

**When diseases related to poverty are conceived as being brought about by
witchcraft
Experience from the field in Tanzania
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“Now we are having a very difficult life, we have no clothing, we have no food to eat, not even skin oil. You know, a woman is supposed to oil her skin! –(Sasa tunaishi maisha ya shida kweli, hatuna nguo, hatuna chakula, hata mafuta ya kupaka sina, mwanamke ni kupaka bwana!)” Mama Julia, Tanzania.

Background

This story is about Jared Subeti, a father of two who lives in a village called Engusero in Kiteto district, Arusha region, Tanzania. He and his wife make a living by doing casual labour and subsistence farming activities. “This year we harvested nothing, not even a tin of maize,” says Mama Julia, Jared’s wife. “We farmed last when the rains were about to go and so harvested nothing from the farm”. This was said by Mama Julia when we visited their place to make a follow up on the developments that Jared might have made from being poor to having a better life, according to “our perception.”

The first time we met Jared was in early 2000 on an assignment by Orgut Consulting Ab. to do a mini Participatory Poverty Assessment. During discussions with the villagers, Jared’s household was identified as being the poorest of the poor in the village and so the group decided to visit him accompanied by the Village Secretary. Jared lived in a grass-thatched hut outside the village centre. He lived there with his pregnant wife and one female child called Julia.

First our going there pulled a lot of crowd to the house. Of course the notion was that how could a poor person like him be visited by people and apart from all with/in a car. We sat outside the hut on grass and the Village Secretary introduced us. We told him that we were looking at the well being of the people in the village and that we want to learn from them about their lives, livelihoods and coping strategies; and their relationships in their daily lives.

His route to poverty:

At first Jared did not want to talk to us, he was hostile but his wife was very calm and started talking and insisted that he should talk to the guests, may be it is God who has sent them there. So, finally Jared agreed to give his personal history as follows: -

“I came here in 1999 after fleeing from Dabalo village in Dodoma district because of the death of my two children, my sister and uncle who died due to witchcraft. I was born in a well off family. We lived a happy life then, my father had a herd of cattle amounting to sixty. Our poverty started when we moved from our village Hosteti to Izara village where all our cattle died. There we started to feel the suffering. As I was married we moved to Dabalo with my wife but when we lost our

children, my sister and my uncle who we had followed there, I decided to flee from there to this place. When I came here I had nowhere to stay but I was given that unfinished house by one villager here and assisted by the church Reverend to survive. Then I started casual labour and the money I get is only enough for food. We do not know what we eat next day.”

Mama Julia also said that during that season, she was expecting to harvest, mud-plaster their three-roomed hut and have a better life. “Now we are having a very difficult life, we have no clothing, we have no food to eat, not even skin oil. You know, a woman is supposed to oil her skin! –(Sasa tunaishi maisha ya shida kweli, hatuna nguo, hatuna chakula, hata mafuta ya kupaka sina, mwanamke ni kupaka bwana!)”

When children die of malaria – It is witchcraft!

They explained to us that all their two children died of witchcraft, but all symptoms showed that the deaths occurred due to either malaria or meningitis. And because of their belief in witchcraft and not having means to send the children to hospital, they then lost the children.

Malaria kills over a million people world-wide each year, of which 75% of them are children from Africa.

Relationships and our perceptions - development workers perceptions

Relationships

Jared was wearing a piece of kanga torn in the middle and the ends sewn together. He could not even get out of the home because he has nothing to wear for fear of being laughed at. When asked if he attends any village meetings, he said, “Where can you go like this? They will laugh at you. After all who will come to tell you that there is a meeting in the village? They know that you are poor and you cannot contribute to development, so you are left out. Nobody cares for you. Even though, I have no guts to go out the way I am.”

