

The Unit for Blind and Visually Impaired Children Masasi Primary School, Mtandi, Masasi.

A report of a visit to the Unit in November 2019.

The reason for visiting

For some years I have been fund raising to help support the children in the unit. The principle aim has been to fund eye care and treatment. A secondary aim has been to enrich the children's lives. To date with the help of many generous people over £10,000 has been raised. My visit was to meet the children and to see at first hand the lives they lead and to discuss with the Headteacher and staff the children's and unit's needs. Some £3000 has already been spent on eye care, the purchase of a washing machine and its necessary plumbing and some repair work to the shower's water supply.

I was made very welcome by the Headteacher and given the freedom to go anywhere I wanted, to talk with whoever I wished to talk to and to take as many photographs as I wished. I took many. I would like to thank them all for the considerable amount of time they gave me and for answering my many questions. I would also like to warmly thank the children for their cheerful welcome and their friendliness throughout my visit.

My visit was self funded.

Background

The unit is part of Masasi Primary School in Matandi, Masasi. This primary school is not to be confused with another newer nearby primary school - Masasi Primary School, Masasi.

The school and unit was founded by Bishop Trevor Huddleston in the 1960s and at least one of the three blocks that make up the unit was I believe funded by the Hildon Trust in 1964.

The school is a public school, funded by the government. Only children whose families can afford to buy the school uniform and buy the necessary exercise books can be pupils at the school including the unit. Many families are unable to meet this requirement.

The children

The unit has 84 children registered - 47 girls and 37 boys. Out of the 84 children 15 failed to return at the start of the new term. So at the moment the unit has 69 children on site. All of them board. One of the 15 not to return is a child with albinism. The boys are aged from 5 to 18 and the girls from 7 to 17 years.

The school has 790 pupils.

15 boys and 23 girls have albinism. All are in the unit. 7 boys and 7 girls are totally blind.

Two children in the unit have serious mobility handicaps with no visual impairment.

Malaria is endemic.

The children's access to the unit is determined by assessment by staff and confirmation of visual impairment from a hospital. Although diagnosed as having a visual impairment no treatment that may treat or reverse the impairment is given unless the family can afford to pay for it. This means that some children go to the unit with treatable impairments.

Some children come from village homes as far away as Mtwara - 290 kilometres from Masasi.

Once at the unit the children never leave it again until they go home at the end of term. The only time they might leave it is if they have to go to the hospital. The longest term is from the middle of July to 6th December. During that time the majority of the children will have no contact with their families. In a very real sense the unit is their home.

By and large their clothing (both uniform and day wear) is dirty and ragged. Their shoes are often worn out. For much of the time when not in class they do not wear them.

The christmas holiday is from 6th December to 6th January. The easter holiday is for 2 weeks and the mid year holiday is for 3 weeks from mid June.

When not in class the children in the unit have minimal or no supervision. At weekends the children are looked after by two non teaching members of staff: a man (patron) and a female (matron). There are no planned or pre-prepared activities.

One very noticeable feature of the children's lives in the unit is their capacity to care and look out for each other. Those with some sight will help the non sighted and the older will help the younger.

The management structure

Overseeing the primary school and the unit is the Headteacher, Ituyani Chikomo. Under her is Elizabeth Sapuli who has overall responsibility for Special Needs and under her is Felix Ndimbo who has responsibility for the unit.

The children's education

The children have full access to the curriculum alongside the children in the main part of the primary school. No special support is given in the classroom to meet the needs of the visually impaired. One classroom had 28 desks at which 3 children sit (including some from the unit). This gives a possible class size of 84 pupils.

Boys and girls are taught together.

Eight teachers have received specialist training to teach/support children from the unit.

Security

There is no fencing around the boundary of the unit. Wire fencing provided some time ago is no longer in place although the concrete posts to which the fencing was attached remain in place. Some of these posts are no longer secure in the ground. The children can move freely outside the unit's boundary.

The buildings

The unit comprises three rectangular blocks of differing sizes built of stone plus two toilet and shower blocks (one for the boys and one for the girls). One block contains the girls' and boys' dormitories, another the area where the children eat together with the kitchen and food store. The inside of the kitchen is black as a result of smoke from the the wood fires used for cooking. The inside of the eating area nearest to the serving hatch is similarly black. There is a water supply to the food store area. The third unit is empty and divided into three sections by partitioning. Two of the sections are mostly empty, the third is full of junk (discarded desk frames, timber, parts of an old motor cycle and bits of an old wheelchair).

