

THE POWER OF CHILDREN IN FIGHTING NEGLECTED TROPICAL DISEASES IN AFRICA

O B E D I M B A H A F I



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Good evening every one!

You took too long to gather here today. Hope you aren't going to repeat that again?

How many of you remember what we discussed last week?

Yes! ... Alan Hirwa

Yesterday, eeei.... Last week, we discussed about Leadership and we looked at great African leaders like Nelson Mandela. We learnt the essence of forgiveness and the need to love one another unconditionally.

Let's give a round of applause to Hirwa. That's what I expect from you all going forward with our story telling and discussions.

Today, as usual, I will tell you stories from grandpa's diary which features on neglected tropical diseases in Africa and how he managed to overcome them during his time. By the way, I must say you are so fortunate to receive these kinds of stories at this time of your life because now the world needs young people like you than ever.

When we were kids, grandpa gathered us all together as one like we have done here and told us countless stories from his diary. He was incorporating in us what you will later get to know as team work and the ability to listen well.

Today, almost every solution in the world requires collaboration. The days of individualism has changed and people with great team bonds win the race. Today we are looking at grandpa's second journey to a country close to us called Democratic republic of Congo.

He says he went there as a teacher but only to realize that he was everything from interpreter, counselor to even performing duties as a doctor. He worked very hard and always tried his best to give what the occasion demanded. He says one key problem he encountered was worm infestation which affected most of the children academically and in healthwise. One day, one of the children came to school with his sack of books dangling about him. In a moment, what seemed like a simple stomach pain grew to an uncontrollable weeping. He says he felt so sorry for the boy but he could not help much. Remember he was a teacher not a doctor or health worker and could only offer help as a result of the inadequacies. The passing by of time communicated hopelessness in the boy Lukamba. One of the little children addressed him sharply. Sir ... Sir... "I think we should see the local herbalist. He can do something about it". When they got there, the woman disclosed to him how she had been handling even worse situations than that prior to his coming and it was not new to her at all but she wondered if there would ever be an opportunity to get total remedy over this kind of ailment. 'I believe it's a punishment from the sun God when we fail to make sacrifices at the right season of the year'.

They used to handle some of these worms through traditional means of pawpaw seeds which they believed was a dewormer. As a matter of fact, it worked to some extent but wasn't an entire solution fit. Lukamba got healed but that wasn't an end to the menace. Grandpa introduced health talks in the community which was delivered by health workers who lived in nearby towns. The goal was to get the community informed on health and hygiene.

Grandpa says he put this short story from the region of Ituri in the Democratic republic of Congo so that whoever comes across it will see a need to help the communities affected.

Well, that was a beautiful story about a particular disease that falls under the neglected tropical diseases. Let me tell you that this country is not the only one that suffers from this form of diseases. It affects 1.7 billion people in the world who are mostly poor. A billion is 1000 times 1000 times 1000. That's a lot of people and we need all hands on deck to handle this issue at the basal level.

Neglected tropical diseases are viral, parasitic and bacterial diseases that mainly affect the world's poorest people. In short NTDs are diseases caused by tiny organisms that live in unhygienic conditions.

Typical examples of neglected tropical diseases include buruli ulcer, trachoma, worms, lymphatic filariasis, rabies and leprosy. Worms can lead to cognitive impairment (failure for the brain to properly function) and when it remains unchecked can cause mal-nutrition. Those NTDs finally put many children out of school.

You are one of the people I have chosen to handle this issue in harmony with grandpa's request. In the past years most countries around Africa have helped through access to clean water and sanitation, deworming, quality education and health improvement with the introduction of trained doctors and nurses to villages which suffered from NTDS.

You wonder what you can do to stop this. Yes! You are all needed. whilst the number of health workers deployed to such communities remain inadequate, it becomes necessary that we as children do our best to protect ourselves and our families through simple practices like personal hygiene, drinking clean water and keeping good sanitation. When you do these, we minimize the chances of contracting such diseases. As grandpa has always said that the power to live has always thrived on our simple and most basic decisions in life.

Knowing these things, what else do you think you can do to help eliminate these neglected tropical diseases?

Sir ...!. Sir...!!

Yes! Bella....speak!

Bella: I will study hard to become a nurse to help fight these diseases.

Very good! Thank you for this input. In fact, we need you all to have this mentality.

Next is Ben.

Ben: I don't want to be a health worker; I want to be a broadcast journalist and help air the issues of neglected tropical diseases so that the public will be well informed.

That is also good and accepted.

Sir, please I have a question.

Ok, let's hear you.

Ritha : How do I help if I am unable to continue my education because my dad is saying he will not support any of his girl child to continue her education to a higher level?

Ohh wow. That is so bad to hear, regarding your question, everyone can help from even as little children like you to the highly educated mature leaders by just observing what we have highlighted earlier on and more.

Concerning your education furtherance, I will discuss with your father Mr. Daniel to convince him of the need to allow you to continue your education further. Jane and Ama who just gained admission to University of Rwanda also suffered the same issues but my intervention resolved everything. So girl child is as crucial to fighting this cause as boy child is also needed. We need more hands from the girls' side in recent times in order for Africa to meet the 4.2 million health-worker deficits.

If there are no questions, I will disperse you to go to bed and think of more alternate solutions. I will ask for them in our next meeting next week. Have a good night. Bye....!!!