

THE PROBLEM OF ASSISTANCE TO THE BLIND IN AFRICA

The First African Conference on Work for the Blind was held in Lagos, Nigeria, from 17 to 25 January 1966. The conference was sponsored by the Nigerian National Advisory Council for the Blind on behalf of the Federal Government of Nigeria, together with the Royal Commonwealth Society for the Blind, the World Council for the Welfare of the Blind, and the Royal National Institute for the Blind in Great Britain. Its main theme was *The next five years of work for the blind in Africa*; fifteen African countries were represented.

A number of resolutions were adopted, the main points of which are summarised below.

The conference requested all information media throughout Africa to give the widest possible publicity to the following general facts regarding blindness. In the 32 countries of tropical and equatorial Africa there are at least 1,400,000 blind people, including 100,000 children. Two-thirds of this blindness is preventable. Unless decisive action is taken now this problem will increase with the growth of the general population, so that by the end of this century there will be more than 3 million blind people in Africa. At present only one blind child in 40 is at school, and many African countries have no educational facilities for the blind. Only one blind adult in a thousand receives rehabilitation, training and employment; most of the remainder live in destitution, either as town beggars or as family dependants in rural areas. For economic no less than humanitarian reasons this situation must be remedied.

A blind child not only has the same right to education as a sighted child, he also has the same ability to profit from it. A fit blind adult of working age can be trained to support himself as a farmer or to earn his own living in a town workshop, factory or office. These results have already been achieved in some parts of

¹ *International Labour Review*, ILO, Geneva, 1966, No. 6.

Africa. The facts are incontrovertible. The need now is for action on a continental scale to save the sight of future generations and to bring new hope to blind people so that they may enjoy independence, which is their right as citizens of modern Africa.

The conference therefore outlined an African plan for the blind with the objectives (to be achieved in five years) of trebling the number of blind children at school, increasing to at least 3,000 the number of blind people being trained and resettled annually in rural occupations, and establishing in each country at least one centre where blind people can be rehabilitated, trained and placed in urban occupations.

The conference called for the formulation by governments of national plans, the immediate establishment of action committees in East, Central and West Africa, consisting of one representative from each of the national organisations for the blind in the region, and the mobilisation by international organisations for the blind of all the international and national resources that could be made available in support of such projects.

It urged that every effort should be made to increase substantially and rapidly the number of blind children receiving education, either in residential schools or by their integration into ordinary schools. While it might be necessary to adopt the open educational system to meet the special needs of certain countries, the need was so great and the numbers so large that only open education could provide a speedy answer at reasonable cost.

Every fit blind person of working age had the right to training and employment. This might be achieved in a variety of ways—in sheltered workshops for the blind, by undertaking subcontract work, in agriculture, and by placement wherever possible in industrial, commercial and professional occupations. The need for assistance in the field of industrial placement by experts seconded through the usual channels of technical co-operation was emphasised. The conference recommended that provision should be made for the placement and employment of the handicapped within the government framework, the placement of the blind being handled by an officer specially trained for that purpose. It strongly emphasised, however, that the main need was to extend or introduce agricultural training schemes, and that this should take place

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within the framework of the general agricultural development of each country. Resettlement and aftercare services were absolutely essential and must keep pace with general development. Governments should ensure that adequate arrangements for the training of staff for all departments of blind welfare were made, wherever possible within the context of general programmes.

MEDICAL MANPOWER : THE PRESENT SITUATION

Reporting to the Nineteenth World Health Assembly on the work of WHO in 1965, the Director-General cited the following figures to illustrate the present " gross deficiencies " in medical manpower : ¹

The physician/population ratio is generally considered a fairly reliable indicator of the general health manpower of a given country. This ratio is signally low in Africa. While the world average is one physician to 3000 inhabitants, in the continent of Africa, excluding two countries, the average ratio is one to 20 000. A number of countries in that area have much lower ratios. One country has, for example, only one doctor for every 76 000 inhabitants. The dearth of training facilities in the area is also disquieting. For a population of more than 200 million there are at present only six well-established and fully functioning medical schools. For an equivalent population in Latin America there are more than 100 medical schools, and even so the situation is still far from satisfactory. In Africa as many as 14 countries with populations of over 3 million have no such schools at all, a situation without parallel in all but two other countries in the rest of the world.

The Third Report on the World Health Situation records a wide range in the physician/population ratios of the 11 countries

¹ *WHO Chronicle*, Geneva, 1966, No. 7.