Jared’s relationship with the village and village government

In the village there are development activities, which affect all villagers and are all supposed to take part. During our discussions we wanted to know whether they have been involved in any village meetings or in any development activities and the response was: - “We have never been in any meeting in the village because nobody tells us that there is a meeting. Poor people like us are never notified because they think we have nothing to contribute, not even ideas. Another problem is that even if we know that there is going to be a meeting. Let us say I talk to someone and he tells me so, I cannot go because of my poverty situation. I have no proper clothing. I cannot attend a meeting putting on clothes like this. It is shame, they will laugh at me.” The above statement shows clearly that the poor and the disadvantaged people are not involved in any social development activity and they thus become socially secluded and so lack social protection.

Our perceptions as a means of Jared getting out of poverty

The team went back and discussed the situation, which we saw there and everybody was real struck by the situation. We looked for ways of helping them get out of poverty. Every member of the team decided to contribute something the next day, as it was a market day to the family and made arrangements with the Village Secretary to take us there in the afternoon. We met at around two after having our meeting in the office at the market place. We all bought something for the family, shirts and trousers for Jared, dresses for Mama Julia and for Julia, sandals, bed sheet, soap, flour, rice, cooking oil, haplochromis (type of small fish) and of course skin oil as she had earlier said "...mwanamke ni kupaka bwana." We perceived that this will help them to have time to do casual labour and make a saving and also have the time to do farming in their own farm. When we went to send these things, they could not imagine how that could happen to someone so poor like them. The woman exclaimed and said, "...When you came here yesterday my husband thought you came to mock us. But look, all this is God's will. From today on, I will attend to the church."

Follow-up – Life in crisis

After seeing all this, I developed a personal interest of wanting to see how this will develop in the future and wanted to make a follow-up on Jared's life. More that a year later I decided to visit Jared. Gosh! I did not believe what I saw. No one of us believed. The condition had gone from worse to the worst. That was absolute poverty. What we had seen before was nothing. The hut was falling, two rooms were all down and the last room remaining was to the point of falling over them. The wind was blowing from the eastern side of the room, which was leaning to the west straight into the hut. One cannot imagine how they managed to sleep there in such openness.

Mama Julia had given birth to another baby boy called Robert. Robert was asleep when we arrived and was rapped in a piece of cloth and packed in a corner of the hut that was still standing on a piece of goatskin. When she delivered she got support from the Reverend's wife who has now shifted to another village. They had nothing left except a bucket, a pot and a cooking pan placed near the fireplace. Jared was not home by then and the wife said that he was away in the farm building a new hut in the farm that he has inherited from her sister and they were going to move there. She said that their hut is in that condition now because the husband had said there was no need to repair the hut while they were going to move to the shamba (farm) in Matembo village. Mama Julia said that they did not harvest anything in that season as they had planted their crop late so they got nothing.

Julia, who used to be a happy girl, looked sad and her eyes seemed to be infected probably by trachoma, as she could not see properly. If she gets no medical help, she may possibly become blind.

Conclusion

Poverty is a cause of many deaths especially in Africa and other developing countries. People live in what is called abject poverty not knowing how to get out of it or with no hope of getting out of it. The way Jared lives in a dangerous and temporary hut gives us a picture of what poverty means.

Our perceptions as outsiders, usually is that giving out something will get someone out of a problem, yet Jared's story shows it differently. Though contributions or grants are sometimes a must, but the counselling and training before donating is very vital. Trying to make a third follow-up of Jared's life proved futile, as he had moved to a remote village where nobody knew how to get him.

There is need for governments and other development institutions like WHO, UNICEF etc. to work together towards proper implementation of pro-poor policies those that they design to real become pro-poor. They should see to it that no child dies for example because of malaria, which is a preventable and at the same time curable disease, as a result of the family being poor. Health facilities and services should be accessible and affordable. This is only possible if the health systems are well financed and taken care of. The strategy of PHC is to promote health through reduction of inequalities and social exclusion as the one that affected Jared's family.

Pro-poor processes must involve poor people themselves to determine what they want. Our misconception of Jared's problem is a good example in this, guiding us to change course where there is need of full involvement and participation of people in their own development endeavours.