

Children with IDD's

Leave no one behind



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"Leave no one behind" was this year's theme for World Down Syndrome Day, in addition to being the pledge made by the 2030 UN Agenda for Sustainable Development. Unprecedented changes in the health policy for children with special needs in Eritrea and the advent of extra activities in their classes show that the country is committed to "leaving no one behind" and "reach the furthest behind first" as requested by the UN Agenda for the year 2030.

The National Association for Intellectual and Developmental Disability of Eritrea (NAIDDE), together with the Ministry of Health and other stakeholders, is showing its zealous support toward putting marginalized people at the forefront of sustainable development, by creating opportunities of free health care services for individuals living with IDD's (Intellectual and Developmental Disability). This is of paramount importance for these individuals, as the disorder usually affects the trajectory of their physical, intellectual and/or emotional development negatively, making life-long medical assistance almost indispensable.

According to a report by the World Health Organization in 2011, households with a disabled member have higher rates of poverty than those without disabled members. Disability usually leads to poverty, through lost earnings, as a result of unemployment, underemployment or additional costs of living with a disability, such as extra medical, housing and transport costs (WHO, 2011). Thus, free medical aid for individuals with IDD's is the stepping-stone for the alleviation of economic hardships

these families face. The chairperson of NAIDDE said in an interview that the prescriptive provision of accurate training as well as parental love and affection are for parents to spend about 40 hours in a week with their child with special needs. However, this leaves parents baffled between two equally important choices – allocating time for income generation versus for your child’s care. Hence, the provision of free health care is essential to relieve parents of the predicament to make a choice.

Aside from helping the nation and the world at large fight back poverty, free health care also extends a hand to those persecuted by the society for the sole reason that they are living with IDD. Traditionally, the Eritrean society views parents of children with any disability, in particular those with mental health ailments, as cursed and denies them a fair deal out of life. Therefore, many parents have no choice but to keep such children hidden from society to avoid the inevitable stigma and embarrassment. According to examples of superstitious beliefs reported in a study by Martha Tesfai in 2017, the Kunama ethnic group blames mothers of disabled children for crossing a specific river because they are traditionally instructed against crossing rivers during pregnancy. Other ethnic groups in the highlands believe that pregnant women shouldn’t go out in public or attend funerals to avoid the “evil eye” that may harm the child (Gebremedhin, 2015).

Nonetheless, the concerted efforts of the Ministries of Health, Information, Labour and Human Welfare as well as the NAIDDE, have helped the awareness of the public to grow by leaps and bounds and foster a relatively more inclusive society. As a matter of fact, free health care aids the fight against the tyranny of ignorance by luring families who still couldn’t break free from the barriers of superstitious beliefs out from their hiding places. Thus, it encourages disabled people and their families living at the intersection of poverty and discrimination to better themselves economically, socially and psychologically.

According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), people who are “left behind” are those who lack the choices and opportunities to participate in and benefit from development or progress. The UN 2030 Agenda for sustainable development pledges that no one will be left behind because “every person counts and will be counted. Every person has a fair opportunity in life no matter who or where they are” (UK Government’s Leave No One Behind Promise). Eritrea has gone beyond rhetoric to integrate those individuals who are “left behind” in the community by organizing extracurricular activities to help them acquire art, pottery, photography, music and hairdressing skills. According to the NAIDDE, about 19 pottery students and 26 art students have graduated this year in the Central region. The Association further specified that this was just a pilot project to test the applicability of a bigger program that will include the remaining regions in the coming years. This will help the children living with IDDs hone their skills in particular fields and hopefully

prepare them for employment and independence, lessening the burden on families as well as increasing their earnings.

Underpinning this response is the pioneering of the special needs classes in different elementary schools. This joint initiative of the Ministry of Education, NAIDDE and other stakeholders helped establish a special-needs class in 16 elementary schools in the Central Region, as well as at least one school having special needs class in each of the remaining five regions, as attested by the association. This initiative was based on the government's belief that education is a national basic human right for all.

The introduction of inclusive education acted as a catalyst in debunking the false beliefs associated with IDD and obliterating the derogatory outlook related with the disability. It proved that individuals with IDD are ordinary people who can improve if provided with care, daily living skills, sanitary training, etc. As a result, there are more and more people from the community volunteering to train these children for free. For instance, the course on pottery this year was given for free to interested individuals, as specified by the association's employees. Moreover, not only did inclusive education raise the parents' hopes for further improvement, it also freed their schedule for work or other activities, which in turn played a big part in ameliorating the economic, social and psychological aspects of their lives.

In conclusion, it is remarkable that Eritrea has made considerable progress in regard to individuals living with IDD. The progress rests upon raising awareness and taking action to ensure that these individuals march alongside everyone through the gates of sustainable development.

The NAIDDE is committed to supporting these children and help them improve. To do so, it totally relies on the generosity and donations from the public. There are many ways to help them in their projects, be it with your time or cash.

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