

CHRONICLE

A FINE HUMANITARIAN ACTION

TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT OF BLIND PEOPLE IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

The *International Labour Review*¹ has published an article by Mr. John Wilson, Director of the Royal Commonwealth Society for the Blind. In view of its great interest, which is both informative and of social and moral importance, we consider that a wider circulation will result in serving the cause described in this study with breadth of vision and objectivity and it is for this reason that we now present chief extracts of this article to our readers.

The author starts by giving numerical data . . . "the number of blind people was estimated² at a minimum of 9.5 million, of whom not less than 7 million live in rural areas . . . scientifically ascertained statistics are not available, and it may well be that later investigations will show that the present estimates are a substantial understatement." The highest rates of blindness have been recorded "in Africa, where the problem reaches startling proportions in some areas where trachoma and onchocerciasis are endemic." Vast problems of this sort have also to be faced in Latin America and in Asia, especially as the outstanding conclusion from recent surveys is that "a massive proportion of the world's blind (8 to 12% children and 35% men and women of working age) live in rural and predominantly agricultural communities in the emergent countries." The author urgently advocates action "for economic no less than for humanitarian reasons", first of all to prevent eye disease, then to save what can be saved by introducing realistic forms of education and rehabilitation.

¹ Published by the International Labour Office, Geneva, November 1960.

² Statement presented to the World Council for the Welfare of the Blind at its Rome Conference in 1959.

Mr. Wilson then expresses what to us seems to be the ruling idea throughout the whole article . . . " The important fact about a blind villager is not that he lacks sight, but that he is a member of the community. Once this is accepted, it will not be difficult to show that it is within the community's power and very much to its interest to help him to become a productive worker instead of maintaining him as a dependent." And then in order to demonstrate the importance of this idea of the community in its different aspects he covers a wide area, chiefly throughout the British Commonwealth, in order to demonstrate that it is first and foremost rural communities in which urgent measures must be taken to prevent eye disease and to introduce effective measures of education and rehabilitation.

He gives a brief historical summary of all that has been achieved in this field in the more advanced countries . . . " In the century-and-a-half during which modern systems of blind welfare have been evolving . . . the emphasis has been laid almost exclusively on urban accomplishments in education and employment." In some countries remarkable success has been achieved at first with the provision of sheltered employment, and more recently with the placement of blind workers in factories, offices and in the professions. Thus in the United Kingdom " one third of all blind people of working age are employed, more than half of them in competitive, unsubsidized jobs . . . " The techniques of placement in unsheltered employment have had excellent results in the United States which together with pre-war Germany pioneered them, so that some 20,000 blind people are now at work in an extremely wide range of occupations. In Japan " which has a long history of work for the blind " approximately 35,000 blind people are classified as employed, most of them in specially reserved occupations. Recent reports from the Soviet Union record that there are 286 " workshop schools " for the blind, many undertaking highly mechanized forms of production. The author points out that even in these countries " it is noteworthy, however, . . . that few attempts have been made until recently to organize rural occupations for the blind."

The problem of blindness was presented in the above-mentioned countries, in India, the Far East, South America or in Africa by blind people making their presence obvious by begging and the

founders of the first institutions for the blind were usually missionaries. These understandably turned westward for their instruction notably in the teaching of Braille . . . ” They reproduced, often with minute fidelity, the schools and workshops of Europe and North America ”.

It has only been during the past few years, when welfare and health measures have been carried out by the governments concerned, that the “ formidable size of this problem ” has been revealed in rural areas, where “ the overwhelming majority of the blind ” live, especially, as has been previously stated, in Africa and Asia. Here too the full extent of the drama was to be revealed by begging, due to the weakening of family and clan traditions, so that considerable numbers of blind people, who were formerly family dependents, are becoming mendicants or in need of public relief. This sad state of affairs has been brought to light by medical investigations and welfare enquiries undertaken in the villages and amongst the tribes by various organizations.

However, the situation has shown a marked improvement during the past few years ; in fact, thanks to the increase in the number of welfare services for the blind as well as the recent creation of national and international organizations, it has been possible to apply technical methods of instruction which, in many cases, have resulted in turning a blind person into an independent and self-reliant human being who is capable of taking a normal part in life, both morally and materially.

The author then mentions numerous examples of training centres which, thanks to the above-mentioned factors, were and have proved themselves to be highly successful. Thus shortly after the First World War the St. Dunstan’s organization in England opened a farm training centre for men blinded. A similar centre was started in 1943 for men blinded in the Second World War. Both these centres have now been closed but they have trained a large number of students who make a living on the land, mostly as poultry farmers.

