HUMBLE BEGINNINGS: GREGOIRE AHONGBONON AND THE ST CAMILLE ASSOCIATION

"In certain countries in Africa and elsewhere, mental illnesses are considered to be a magical, supernatural event, caused by spirits that take over the body. People who are mentally challenged are considered dangerous or contagious and are abandoned by their families, left to wander the streets with no food and no home. Or they are chained to tree trunks, left alone, hidden from the rest of the society. Some are beaten and left with little food to 'purge the evil spirits' through physical suffering."

"I was born in 1953 to a farming family in a small village in Western Africa. I immigrated to Côte d'Ivoire. By 1994, I had been caring for people excluded from society such as prison inmates and people with HIV/AIDS for 10 years. At this time, I learned about the fate of people with intellectual disabilities and mental health problems. I decided to get actively involved in their care and founded the St Camille Association for people challenged with Mental Health in Western Africa."

"The first challenge was to get these people off the streets, liberate them from their chains, care for them, and rehabilitate and reintegrate them. In almost every village, there is a person chained up, but it is so shameful to the family that it is hidden. Sometimes I find patients in the most deplorable state. I see mistreatment almost everywhere I go.

"My mission is to give dignity back to people with mental disorders, through care, support, and help to reintegrate them back into society. The St Camille Association provides shelter, medical treatment and follow up for ex-patients and their families and supports their social reintegration and rehabilitation through skill training and education. Several farms and centres have been created where ex-patients can cultivate manioc and other local products, as well as breed chicken, pigs and rabbits. We also try to facilitate the reintegration of these people into their village of origin.

The Fondazione Saint Camille de Lellis supports the activities of the Association St. Camille de Lellis, founded in West Africa by Gregoire Ahongbonon in 1983. The St. Camille has 10 centres, which are located in the cities of Bouake, Korogo, Boudouko u, in the conflict zone of the Ivory Coast and in Avrankou and Bohicon in Benin.

The 10 sites provide assistance in mental health, integrated in a broader range of health and social services, including rehabilitation, housing and vocational skill training for reintegrating patients into their native villages.
In 1998, following the increasing needs of the local population, the Association improved its services inaugurating in Bouake the Saint Camille Hospital which provides comprehensive health care in general medicine, an eye clinic and dentistry.

The Hospital with the centres of Bouake provided medical treatment, shelter, water and nutritional services for over 70,000 people daily at the height of the Ivorian crisis. Today, the Hospital treats 25,000 patients each year. Recently, it began to make available antiretroviral treatment to HIV+ patients.

With more than two decades of experience in the health and social sectors, the St. Camille commitment in West Africa, aims to improve assistance and provide additional resources in scaling up an organic response to the mental health and furthermore general health crisis in the region.

The Association St. Camille together with the Fondation in Lugano is working with international organizations such as, Catholic Relief Services, The World Food Program and the Red Cross. Recently they have secured a grant from the Elizabeth Glaser Pediatrics Aids Foundation for a HIV/AIDS unit in the Saint Camille Hospital, in Bouake.

The Foundation St. Camille is a member of the Clinton Global Initiative in New York and is partnering with the Clinton Foundation, the Ivorian Government and PEFAR to secure free antiretirol treatment to patients at the St. Camille Hospital.

For more information about the work of Grégoire Ahongbonon and The Fondazione and Association St. Camille de Lellis visit: www.fondazione-st-camille.org
VOICES FOR MENTAL HEALTH - Human rights & Legislation

AMIT, KRISHAN AND THE WORK OF KOSISH

KOSISH is a mental health self help organization which works to improve conditions for people with mental disabilities in Nepal. Here are two stories illustrating the key role of service user organizations in promoting and protecting the rights of people with mental disabilities.

TAGGED TO BE UNCURED: AMIT'S STORY

Amit is a very innocent, honest and loyal boy, 20 years old. Unfortunately, he suffered from severe mental illness for three years. Amit has five younger brothers and two younger sisters and the family entirely depends on the father's income on painting traditional pictures named THANKA.

Amit was at first admitted in local private hospital in Kathmandu named Temple of health hospital. During our usual visit to that hospital we encountered him in vulnerable and heart wrenching situation, chained to a bed. However, we could not raise our voices for him because we were not an authorized person there. Psychiatric prescribed him 33 tablets of mental health drug for him per day. We consulted with other psychiatrists and they were surprised to hear about the amount of drugs being prescribed to him. Luckily, we found out from our confidential sources that Amit's consultant psychiatrist forced his parents to take him away from the hospital and suggested to them that they make a criminal case for him and have him locked in jail. After this information we decided that it is high time that we acted. We decided to find out Amit's family contact address with the help of the staff of the hospital. After that we rung his parents and called them, offering them our help.

