



## **OUT OF THE SHADOWS: EMPOWERING INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES IN AFRICA**

**SEVERAL OF OUR LOCAL PARTNERS IN AFRICA ARE WORKING TO MAKE SELF-SUFFICIENCY ACHIEVABLE FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES. TOO OFTEN, FAMILIES HIDE MEMBERS LIMITED BY DISABILITY. BUT THESE LOCAL PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS ARE BRINGING PEOPLE OUT OF THE SHADOWS. USING WELL-RESEARCHED INTERVENTIONS AND THERAPIES, SUPPLYING MOBILITY AIDS AND EQUIPMENT, AND DEVELOPING SKILLS, THEY HELP CHILDREN AND ADULTS WHO LIVE WITH DISABILITIES LEARN HOW TO LIVE MORE INDEPENDENT LIVES.**

An estimated 60 to 80 million people live with disabilities in Africa, including mental health conditions and physical impairments. This number is expected to increase as the population ages, food insecurity grows and the climate changes in unexpected ways, according to the United Nations. For many individuals living with disabilities, their lives are often cloistered inside homes, and therapies to

improve their conditions are nonexistent. Those who join the labor force face inaccessibility, discrimination, and negative perceptions.

### **COMMUNITY WISDOM**

Community-based organizations are instrumental in bringing individuals living with disabilities from out of the



shadows and into the public space. The ELMA Community Grants Program of the ELMA Foundation provides these organizations with vital support.

“The ELMA Community Grants Program gives grants to organizations based in the communities they are serving,” explains its Program Manager, Ruth Mapara. “Across the 12 countries in our service area, we support 113 community-based organizations, which are embedded in communities and founded by local people who know community needs and community protocols.” Within the ELMA Community Grants Program, there is a “Disabilities Cluster,” a group made up of 76 organizations. Among these, 24 organizations focus solely on serving children with disabilities. Collectively, they reach 54,000 children across eight countries. Importantly, they align their activities with the community-based rehabilitation

strategies outlined by the World Health Organization. “These are remarkable organizations that provide vital services to support their communities,” says Ms. Mapara.

### **FAMILY CENTERED**

An essential aspect of the organizations the ELMA Community Grants Program works with lies in their close work with families. “The component of home visiting and family-centeredness is crucial to children with disabilities,” Ms. Mapara explains. ELMA Foundation funding enables these community-based organizations to provide access to essential services that they would otherwise not have access to, such as physical therapy, psychosocial and nutritional support and to help communities understand how to better support children with disabilities and their families.

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Ms. Mapara tells the story of three ELMA grantees - the Mukisa Foundation, the Rachel Swart Fund and the Kyaninga Child Development Center. At ELMA’s suggestion, all three opened an ‘American Friends Fund’ at KBFUS, providing them with a legal and tax platform to receive contributions from other grantmakers and individual donors based in the United States.

As part of their overall programming for children with disabilities, the Mukisa Foundation in central Uganda has set up a medical and mobility center that provides quality, affordable, and holistic health care services in Wakiso District, which has a population of over 500,000 people.

Florence Namaganda, Founder and Director of Mukisa, explains that “children are now able to access therapy, as well as have access to mobility and positioning devices, such as wheelchairs, splints and braces that can be customized to each child’s needs. These services were previously not available in the area and families had to travel long distances, to crowded and under-resourced health centers to find healthcare for their children.”

Based in Cape Town, South Africa, the Rachel Swart Fund (RSF) provides mobility aids and assistive devices for children and youth from marginalized communities and rural areas throughout South Africa. There is a shortage in appropriate assistive devices for children in the disability sector in South Africa - creating backlogs. “RSF works with the public health system to ensure that children with disabilities are provided with properly fitted mobility equipment, such as motorized wheelchairs, on a timely basis and that the children and their families have access to trained physical and occupational therapists,” adds Mark MacGinty, RSF Board Member.

