

STORIES THAT MATTER



FOCUS STORIES



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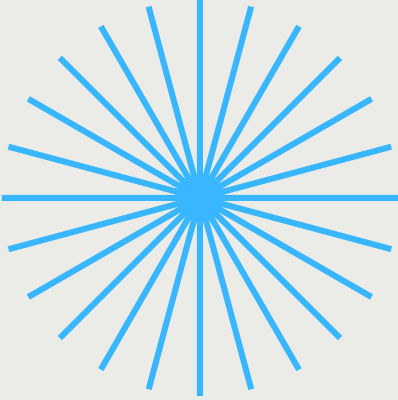
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FOREWORD

Rwanda Union of the Blind (RUB) would like to start with special thanks to all of its partners and well-wishers who have been and who are still supporting various initiatives that are in place to support our members.



In this booklet you will find stories from the visually impaired persons who have had the opportunity to be given the White Canes that are helping them in mobility on a daily basis.

The views expressed in this document are those of some of the people with visual impairment that we visited in different parts of Rwanda, especially in Muhanga, Ngororero, Musanze and Nyagatare districts.

As you will hear from their stories, the white canes are very important and have helped them in many ways: from loneliness to self-confidence, to helping them in their personal development and to keeping them involved in their local development activities.

RUB will continue to advance its advocacy efforts for the availability and affordability of white canes and for its recognition as a symbol of independence, a sign of autonomy, and respect for the inherent dignity for persons with visual impairment in Rwanda.

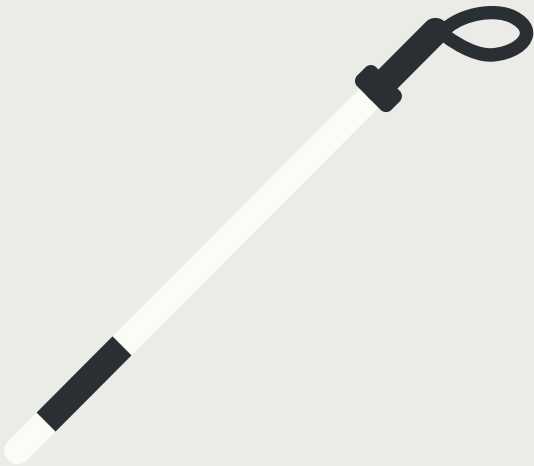
Support given to persons with visual impairment also shapes the way towards the respect of their rights.

As a result of better co-operation, people with visual impairments have become more confident in their lives and even feel empowered.

In the next section, you will find the stories and testimonies of the visually impaired persons that we visited.

RUB calls upon its partners and well-wishers to support its efforts to remind the government those persons with visual impairment must receive white canes to ease their travels; and that the infrastructures, including, housing must have signs and sounds that support the safe movement of persons with visual impairment.

Let us conclude this keynote by calling upon everyone to take action to ensure that the Rwandan society is fully inclusive of persons with visual impairment.



WHAT MAKES IT MATTER?



A white cane: An eye and life of the visually impaired

Our journey to Ngororero District has brought us to the home of Bamporineza Jean de Dieu, a resident of Ngororero District, Nyange Sector, Gaseke Cell in Ngobagoba Village.

Bamporineza who lost his sight in 1978, explains that before being supported by RUB he lived a life that he felt was meaningless. However, after starting to receive RUB support service including attending various courses meant for Persons with Visual impairment, his life started to change.

Commenting on the importance of the white cane towards improved living condition, Bamporineza said “The white cane helps me because it prevents me from falling into the potholes, and also when I have it, it gives me safety especially when I am walking on a busy road.”

“This white cane is like the eye for the blind. I compare it to the eye and to life, when you have it, it allows you to walk and get out of loneliness.” He testifies.

“The scars that you can see on my legs were due to the difficult life that I was living without white cane. I used to fall and get injured.

However, I continued to struggle because I wanted to learn to live with my disability.” He said.

He goes back to the time when he used a wooden stick and found that it really did not give respect to the user, and most of the time it was very likely to cause accidents. He says that in the past, a person with visual impairment was someone portrayed as a beggar. “Now you can notice that a person with visual impairment having received RUB training, will not go to the market to beg for sweet potatoes because that habit has become obsolete.”

Returning to his role in the development of his family with the support of a white cane, Bamporineza says that for example he is able to earn some money from his work and can rent a land for his wife to farm and even pay for farmers to help her. “And with the help of a white cane, I can perform home chores such as cooking, cleaning or washing clothes. As well, the white cane guides me when I am drawing water, and so on.” Bamporineza affirmed.

“When you don’t have a white cane, leaving home is hard and difficult for you, but when you have it, you go with no worries. And if someone tries to abuse you, when taken to court, he is severely punished because it is obvious that he/she has attacked a person with visual impairment, and this is to emphasize the rights of persons with disabilities. Bamporineza highlights the great importance for all persons with visual impairment to be given a white cane.

emphasise the rights of persons with disabilities. Bamporineza also emphasizes

that it would be great if all persons with visual impairment could be given a white cane.

