down the line.

In 2007, Kakuma's wheelchair basketball team was invited to Nairobi by the Kenya Wheelchair Association because its high calibre



Dadiri, an 8-year-old Somali boy with spinal bifida, Kakuma, 2010.

of players would help the association to make better informed decisions in selecting the Kenyan national team. Unfortunately, there was no funding for the trip or for the repair of the special competition wheelchairs.

Kakuma has many talented persons with disabilities who are waiting for employment opportunities. We have fine orators, musicians, carpenters, welders, teachers, tailors, Braille transcribers, weavers and tie-dye artists, to name but a few – and if they had training or livelihoods opportunities, this would assist in reducing illiteracy, idleness, insecurity, dependence, depression and sexual violence and its consequences, and would improve livelihood opportunities with respect to repatriation or resettlement.

Taking action

While advocating for more funds for persons with disabilities, UNHCR decided to do a bit of local fundraising among the refugees through a raffle. Essentially it was to raise the issue of disability, engage community leaders in learning about community members who have disabilities and gather funds to begin the process of assisting and reaching out to persons with disabilities. UNHCR's Community Services staff brought eight handmade blankets, a long dress and eight packets of coffee to be used as prizes. In a textbook example of refugees helping themselves and taking ownership of their lives, they held a raffle and were able to raise 97,035 Ksh (\$1,508).

Following the raffle, the chairman of the largest community (Somalis) in the camp stated: “Bearing in mind that we are poor refugees dependent on the assistance of the international community, we are very pleased to have raised approximately 100,000 Ksh from our meagre resources towards supporting the neediest persons in our society, the disabled. Indeed, this is a lesson to us that together we can achieve a lot.” The chair of the Ethiopian community said: “This was done independently and the refugee community participated eagerly to support persons with disabilities and it makes us proud to have made our own money and be accountable to ourselves. We appreciate the idea of the raffle so that we reached this achievement. It helped all of us to be aware of persons with disabilities and initiated all to support them with courage.”

The greatest problem was getting an agreement among some of the larger communities about how the money raised would be dispensed. Therefore, having an association of persons with disabilities with a broad support base is imperative as the implementing partner. It is a testament to the belief, respect and reliance the community has in this group that the community handed over the raffle money towards

running the orthopaedic workshop. While this is a small step, it is also a giant one because it shows that capacity building has had a positive effect. Through this group, persons with disabilities are making their voices heard and beginning to take responsibility for their lives.

Since then, persons with disabilities who used to work at the orthopaedic workshop have formed the Syndicate Disabled Group, an association that is now registered with the government of Kenya. The group has 300 members and is working to set up meetings in all parts of the camp to allow everyone easier access. The Syndicate Disabled Group is running the orthopaedic workshop and is providing training to other persons with disabilities. The group is also advocating to be included in consultations regarding services which affect persons with disabilities. Persons with disabilities have now designed and built our first large covered gathering place



UNHCR Kakuma

where refugees and staff from the UN, NGOs and government can all meet together in the shade.

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Orthopaedic workshop, Kakuma.