Funding

The school, as a whole, receives 10,000 Tanzanian shillings per pupil per year (approximately £3.50). In addition the unit receives TSh 3,000,000 for the unit per month (approximately £1000)/ £15 per pupil) to meet the cost of food, electricity, water and emergencies, the wages of the 2 cooks and the matron and patron who oversee the pupils during the day and nights. From this budget the unit must observe spending limits: it should not spend more than TSh 20,000 (approximately £7) on electricity (the unit has some of its electricity needs supplemented by solar power); TSh 250,000 (approximately £85) on water and TSh100,000 (approximately £34) on emergencies (e.g. taking children to hospital and any treatment costs that are incurred).

Water supply

The water supply to the unit is via a meter just outside the unit's boundary. The supply is then split into two. One part feeds an outside tap at the end of the main yard. It also feeds the store room adjacent to the kitchen. The second supply provides water to the toilet blocks and showers. This supply has broken down and no longer provides any water. It was this supply that fed water to the washing machine that was bought for the unit. The machine now has to be filled by using buckets of water. Part of the supply system the unit side of the meter leaks.

Resources in the unit

The unit has very few specialist resources. It has 8 Perkins braille machines, only one of which was out of its box. When I was shown it Felix had to blow the dust off it. It has one A4 frame with a stylus. There is a small supply of braille paper. There are no IT resources (there are none in the school as a whole). There are no other resources appropriate for children with visual impairments.

Sleeping

The children sleep in one of 2 dormitories - 37 boys in one and 47 girls in the other. The children sleep on very sturdy wooden bunk beds. Each bed has a foam mattress of varying thickness and firmness. One mattress was barely 2 inches thick. In the girls' dormitory 2 girls share the same bed (i.e. 2 girls on the top bed and one below) because there are insufficient mattresses. The children have no bed covering or pillows. They sleep in their daytime clothing. Each bunk has a mosquito net but many have holes and need replacing. The children are each responsible for arranging their nets (the blind by feel) before they go to sleep. The dormitories are lit by 3 low powered ceiling lights. If a child has a problem at night they seek help from matron or patron both of whom sleep in the dormitories with the children. The dormitories are each bolted from the inside at night. There is no drinking water available in the dormitories. The windows have mosquito wire but do not have any glass. Each dormitory has three electrically powered ceiling fans but the electrical supply is intermittent.

Diet

The children have 3 meals a day. The first meal (breakfast) is porridge at 10.00 am. Lunch is at 1.00 pm and the last meal of the day is at 7.00pm. There are 15 hours between supper and breakfast. No other food available at any time.

Porridge is made from white flour and water with a little sugar added. It is made by boiling a bucket of water and adding 2 kilos of flour, stirring and adding the sugar. Each child receives a plastic mug of hot porridge. Second helpings were available.

The second meal consists of ugali (stiff porridge, made with maize flour) served with beans (cooked with some onion). The evening meal is the same as the second meal. A small christmas pudding sized portion of ugali is served to each child. It is cooked some time before the meal is served and will only be warm when it is served. On some days (Wednesdays and Saturdays) the

ugali is replaced with rice. Very occasionally meat is served. It is regarded a luxury. There was none in the store room when I visited and there is no means of keeping any meat product fresh. No dairy products are served.

The only cutlery available are spoons for those who wish to eat their porridge with one. The children eat their second and third meals with their fingers - using the stiff porridge to scoop up the beans and the juice they are in. Those without sight wasted some of their food because they were unable to see where it was and pushed some of it from their plates onto the table. There was no supervision of the children at meal times.

The children eat their food on heavy wooden tables and sit on wooden benches.

They are responsible for cleaning their plates and mugs in a communal tub of cold water outside the kitchen.

At this time of year the children are able to supplement their diet by foraging for mangos from the tree just outside the unit.

It would appear from what I was told by staff that the unit's budget precludes it from providing a more nutritiously varied diet.

Food preparation

The food is prepared in large metal pots over 2 or 3 wood fires in the kitchen. The food is stirred using wooden paddles and served from plastic buckets using a mug. The kitchen is devoid of any electrical/gas appliances.