White Cane, key to the development of Persons with Visual impairment



As we continued to visit those who are visually impaired and have had the opportunity to get a white cane, they confirmed that a lot has changed in their lives because this cane is considered a tool that leads to the development of the users and their families.

We have also visited Ms Dunia Anathalie, from Remera Sector, Musanze District and her story is promising as she says: "When I go to the market to shop, I use my white cane, and going to the Health Centre, I use it as well. In real life, it helps me a lot, like when I go out into the country to look for merchandise.

"This cane is very important because it helps me in my development." Dunia revealed

She asserted that before she used to rely on a wooden stick that could hurt her in case it was broken.

However, this time, Dunia says she is able to cope with domestic issues with the help of the white cane.

"When I'm at home in a familiar place I don't have to use it, but when I walk down the street I take it," she says.

"The place where I live is on steep hills, so without this white cane I would not be able to go down. I really can't leave home without this white cane because it's providing much help in my life." She added

Dunia continues to say that before she got the white cane she was in a bad situation because it was difficult for her to go and find food for her family.

"Before I got it, I was always struggling to go to work to cater for my basic needs. Finding clothes was very difficult. For sure life was difficult. But now I grab it and go to do my business and get food and clothes." Dunia explained.

Aside from the fact that the white cane helps people with visual impairment in their daily activities, they also believe that the person who holds this cane feels safe and confident, and that he or she feels cared for.

Like everyone else, Dunia also requests that if means are available, other persons with visual impairment be given white canes, as they are an important tool for daily mobility. She also adds that it is the right of every Rwandan to be independent and have access to easy mobility

Muhanga: How the White cane transformed Niwemugenzi's life conditions



One cannot understand the importance of a white cane that people with visual impairment use except when you hear testimonies from the users themselves.

To date, not a large number of people with visual impairment are able to afford a white cane.

However, as a result of advocacy by RUB, people with visual impairment in Rwanda are increasingly being provided with the white canes through support from various partners.

Ms. NIWEMUGENI Eugenie suffered from blindness due to an illness that eventually affected her until she lost her sight when she was in secondary school. After losing her sight, she explains that she avoided losing hope but continued to feel that the time will come when she will be able to see again. Only that it did not happen because she has continued to be blind.

"Before getting the white cane, I used to stay at home and wherever I wanted to go they would take me by hand. And then after, I came to the conclusion that I shouldn't have to stay at home. That's when I started to use a wooden stick."

Niwemugenzi says walking with a wooden stick was difficult because otherwise having it did not prevent her from walking with someone holding her hand.

"Then I was blessed and got a white cane from RUB." She said,

"This white cane has been a great help to me. "Otherwise, when I was walking with a stick, those who saw me thought I might have been injured, and they thought maybe I had another illness and I was going to the doctor because I have fatigue, but the white cane made the difference." She added.

In fact, Niwemugenzi is one of the few people with visual impairment who have had the opportunity to get a white cane and be able to thrive.

Niwemugenzi currently owns a tailoring workshop in Muhanga Town and has been able to hire three employees. "For me, RUB has helped me tremendously in getting acquainted with using the white cane, which in return, helps me in mobility and orientation." Before receiving this white cane, I am telling

the truth, I didn't even know the home entrance." She said.

Usually, people with visual impairment should learn different techniques on using white canes in order to be able to navigate all the way without problems.

According to Niwemugeni, since she got a white cane, she usually travels from her place of residence to Muhanga town to do her work as usual.

"Whether it's at the sector office, in the church or anywhere else, I get there without difficulties," she said.

She goes on to say that at this point, people are beginning to understand the importance of the white cane because whenever they meet someone with it, they can recognize that she/he has a visual impairment.

"As soon as they see me, they tell one another, 'Let this person pass.' Niwemugeni testified.

Having people understand the importance of a white cane is really a step in the right direction. This is largely due to the ongoing awareness campaign by the Rwanda Union of the Blind (RUB) in collaboration with various partners.

"On how I use it, when I am about to cross the road, I stretch it out and cars stop, and those near me inform me that I can cross," she said.

Mrs. Niwemugeni says that the white cane has played a lot in her living conditions.

"I was able to buy knitting machines, and now I come to work here in Muhanga town without waiting for someone to hold my hand," she said. Not only did the white cane help her get to her job, she explained that even in the family she is more confident because no one mocks her or disrespects her because of her visual impairment.

"We don't have any problem in my family, they respect me and treat me well and they can't even take and ignore my view," she said.



This is also a big step, since before, in the Rwandan society, a person with visual impairment was often marginalized and disrespected, but as sensitization continues, people with visual impairment are more likely to be cared for and get the right they deserve in the society.

Ms. Niwemugeni asserted that for the help she receives as a visually impaired person, she commends, "RUB as a caring parent."

"They help us, they advise us, they give us training in many ways, and now I have been able to get a white cane. That's why I really appreciate the work of RUB."

