

The Udayam Project for Homeless: A Success Story from Kozhikode, South India

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ABSTRACT

Homelessness is a major public health challenge globally. Rehabilitation of people experiencing homelessness is a difficult task considering various psycho-socio-economic-political aspects. The outbreak of COVID-19 made it more challenging and the life of people experiencing homelessness more miserable. The administration of Kozhikode district of Kerala state of South India made a remarkable initiative called the “Udayam Project” for the comprehensive rehabilitation of people experiencing homelessness with the support of various Non-Government Organisations and Government Organisations. Three years of services provided for people experiencing homelessness have made the project a model for similar projects.

Keywords: *Rough Sleepers, Pandemic, Development, Social Justice, Public Health*

Homelessness is a global phenomenon. Though the real number is probably higher, it is estimated that 150 million people (about 2% of the world's population) are homeless globally. As per the Census of 2011, India has more than 1.7 million homeless residents, of which the majority are located in urban areas.

The high prevalence of homelessness presents a significant challenge for any welfare state to demonstrate its effectiveness. People experiencing homelessness often lose their identification papers and withdraw from the democratic process, leading to further marginalisation and exclusion from government development agendas (Settlements, 2000). Regrettably, public systems often fail to recognise enough that homeless have the right to live with dignity while participating in the design and implementation of rehabilitation programs. Addressing homelessness requires a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted socio-economic-political-psychological factors involved (Perri et al., 2020). For instance, many homeless individuals hesitate to relocate to rehabilitation centres due to distrust of government institutions and concerns about losing their independence. These factors make it challenging for governments to address homelessness in countries even on high-growth paths creating a paradoxical situation.

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Here the authors describe the setting up, challenges, and smooth operation of a sustainable rehabilitation project for people experiencing homelessness initiated during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Kozhikode district of Kerala state of South India.

Background

The high prevalence of homelessness in Kozhikode district poses a significant challenge to rehabilitating homeless (Kudumbasree, 2017). As a result, the rehabilitation of homeless has been identified as a sectoral program under the 'Nammude Kozhikode' – a District Development Governance Initiative (Reporter, 2021). Kozhikode District is known for its unique culture of camaraderie and active citizenship, which makes it an ideal place to implement such an initiative (Reporter, 2021). Initially, the district administration tried to persuade some people experiencing homelessness to move to welfare homes in the city, but this approach did not yield any favourable results. Convincing people experiencing homelessness to move was difficult, and using force to relocate them was not an appropriate solution. Moreover, the socio-psychological issues faced by people experiencing homelessness were complex and required a more nuanced approach.

The outbreak of a crisis often provides opportunities to address seemingly insurmountable problems. In the year 2020, the COVID-19 outbreak and the lockdown proved to be a catalyst for successfully rehabilitating the people experiencing homelessness into mainstream society. When the lockdown was announced, the movement was curtailed, and all economic activities stopped, causing concern for the vulnerable, who would be seriously affected due to the closure of restaurants, hotels, and other facilities.

The Udayam Project

Foreseeing the challenges in preventing the COVID-19 among people experiencing homelessness and protecting their rights and privileges, the Kozhikode District Administration (KDA) has taken a significant step towards addressing the issues of people experiencing homelessness by launching a sustainable rehabilitation project called 'Udayam.' The 'Udayam Project' is specifically designed to help the people experiencing homelessness rescued from the streets during the COVID-19 outbreak in March 2020 (KP, 2021; Ragesh et al., 2023; Reporter, 2020; Society, 2023).

Initially, the KDA arranged for food distribution with the support of NGOs. However, the District Collector (the highest-level administrative officer of the district) observed that many people experiencing homelessness were sleeping on the streets in scorching heat due to unawareness of food supply or inability to move to the supply points. With the lockdown likely to continue for several weeks, it was decided to shift all people experiencing homelessness to camps across the district, citing health grounds to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Many Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) and Government Organisations (GOs) joined hands with the administration to provide food, clothes, and other amenities for the camp inmates (Karelia, 2021; KP, 2021; Reporter, 2020; Society, 2023). The shift was made with the help of police and NGOs. NGOs started providing basic facilities and care in the camps.

A needs assessment survey revealed that the age range of people experiencing homelessness was 17-93 years. Males, females and transgender people were in the camp, but the majority of the inmates were males. The majority had no valid identification documents. Many with poor health status, including communicable and non-communicable diseases, substance

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dependence, and mental illness. Significant family issues, illiteracy, and unemployment were also observed among people who stayed in the camps.

Adhering to the COVID-19 protocols, possible health care and psychosocial interventions were provided and noticed considerable progress in changing the orientation and perspective towards life of people experiencing homelessness. After a few weeks of camp, it was interesting to observe that most camp inmates did not want to return to the streets.

