

Development People

“The BasicNeeds Model for Mental Health and Development is a way of working with mentally ill people in the developing world”
Chris Underhill



• Subira user group meeting. © BasicNeeds

Chris Underhill, Founder Director of BasicNeeds, shares his vision for the future of the charity and explains plans to roll out a Model for Mental Health and Development.

What does your role involve?

I am the Founder Director which is the equivalent of being the Chief Executive. I founded BasicNeeds in 1999 and initially the role was to envision what the organisation would be like and to put that vision into practice, and from there to develop the strategic reach of the organisation. I set up BasicNeeds after I became aware that whilst quite a lot had been done in the field of physical and sensory disability, mental ill health in the developing world was still something which was really quite a long way behind.

It was, and still is, very common to see people with mental illness not being treated nor being given their rights so it struck me that there was a real gap. When I looked into it, I was astonished to find that there is something like 450 million people at any one time with serious mental illness in the world and because of the population skew, the majority are in the developing world.

What inspired you to work in the sector?

I started in the sector 40 years ago by going on VSO, to Zambia. I followed three themes in my career: disability and mental health, appropriate technology and leadership. What has inspired me has been a mixture of things but to stand beside people, such as mentally ill people, who are facing considerable economic and social inequalities and to work in solidarity with them is a particular joy. It has also been a sector that has afforded me an enormous amount of opportunity to be a social entrepreneur, and to be creative, and this has been very important to me.

What are your current work priorities?

As well as continuing the development of BasicNeeds, I am in the process of setting up the BasicNeeds federation. At present we work in 10 countries – seven are country-based programmes (Ghana, Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, India, Laos and

Sri Lanka) which are managed by country offices. A further number are either in the process of being developed (for example, Bangladesh and Vietnam) or are already managed by partners (Nepal).

So, I am taking each of those major programmes and we are bringing into being an independent local organisation with its own board. Essentially we are creating a set of autonomous organisations that will then be part of the BasicNeeds federation and each will franchise the BasicNeeds Model for Mental Health and Development – a way of working with mentally ill people in the developing world – which I, with my friend DM Naidu, developed when I first started the charity. BasicNeeds India is already autonomous and managed by an independent trust board.

My vision for BasicNeeds was that we would always have independent and autonomous organisations once we were able to get them up and running. In order to maintain

and preserve quality around the Model for Mental Health and Development, we have arrived at a quality assurance approach offered through a franchise.

We started this in January 2010 and plan to have the Federation in place by 2012.

What outcome do you hope this will have?

By December 2012, I want to be in a position where all the current branches are independent and because they are franchise operations, meaning they are responsible for the Model of Mental Health and Development in their region, that they themselves are able to franchise onwards. This gives us the potential for major growth and therefore it means that we will be able to reach the 500,000 mentally ill people and people with epilepsy together with their carers that we would like to reach by the end of our strategic plan in 2013.

What is the most rewarding and most difficult part of your job?

We work in a landscape that is still very barren of other charities and 'competitors' or collaborators, so the satisfaction and reward is that we are really making a lot of difference to the lives of mentally ill people. From 2000 to December 2009, we supported 78,036 mentally ill people or people with epilepsy and in 2009 alone we supported 33,915, of which 28,053 were in treatment.

It's never been easy to raise money for mentally ill people and raising money for mentally ill people in developing countries is significantly more difficult. On the other hand, I really enjoy talking to high net-worth donors, charity funding bosses, bi-lateral donors and so on about the problem and the subject and slowly and by degrees convincing them to support his kind of work. I don't find it

onerous; it is demanding and always a challenge but it's not something I dislike.

What is disturbing and at times frightening is when a member of the team finds someone who is chained or bound up, and the way that you can persuade a community to ensure that the individuals are not chained up is always a matter of skill and judgement at a local level.

What challenges are there for BasicNeeds at the moment?

Our annual turnover is about £2.2 million at the moment and when we first started it was £75,000 so the challenge really is the federation transition programme. The most significant part of that challenge is to make sure that the governance of the newly created organisations are strong and robust and that they have the proper training and sense of development and ownership of their new entity. If you take the governance, the franchising and the capacity building of staff, the most vulnerable thing could be the governance – it is the thing that we have to get right.

What, in your opinion, is the organisation's most significant achievement?

That we have established a way of working for BasicNeeds and a model of working for health and development, and this has led to the big numbers of people that we have supported over the years.

Where would you like BasicNeeds to be in five years time?

A federation of autonomous organisations, both with the current branches as autonomous organisations and with new partner organisations being part of the franchise. In the end, the federation would

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be more than just simply what we know today as the branches.

Do you have a mentor or someone who has inspired you?

There are several people who have either been inspiring or encouraging over the years. Over the years Joel Joffe has been an immense inspiration and a 'super-encourager and mentor from time to time. I am also really inspired by the BasicNeeds staff, so my in-country programme management staff are immensely inspirational in the way that they carry out the model that I have been referring to.

What is the key challenge for the sector in the coming year?

The key challenge in this and every year is to remain relevant and to genuinely serve the needs and aspirations of economically and socially poor people.

Chris Underhill is the Founder Director of BasicNeeds. For more information about the work of the charity: www.basicneeds.org



• Chris Underhill listening to the local community © BasicNeeds