In the United States communities exist for the blind in rural areas in which training is given and has been largely developed. Thus in 1949 the Cincinnati Association for the Blind established a school for blind farmers at Mason (Ohio) on 56 acres of land at

which an agricultural course was given with emphasis particularly on dairy work and the keeping of poultry, pigs and bees. In a number of other States training courses for blind farmers have been arranged at general agricultural schools and " though exact figures are not available, it seems likely that some hundreds of blind farmers are included amongst the 3,500 blind workers in the United States who are classified as employed in rural areas."

The United States showed themselves to be pioneers in this field. In 1950 a training centre for the blind was established in Athens modelled on work in America. The results are revealing since, out of 50 blind men who have now returned to their villages from this school, 38 are reported to be well established, some being amongst the most prosperous farmers of their locality.

These examples of the possibilities of training the blind for rural work gave great encouragement to similar efforts in France and Spain and in Africa and Asia. In fact, these examples showed the possibilities of training the blind under suitably prepared conditions in effective work in rural areas. It was not so much a question of starting something new, but of co-ordinating, concentrating and putting into effect an action which was by itself capable of improvement for, " even among primitive communities, a surprising number of blind villagers succeeded in maintaining themselves as peasant cultivators and craftsmen."

This can be borne out by experience in two centres in Nigeria and Rhodesia, descriptions of which are reproduced below, since, in the author's words, they bring " life into the picture " :

As you drive through the gates of the Ikeja Farmcraft Centre you are immediately impressed by the novelty of the place and by the freshness of the ideas which have inspired it. The main buildings were constructed in concrete as a concession to the Lagos town plan, but in every other respect the place has the atmosphere of a well run Nigerian village. The blind farmers, who know every yard of the 65 acres, are typical villagers — men from the creeks, from Ibo and Yoruba tribes, from the Hausa Emirates, the Northern Plateau and the hill country of the Cameroons. This was a normal working day and the range of activity would have been remarkable in any setting ; blind men were building the compost heaps, watering the crops, staking the beans, weeding a plot of pineapples, sifting earth into seed boxes, laying a new path with pegs and a rope line to mark the boundary, and digging and ridging a difficult piece

CHRONICLE

of new land. At one place, 10 feet up on a bamboo construction, two blind men were fixing the roofing thatch on a typical village hut with dried mud walls. The only difficulty was when we asked the Principal, who is himself blind, whether we might see a demonstration of Braille reading ; he replied that only three of the blind students were literate and that so far they had been too busy with the farmcraft course to have time for the optional Braille lessons which are provided in the evening.

The second description is of a school for the blind in a Rhodesian village, one of ten such schools which have been established in tropical Africa in an attempt to provide a realistic curriculum which will prepare blind children for life as peasant farmers and village craftsmen :

The village is a scatter of thatched huts around the chief's compound. It flanks the river which, with a few sparsely cultivated fields, provides food and work for the tribesmen. The blind school, made of sun-dried bricks under thatch, was built by the village people for less than £ 650. Thirty-two blind children attend, some coming daily from neighbouring huts and other from remoter villages, living in " round houses " each under a " hut chief ". There are two teachers, both village men. One teaches full-time at the school whilst the other spends part of his time on a bicycle visiting villages within a radius of 50 miles, getting to know all the blind and laying the foundations of a simple after-care system. If you ask the headmaster for his curriculum, he will probably produce it with some difficulty, but it gives only an approximate idea of what the children do. Shortly after dawn, you will see them in the " bush " gathering wood for the fire and material for the day's work. When I was there, two of the blind students were fashioning a canoe from a tree trunk whilst others repaired hand-made nets, kindled the fish-curing fire or worked in the fields where they grow much of the school's food. There are formal lessons, but the classroom is part of the village and open to its sounds and life. Most of the children learn Braille, but this does not interfere with their more active education ; they have improvised an arithmetic frame by punching holes in a cigarette tin. When they have finished this schooling, they will not be scholars, though some of them reach Standard Five in the general curriculum, but they will know every inch and every activity of their village. They will be part of their community because they have never left it. They will stand a good chance of marrying local girls and of raising families which they can maintain and protect at a standard not much below the average of the community.

Lepers also benefit from this action and Mr. Wilson mentions : " the striking achievement " which has been recorded at the Ogi River Leprosy Settlement in Eastern Nigeria. When we think that

these men have to overcome not merely the handicap of blindness but also to endure this terrible affliction, one is filled with admiration for their courage and also for those who have thus enlarged their action in such profoundly humane work. This is borne out by but one example. "... Reports in August 1959 showed that all the eight blind people who returned home from the Leper Settlement during the previous year were well established and on their way to becoming self-supporting . . ."