The toilets, hygiene and washing

The boys and girls each have their own toilet and shower block. The toilets have no toilet paper and the children clean their bottoms by hand (or not at all). If water was available they would clean themselves by hand with water. As noted above neither block at the moment has a water supply. A bar of soap was however available on the basin in the boys' block. The doors to the showers and toilet cubicles were in the most part unhinged and hanging off. Apart from the basins in each toilet block I saw no other means of washing hands. Before a meal the children 'wash' their hands in a bucket of cold water outside the eating area. No soap is available. I am unaware of provision for menstruating girls.

Eye health

There are no eye health check ups. I saw no children wearing glasses or in the case of the albino children, sunglasses. Some 15 children have been identified by staff in the unit for the next round of checkups that will be funded. On what basis they were identified is unclear. The cost of these assessments (costed by the unit) will be approximately TSh1,605,000 (approximately £550). In February this year 12 children had funded assessments and 3 received surgical interventions. One child who was recommended for surgery didn't receive it because her parents refused to give permission because they thought she might die during the operation or after it. She remains in the unit.

Dental care

As with eye health there are no regular dental check ups. Only when there is a problem will a child be taken for treatment and then to Ndanda hospital. I was assured that the children do clean their teeth - once a day in the morning using a tooth brush and tooth paste.

The daily routine

The children are up and about at 6.00 am. They do clothes washing and some sweeping of the area outside their dormitories. During the weekday they change into their school uniforms. The school meets as a whole for an assembly at 8.00 am when notices are given out, the children do some drill and sing the national song. The children in the unit then go off to their lessons until breakfast time which lasts about 30 minutes. The younger children do a shortened day finishing around lunch time. After the last meal of the day the children have playtime until it becomes dark. It is then time for prayers with the christian children in the area between the dormitories and the muslim children meeting in the eating area. Prayer time is 'energetic' and noisy and mostly led by the children themselves with singing and dancing to a drum beat. After prayers the children retire to bed.

Playtime

The children have no toys or play apparatus with which to play and entertain themselves other than 3 drums (one side of the large one needs repair). An old television between the dormitories has a screen far too small for the picture to be seen easily. It is broken. The signal to it is provided by a satellite dish fixed to the roof.

There is no designated recreational area and no seating provision other than the floor.

Action to be taken that requires funding

Children's eye care and treatment - an ongoing requirement

Install secure fencing around unit

The water supply problem to be fixed so that washing and showering is available (fixing this will ensure a water supply to the washing machine)

Twenty new mattresses to be bought

Bed linen to be bought

New mosquito nets to be bought

Refurbish the kitchen so that it doesn't rely on wood fires

Provide a nutritionally balanced diet and/or food supplements for the children

Remove all junk

Provide a designated recreational area - possibly the unused block which will need the partitioning removed and the block cleaned and decorated

Provide recreational apparatus and equipment - to include goal ball

Provide new drums

Provide a TV with a screen large enough to be seen easily by those with limited vision

Provide better lighting in the eating area and dormitories

Provide regular dental check ups and when necessary treatment

Remove the wooden table and benches and replace them with brightly coloured stackable plastic tables and chairs

A final comment

The information given in this report is based on verbal statements given by staff, what I saw with my own eyes and where possible confirmed by three officials from Masasi town who visited the unit to see me whilst I was there: Mr Hamasi Chakulya (Ward Education Officer), Mr Fadhili Mimu (Town Special Education Officer) and Mr Amiri Nyiruka (Town Community Development Officer). I met them with Canon Geoffrey Patrick (Diocesan Development Officer) and two members of staff. I outlined to them my reasons for visiting the unit and told them of the issues regarding provision I thought important and that needed, in some cases, urgent attention. I told them of the budget I had (£7000, TSh 20.5 million) that could be used to meet some of the unit's needs. We then undertook a tour of the unit. Afterwards Mr Nyiruka confirmed that my assessments of need were accurate. Comments in support were given by Mr Chakulya and Mr Mimu. Mr Nyiruka undertook to provide, within a short period, a costed set of proposals that would remedy, as far as was possible, these needs. It was also recognised that my budget would be insufficient to meet all these needs. It was agreed that we would both seek additional funding and support.

A challenge! This report is written in the hope that those who read it might be able to help us meet the challenge. The lives of the children in the unit are far too important for us to fail.

Stephen Arbery

(A trustee of the Friends of Masasi & Newala (Registered Charity No. 1009963), retired teacher and a governor at a primary school in the UK)

I can be contacted at stevearbery@gmail.com or by 'phone 0044 (0)1386 750877

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