Musanze: White cane and Quick service delivery to the holder



Fulgence Nizeyimana

As we continue to highlight the role of white canes to people with visual impairment, let us remember that persons with visual impairment believe that the white cane, for those who are lucky enough to possess them, have also been a symbol that allowed them to benefit from quick service delivery despite it not being respected every day, but at least service providers have started to develop an understanding on the urgency of providing timely services to the visually impaired persons.

As they said for instance, you can arrive at the hospital and find a long queue of patients who are waiting for the doctor. But can you imagine a patient with visual impairment waiting on a line of dozens of people to be treated? Sometimes people from behind will jump the queue and come in front of him/her.

“For example, we would go to the hospital and had to line up while waiting. But for now, people with disabilities are given attention. When we get there and they see us with white canes they welcome us and give us a quick service.” said Fulgence Nizeyimana, a resident of Gasongerero Cell, Remera Sector in Musanze District.

While some touch on the fact of service delivery, others also believe that the white cane protects the life of its owner either while traveling on a difficult road/way or when passing through heavy traffic. Nizeyimana explains that before he got the white cane, he felt the loneliness, which could lead to illnesses, including depression.

“At that time I could not think of going out”, he says. “I always felt like I wanted to stay in bed only” He adds.

Nizeyimana, who lives with his wife and children, explains that he used to be idle but now he can wash his clothes, cook while others are involved in other family development work, and other simple tasks compared to his old age. He noted that after getting the white cane, he was able to do a lot for himself, especially to do household chores independently.

In addition to Nizeyimana who testified that the white cane had brought some solutions, including quick access to services, Sylvestre, also visually impaired, confirmed that anyone who saw it immediately knew that he had a visual impairment and would help him in one

way or another.

Sylvestre says, "This white cane makes everyone aware that I can't see."

"When a car is speeding and the driver notices that you have a white cane, he slows down to avoid hitting you," he added.

The use of the white cane is important. Sylvestre, a craftsman, says that he can do his small business of making baskets (inkangara) and he can easily trade because of the white cane.

Nyagatare: Mukabarambirwa narrates her recovery from the loneliness, thanks to the White cane



In Nyagatare District we visited Mukabarambirwa Anastasie who lives in Katabagemu Sector in Kigarama Cell.

She says it has been almost 30 years since she lost her sight.

Mukabarambirwa explains that after losing her sight she experienced many challenges.

"Even walking on a wooden stick was very difficult. I used to remain where I was seated." She said.

"But then I was told that there is an organization of visually impaired people established by RUB and that they can help me," she explained.

On the other hand, it took a lot of effort to convince her that RUB would help her since she had no idea about the organization's service and activities.

Then, she says, "I asked them, do you think going there will make me see again?"

However, she later agreed to join the branch. As a result, Mukabarambirwa began to be able to participate in the activities of the branch, from where she was provided with a white cane and learnt to use it.

"Now I tell you that I have come to know the importance of the white cane because it has

lifted me out of loneliness." She said, "Now I can go where others are, now I know where to sit, and I am grateful to RUB for taking me to this level," she added. "Since I got the white cane, I know how to walk independently, I know how to get out of the house and go where others are. When we are on the road, the person walking with me goes ahead and I can easily follow be-

hind and walk without being pulled along." Explains Mukabarambirwa. "Whenever I meet obstacles on my way, I am able to detect them because of the white cane. I feel like it protects me. She explains, adding that the white cane is a sign that the holder has a visual impairment and can therefore get help as he/she walks in heavy traffic or a crowd.



The story of the white cane is similar worldwide. To a person with visual impairment, it means safety, independency, self-esteem, safe travel. Persons with visual impairment in Rwanda, through their own organization RUB, have been able to raise awareness about the white cane. With support of various partners and well-wishers, RUB was able to provide training on orientation and mobility using the white cane, and to distribute white canes to quite a number of members.

RUB wishes to thank all its partners who have supported the distribution of white canes either by providing white canes, providing funds for orientation and mobility trainings or carrying out awareness raising campaigns on the white cane. We call upon the government of Rwanda to make white canes available at affordable prices and to support awareness of the white cane among road users especially drivers, cyclists, and other motorists. Inclusive development in Rwanda entails that persons with visual impairment be should be independent and have easy access to assistive devices which are useful tools for everyday life.

As we have seen in the stories above, the white cane has positively impacted people with visual impairment and has greatly improved their families' livelihood. The white cane has played an important role in liberating people with visual impairment from their loneliness. Now, they can go out and earn a living. It also implies that the white cane has also made a difference in their families' lives and the community at large. The white cane is a right to every individual with visual impairment. As a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), the government of Rwanda must provide white canes for citizens with visual impairment or make them available at an affordable price.



"Wisdom is our dignity"



"Rwanda Union of the Blind is a civil society organization dedicated to the improvement of the living conditions of people with vision impairment. We work in all provinces of the country."

CONTACT US

Kigali City,
Nyarugenge District,
Muhima Sector
Poids – Lourds Road.