*

Those who work for the Red Cross are well aware that in any welfare work it is necessary to know the setting in which they have to work and to take this into account. The *Revue internationale* published an article in April 1953 by Dr. Pierre Dorolle on the connection between ethnology and problems of health and an analysis last October of the work of Mr. J. P. Lebeuf on the relationship between this subject and medical aid. Effective medical action depends on previous knowledge of the setting and of the likely reactions, if these can be foreseen, of individuals and groups to this action.

Mr. Wilson bears this out when he says :

It was early recognised that in the setting of most tribal villages the blind man should not be treated as an individual standing alone, but rather as a component of a family team in which different members have different tasks. The distribution of labour may differ from one area to another, but the local pattern is usually so firmly fixed by tradition that it would be courting disaster to try to alter it. Once the blind man's position as a worker has been established, the specialisation of labour may well be one of his greatest assets, as he can often rely on his wife, children, relatives or neighbours to do parts of the task which are difficult for him. Provision is now being made in a number of the courses for the blind man's wife or working partner to join him during the latter part of the course; more can and will be done in this direction when smaller centres recruiting from the immediate locality are established. . .

He goes on to say that " no one who has been concerned with this work would yet attempt more than a provisional assessment of its results " and that " one of the most interesting features of this programme has been the way ideas have changed and are continuing to change with experience " . . .

This seems to us to be of particular interest since it relates to an attitude which concerns all humanitarian work if it is to be effective, that of flexibility. It seems in fact, in the face of changing circumstances and situations and the rapid evolution of thought and facts, that all such work, if it wishes to be effective, should be free to improvise even at the risk of unbalancing a rigid programme which is incapable of dealing with the unexpected or with the consequences of events. This article indeed brings out how improvisation can lead to excellent results. A proof of this has been the success of agricultural courses for the blind, which have allowed for many different types of mentality.

This does not, however, mean that mistakes have not been made which the author mentions, but these have been due to their practicability or otherwise. Thus in the beginning "a mistake which was made . . . in some courses was to concentrate on agriculture and virtually to ignore other aspects of village life". He points out that this misrepresented the facts in most villages, where agriculture is merely part of the man's work and where some supplementary trade is necessary.

On the other hand, it was realized from the outset that the tribal organization in the villages had to be taken into consideration. It would have been a serious mistake to treat the blind man as an individual standing alone, and this ruling idea has previously been mentioned, but he should rather be treated "as a component of a family team in which different members have different tasks".

It is difficult to imagine the amount of sacrifice and patience required by those who undertook this action to reach and convince those they wished to rescue from begging and inactivity. "Officials of the Uganda Foundation for the Blind spent six months on "recruitment safaris" before they started the first course at Salama, and in Nigeria a member of the staff travelled 7,000 miles in the process of recruiting the first 16 students." The author points out that an essential and necessarily expensive preliminary to any scheme of this kind must be adequate publicity to ensure substantial recruitment. Much effort is indeed needed but it sometimes achieves gratifying results: "Recently in Nigeria a chief, who had seen a trained blind man at work in a neighbouring area, asked that a "blind farm" should be started in his village."

Mr. Wilson is certainly under no illusions and he emphasizes that training is merely the first and probably " the least difficult part of the problem ". The acid test of any rehabilitation programme is what becomes of the students three or four years after they have left the centre, and this scheme has not yet been in operation long enough to apply that test. Moreover, as he points out, the aim is not merely to solve the problem in a few selected localities, but to establish a new pattern of work for the blind and to develop it " on a scale not previously attempted in blind welfare ". According to a recent statement by the Royal Commonwealth Society for the Blind, its intention is to devote a major share of its resources to the development of rural training facilities during the next five years and in brief the task which it has set itself is as follows : to find a method of training which is capable of adoption by any well organized community and to develop this training on a mass scale by calling " for expertly staffed institutions and specialized after-care arrangements."

Mr. John Wilson concludes his most interesting article by expressing the hope that " a proper relationship is established between workers for the blind and all different movements for community development and village aid."

In October 1960 the *Revue internationale* published an article entitled " The Red Cross Field of Action is becoming wider " which described the new tasks which have to be undertaken by National Societies as a result of the conditions of modern life. It appears that they are all capable of bringing effective aid in this great action, since by uniting their efforts with those of a well co-ordinated movement, they can bring their experience and long traditions into the field of welfare and of the struggle against suffering.

J. Z.