After few discussions with the family members and making them understand that the illness suffered by Amit can be cured, we took him to a Community Mental Health Center located in the northern part of Kathmandu.

Amit was kept in that center for one and a half months. His consultant and medication was also changed. After continuous care and medication he has now recovered and is going on with his normal lifestyle. Amit studies humanities at intermediate level and aspires to become a writer and a poet in future. He has already written and compiled his poems and writings.
Initially, Amit’s brothers and the family members including the relatives were scared that after losing his mental balance he would be a threat to them. In fact he would attack whoever was near to him. Hence, he was excluded by his relatives and family members. However, his father did not lose hope and did everything in order to cure him, whether it be with hospital care, medication or consulting a Jhakri (a traditional healer). Even when Amit was kept in the hospital, he was tagged to be uncured. The psychiatrist himself started pushing for him to be locked up in jail.

Since the attitude of society has always been negative towards mentally ill people, Amit was socially feared, excluded and stigmatized. His illness was thought to be incurable. Nevertheless, this attitude has been challenged by his recovery and his present ability to lead a normal life. His recovery has also build up new and fresh hopes not only in himself but his family members as well.

**FROM THE STREETS OF KATHMANDU TO REHABILITATION: A FIFTEEN YEARS JOURNEY FOR KRISHAN**

Krishan is a schizophrenic man. He is 40 years old and has suffered from the debilitating symptoms of his disease for fifteen years. He lived on the street surrounded by many, many bags of rotten food, knives, spoons, and waste paper. Because he is well educated and has many friends, people came to give him money for food and to check to see if he was alright frequently.

But, only recently has he received help for his mental disorder. KOSHISH workers have rescued him from the streets and placed him in a rehabilitation facility where he is receiving medication and treatment for his illness. He is doing much better. The symptoms of his mood disorder, violent anger, are gone. He loves music and plays the guitar and other instruments. After rehabilitation he looks forward to a career in music, as a singer or as the head of a music school.
Had KOSISH not been there to get him off the streets and into treatment he would still be sitting in the dirt, surrounded by bags, sometimes shouting with anger at people passing by.

He needed what KOSISH provided, understanding, a correct diagnosis, treatment and rehabilitation. He is no longer a man of the streets but is on the road to living a productive life, despite his illness. If the public had a better understanding of mental illness many like Krishan could be helped. If you have read this story, make a point of telling someone else. Be part of the solution of the stigma of mental illness!

ABOUT KOSISH, MENTAL HEALTH SELF-HELP ORGANIZATION

KOSISH is non profit, National, Non-governmental, Mental Health Self- Help Organization registered in 2008. However, it has been working informally and voluntarily on mental health since 2004. It's successful rehabilitation of dozens of people encouraged the organization to register with the District Administrative Office in Kathmandu, with the approval of Nepal Social Welfare Council. The existence of KOSISH self help organization evolved from the experience of people suffering from mental illness and their families. The organization also collaborates with people engaged in mental health service activities including mental health professionals.

The mental health service users; are proud of who they are, how productive they have become, and they would like to be accepted with dignity rather than discrimination and stigma to have their rights respected and be included in society. Without the participation of the mental health service users, the whole health delivery system is imperfect.

KOSISH’s Vision:
To facilitate in the development of a society: where mental health is a priority and mainstream issue in the country, which receives a priority emphasis and resources proportional with other health services; and where those suffering from mental illness receive respect, and are able to live in an inclusive social environment both within the family and in the community.

KOSISH’s Mission:

a. To empower mental health service users and their families to advocate for better treatment as this is their right.

b. To facilitate the building of a national mental health rights based advocacy network.

c. To formulate plans, programmes and execute a strong rights based awareness and advocacy to target grass roots community, top level government, bi-lateral and multi-lateral agencies

d. To monitor and evaluate treatment services for quality and accessibility for users and their families.
KOSISH's strategic objectives:

a. To create awareness and advocate for mental health policies, plans and inclusiveness of mental health services in the general health system in Nepal.
b. To establish a strong mechanism in national and global collaborative networking to raise our voice.
c. To explore policies for comprehensive community based rehabilitation strategy in Nepal.
d. To organize, develop and empower self help mental health groups
e. To participate in developing human resource for mental health.

KOSISH's determinative value:

We will never give up challenging discrimination and campaigning for better mental health. Our independence ensures our integrity - we are never compromised.