

Meaningful Engagement of Care Leavers in Care Reform

VIDEO SUMMARY

Care leavers are one of the most important stakeholder groups in a care reform process, whose experience, expertise and insights should be at the centre of shaping the reform and advocacy agenda. Whilst the importance of engaging care leavers is recognised within the sector, in practice, methods of engagement vary. In many cases they fail to legitimately empower and enable meaningful engagement or are constrained to inviting care leavers to illuminate existing agendas through the sharing of personal experiences. In situations where care leavers are excluded from the sites of power where agenda setting takes place, engagement risks becoming tokenistic or, in the worst cases, exploitative.


In this video Ruth Wacuka and Samora Korea, two key leaders of the Kenya Society of Care Leavers discuss the importance of care leaver networks, to enable care leavers to have a collective voice and to build a peer-to-peer supportive platform that aids in the transition of young people into independent living. They furthermore unpack what is required to ensure that engagement of care leavers in the care reform agenda at the national, regional and global level is meaningful and equitable. They challenge the perceived role of care leavers as 'story tellers' and call for wider recognition of lived experience as expertise, which, if recognised, would lead to greater intentionality in involving care leavers in agenda setting within the care sector.


DISCUSSION TOPIC


In this video, Ruth and Samora discuss the importance of equipping and preparing care leavers for independent living and discuss a range of important skills and topics that should be covered in any life skills training programs. They also discuss the importance of ensuring care leavers play a central role in determining what skills and topics are covered and ensuring those decisions are based on the felt needs of care leavers rather than the agenda or programmatic scope of organisations providing support or training.


Samora compares the situation where important topics are omitted to being given 'half a fish' rather than a 'whole fish' and discusses how this leaves care leavers ill equipped to face the real-world issues they are bound to confront in society. This once again points to the importance of having a care leavers networks in place, to enable, as Ruth says 'care leavers to have a collective voice' in shaping the training agenda.

In your context:

-  What types of life skills training opportunities exist for care leavers? Discuss existing training in terms of how accessible, holistic and effective these programs are, and whether there has been meaningful engagement of care leavers in the evaluation of these programs.

-  Discuss the extent to which care leavers are involved in determining the life skills and training agenda, both those who have already transitioned into independent living and those who are preparing for transition. How could this be improved?

-  Discuss the current status of care leaver networks in your country (or context) of operation. Do they exist? How do they operate? For what purpose? How autonomous and legitimately care-leaver run they are? Are they adequately supported by the broader sector to fulfil their mandate without compromising their autonomy?

-  What needs to be improved in terms of both care leavers networks/platforms and life skills training opportunities for care leavers? How could this be achieved and what resources would be required?



DISCUSSION TOPIC

In this video, Ruth and Samora talk about what constitutes 'meaningful engagement' of care leavers in care reform efforts. They point to the common practice of engaging care leavers as story tellers but articulate how this often does not translate to involvement in agenda setting. Ruth says that until care leavers are invited and supported to be 'at the table' where agendas are discussed and determined, then engagement remains tokenistic. Samora and Ruth both highlight how this requires a shift in how care leavers and their experience is viewed by other actors in the sector; from a perspective where care experience equals a story, to a perspective where care experience equates to expertise. Ruth argues that it is only when we begin to recognise care leavers as experts on par with other 'professionals' that we will begin to prioritise actions that make engagement both feasible and meaningful for care leavers.

In your context:

- ① How are care leavers engaged in agenda setting, within your organisation and in terms of broader national, regional or global discussions and/or reform efforts? Based on the learning and experience shared by Ruth and Samora in this video, reflect on how meaningful that engagement has been and how it could be improved.

- ② What barriers may exist to improving care leaver engagement? How could they be addressed?

- ③ Ruth calls for care leavers and care leaver networks to be provided with logistical support to enable meaningful participation in forums, discussions and advocacy efforts. Discuss how to enable this whilst at the same time ensuring it does not result in a loss of autonomy or a subordination of the care leaver network's perspective or agenda to supporting agencies.

- ④ What are the key insights you've gained from this video and how could they shape or influence your practice? What next steps could you take to affect those changes?