The survey results and qualitative changes in the attitude of the camp inmates made the administration think about a long-term solution for rehabilitating people experiencing homelessness. As the cause of the program is noble and is meant for the welfare of the most vulnerable in the society, It was decided to establish permanent housing facilities to provide shelter and maintain them with the help of the contribution of the public and NGOs.

The shelter home was named ‘Udayam Home,’ which aims to provide comprehensive care, including the best possible accommodation, food, clothing, bedding, toiletries, recreational facilities, psychosocial support, health services, educational services, vocational training, identity documents, job placement opportunities, and reunification with family or reintegration into mainstream society. All three Udayam Homes are constructed and renovated on government land (except one) with the best possible aesthetics to provide a pleasant experience to the residents. These homes are designed and built completely with the help of contributions from corporate, NGO, and professionals.

A daily visit by the medical team was arranged initially. The nearby government hospitals provide outpatient and inpatient treatment facilities. Appropriate and systematic referral system has been developed to provide health care services to Udayam Home residents. The project collaborates strongly with various government and private healthcare systems, including mental health care, de-addiction and dental care.

The project was considered to receive support from the Government of India scheme called “SMILE” (Support for Marginalized Individuals and Livelihood Enterprise) (CORRESPONDENT, 2022). The project is getting support from the Scheme of Shelters for Urban Homeless under the National Urban Livelihoods Mission (NULM) with the help of the local self-government (Kozhikode Municipal Corporation). Thus, the Udayam demonstrated a successful sustainable model for rehabilitating people experiencing homelessness (S. REPORTER, 2022).

Since its inception, around 1800, people experiencing homelessness from various occupational, gender, cultural, language, and religious backgrounds belonging to different states of the country were rehabilitated or supported as part of the project. Around 11% of the total population was employed, around 10% were reunited with family, around 10% received government identity cards, and approximately 6% could open a bank account. All three Udayam Homes across the district currently can accommodate 240 men and are approved by the Orphanage Control Board of the Government of Kerala (Society, 2023).

What makes Udayam unique?

The project was started during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many residents and the staff team members in the project were infected with COVID-19, but fewer deaths were reported among the residents. Facilitating money, materials, and men to run the services was a great challenge during these days.

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A sustainable governance structure is put in place to ensure the successful management of the project. A charitable society was formed with the District Collector as chairperson. Other high-level officers were given various responsibilities of the society and the project. A management committee was formed to oversee the project. Two special officers experienced in administration, social welfare, and mental health supervise the entire service on a daily basis. A coordinator was appointed to coordinate the project activities and Udayam Homes under the supervision of special officers. All three homes have one home manager each to manage the entire activities of each home. Social workers, psychologist, nursing officers, caretakers, and other supporting staff work as a team for the welfare of the residents on a 24*7 basis.

Most shelter homes run by the government and NGOs in India address only the basic needs of people experiencing homelessness. The Udayam provides comprehensive rehabilitation services, not just the best of the shelter facilities, food and clothes. It addresses the bio-psycho-socio-occupational aspects of people experiencing homelessness. A strong partnership and collaboration exist between the district administration and other GOs and NGOs. This helps the project to run the services smoothly.

All services are provided on a no-cost basis underpinned by the rights-based approach. The services are managed by professionally qualified personnel. Earlier, volunteers facilitated the entire services, but currently, qualified professionals manage the services full-time. Research is being carried out to understand their needs and problems in detail, and solutions are recommended based on the findings.

CONCLUSION

Homelessness is one of the major social and public health concerns globally. This underscores the need for comprehensive rehabilitation services for people experiencing homelessness. The KDA has taken a significant step towards addressing the issue of homelessness by launching a sustainable rehabilitation project called 'Udayam.' This was a remarkable attempt to ensure that homeless are not relegated to the margins of society. The Udayam project could provide significant contributions to the lives of homeless. This initiative aims to provide a decent standard of living for every street dweller in the district, acknowledging that rehabilitation involves more than just sheltering them. The program recognises the importance of providing access to education, healthcare, and other essential services to help these individuals rebuild their lives (Assalam, 2021). By prioritising their needs, Kozhikode sets an example for other communities to follow, demonstrating that every citizen deserves respect and support, regardless of their background or circumstances.

The project's primary objective is to reintegrate these individuals into mainstream society by providing them with a quality of life that is commensurate with that of any other citizen. This vision is in keeping with the welfare-based development philosophy of the country and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which seek to ensure that no one is left behind (India, 2023). Once, the honorary Governor of Kerala visited the Udayam home and stated that the Udayam is exemplary for the country (Reporter, 2022). As the Udayam could successfully address the problems of people experiencing homelessness to a great extent within their limited resources during the last three years, even during the pandemic period, the authors suggest the need for projects in line with the Udayam for better public health, rehabilitation, social justice, protection of human rights and ensuring the quality of life of the people experiencing homelessness in urban and rural areas of countries even on high growth paths.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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