Servicing families in western Uganda, Kyaninga Child Development Center (KCD) provides occupational therapy, physical therapy, and speech language therapy to children with severe disabilities. “In addition to the therapy we provide for the children, we run a program for parents of children with disabilities,” says Fiona Berckerlegge, Clinical Director of KCD. “By engaging with caregivers and empowering them with an understanding of their child’s disability and individual needs, it is possible to reduce stigma and discrimination towards disabilities often seen within communities,” she adds.

## UNLIMITED MOBILITY

Similar to the ELMA grantees, South Africa Mobility for the Blind Trust (SAMBT) - another partner with

an American Friends Fund at KBFUS - promotes independence for children and adults living with a disability. Ian Hutton, a South African lawyer who gradually lost his sight during childhood, founded SAMBT in 1998 to support individuals with a vision impairment.

Until someone challenged him to try the white cane techniques, Mr. Hutton had not realized the ease and independence which Orientation and Mobility (O+M) training could offer him. The lesson changed his life. He launched SAMBT with a commitment to provide O+M training to South Africa’s estimated 1,000,000 individuals with visual impairment.

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**PARISHNA RAMLUCKAN**

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SAMBT works in provincial capitals, rural communities and Schools for the Blind, with ages ranging from pre-school through the elderly. “We’ve trained 4,500 people so far, with over 220 blind people trained per year,” explains Helen Vosloo, SAMBT’s Fundraiser. Its vision for full O+M training in South Africa is limited only by the number of trainers they have - currently four full-time and one part-time - and by the number of high-rise vehicles available to get the teachers down bumpy rural roads to clients.

## HOME TERRITORY

“O+M training at a community center is more expensive and less effective, because it is at home where people need to feel most orientated,” says Ms. Vosloo. SAMBT

offers training for activities of daily living - such as ironing, pouring drinks and cooking. "It takes many lessons over a 10-12 week period for a blind person to learn the techniques and gain the confidence to navigate their homes and their communities on their own," says Ms. Vosloo.

During the Covid shut-downs, SAMBT teachers remained in close contact with their students, making tactile maps to introduce street navigation concepts and even giving lessons over the phone. "Our teacher Thabelo had a student who really wanted to learn to iron, but she could not be with him because of the lock-downs. So she talked him and a sighted friend through the process of ironing by touch, while giving instructions over speaker phone," Ms. Vosloo relates.

### **RITE OF PASSAGE**

Individuals living with blindness and visual impairment have traditionally been sheltered by their families, something SAMBT works everyday to change. Whether it is getting to the outdoor toilet or to the local "tuck shop" to purchase household items, navigating on their own in their own time is the rite of passage for the blind clients of SAMBT.

Ms. Vosloo tells stories of the cheers which blind people get on the street from their family and friends, who never expected to see them out on their own.

SAMBT also invests time in raising awareness about the value of O+M training. Its Executive Director, Parishna Ramluckan, who herself lives with visual impairment, takes a personal approach to advocacy, inviting sighted audience members to take 'activities of daily living' tests while wearing a blindfold. "We keep training light-hearted. We want people to realize that blind people are the same as they are - it's just the eyes in our heads

don't work the same way," she explains.

Ms. Vosloo adds, "We engage in education and advocacy at the highest levels of government, tying the rights to independence training to the human rights laid out in our constitution."

### **WONDERFUL, PERSONAL SUPPORT**

Both ELMA grantees and SAMBT say they benefit greatly from their ties with KBFUS. Says Ms. Mapara from ELMA, "KBFUS enables our grantees to receive funding from donors in the U.S., and they provide excellent webinar trainings on fundraising." SAMBT has held a Friends Fund at KBFUS since 2018. Expressing her appreciation, Ms. Vosloo recounts that "We receive wonderful, personal support from the KBFUS team. They are always available to us, and even came in person to see our programs in action."

[https://www.elmaphilanthropies.org/elma/  
community-grants](https://www.elmaphilanthropies.org/elma/community-grants)

<https://www.mukisa-foundation.org/en/>

<https://rachelswart.org.zat>

<https://www.kyaningacdc.org>

<https://sambt.org.za>

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