A BLIND MAN’S VISION
TURNING CHARITY UPSIDE DOWN IN THE CARIBBEAN

By FRANK CAMPBELL

From time immemorial, development has been the prerogative of the able-bodied. Handicapped people have been regarded as the passive recipients of charity and their involvement in productive activity has been rare and mostly peripheral. But this is changing. The Antigua-based Caribbean Council for the Blind (CCB) is playing a pioneering role in that change and is providing a lesson and a challenge to development specialists everywhere.

The CCB is turning the idea of charity upside down. According to executive director Aubrey Webson, helping sighted Caribbean people save their vision is a dominant part of the Council’s three-point program. The other two are the traditional welfare function and a major scheme to provide employment for blind people and to pull them into the economic mainstream.

This program has earned Webson the accolade “a farsighted Antiguan” from the Nation’s Voice, a local newspaper. The farsighted 32-year-old manager has been blind for more than 25 years. “If someone had thought of such a program much earlier, many people who are blind today would probably still have their sight,” he declares. “I always say that if we help everybody in our region to keep their sight, then there would be no need for a number of extra services except, of course, for those who are already blind.”

The Caribbean has a large share of the world’s 42 million blind people—some 135,000 in the CCB’s 22 member-countries. Cataract and glaucoma are the main causes of blindness in the region. Cataract is curable; glaucoma is controllable. The latter is also hereditary although, according to Webson, most Caribbean people are unaware that anyone whose parents or grandparents have the disease should seek early and regular checkups with an ophthalmologist.

The blindness-prevention segment of the Council’s work is executed through the subsidiary Inter-Island Eye Service. The service brings ophthalmologists from Britain and North America for stints of 2 to 10 months, mainly in the smaller Caribbean islands. According to Webson, many of these countries would otherwise be deprived of such a service. Some of these specialists have also given lectures and provided “senior support” at Barbados’ Queen Elizabeth Hospital, a leading medical institution in the region.

This commitment to blindness prevention does not detract from the traditional welfare programs for the blind organized by the CCB and its affiliated national organizations. In future, however, welfare-type activities will be aimed mainly at senior citizens and at those with multiple handicaps.

JOBS TRAINING AND CREATION

For most others, the emphasis will be on job training and job creation. The aim, says Webson, is not merely to get blind people onto the job market, but also to let them set their own goals and develop the confidence and the ability to achieve those goals. “That gives power and dignity and respect to the blind person.”

Three types of employment can be made available to blind people according to their abilities and aspirations. There is the “sheltered workshop”, the traditional workplace for many kinds of handicapped people. There are self-employment opportunities, including farming and commerce. And there is the open market. The CCB’s program accommodates all three.

The program is quite young but already the results are promising. One lawyer has been learning to get to his office and to the courts on his own so that he can defend his clients just as he did before losing his sight. In one country, two previously unemployed people, both blind, have gone into farming—one cultivating crops, the other raising poultry. Several artisans are returning to the trades they practiced before becoming blind.

Inspiration, guidance, and training are provided by six specially trained rehabilitation officers. Another eight are currently in training. The 15-week course is divided into 11 weeks in a classroom setting, a three-week practicum in the trainees’ own country, and a one-week tutorial assessment.

The officers help their blind clients decide on rehabilitation goals, including preferred employment opportunities. “They were taught,” says Webson, “that even if the goal of a client was unrealistic they must not tell him it’s unrealistic; they have to work with him so that he can see for himself that it is unrealistic.” Having assisted the clients in setting their goals, the officers then help them obtain the necessary training.

The rehabilitation officers are knowledgeable about community resources. They must help their clients deal with government welfare and other services, nongovernment funding agencies, and so on. Since each employment project is generally expected to be business-oriented, clients must know how to deal with the local bank and with any other business that might provide funds or market outlets.

Apart from working with about eight clients at a time, the new rehabilitation officer must train health and social workers, both professional and volunteer, in the community. The CCB’s long-term aim is to have this employment program, as well as blindness prevention, eye care, and education for blind people, fully integrated into other community and national services.

In a national response to CCB’s “farsighted” approach has been positive and Webson and his executive are pleased. The Council has obtained financial and other support from government and nongovernment bodies in the Caribbean, Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom. It has also received tremendous moral support at international gatherings concerned with the rehabilitation of blind people, and of handicapped people generally, in the developing world.

Two previously unemployed people, both blind, have gone into farming—one cultivating crops, the other raising poultry.

FRANK CAMPBELL, a journalist by profession and a former cabinet minister and ambassador for Guyana, is Foreign Affairs Officer with the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Secretariat. He is based in Georgetown, Guyana.

©RF Reports, October 1986