

The Deaf World in Developing Countries

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The worldwide renaissance of Deaf people was the theme of the 16th Congress of the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) held in S. Africa July 2011. It was a thrilling, upbeat theme. It was inspiring to see a gathering of Deaf people representing many countries. The sense of pride and accomplishment was palpable. I was honored to be there and I want all Deaf people to experience a renaissance. But equally real and of great concern is the vast majority of Deaf people in the world who have very, very little in the way of rights. This article is about them.

Deaf and hard of hearing people in Europe and North America still have aspects of audist oppression to deal with, but we do have legal rights the same as hearing people. Unprecedented technology is now available to make communications and media accessible to us, relieving old problems and dependencies. It is not perfect, but Deaf people are increasingly able to enjoy all their human rights such as access to education, freedom to have their own language, get employment, housing, etc. Social security systems provide safety nets when needed. Deaf communities are strong and active in promoting our rights. It is nothing like this in developing countries.

Conditions in developing countries

Because of poverty, the context of deaf people in developing countries is totally different from the context in rich countries. We are familiar with the two different perspectives taken toward Deaf people in the U.S.: 1) the pathological perspective that sees deafness as a disability in need of a technological fix so that deaf people can be as similar to hearing people as possible; and 2) the sociocultural perspective that sees Deaf people as whole and able, with their own identity, culture, language, and community. According to Reagan et al. (2006), neither of these perspectives describes the situation of Deaf people in poor countries. Rather, their context is not defined by belief or ideology at all. Their identity is determined instead by constraint. The socioeconomic and political context—poverty, deprivation and lack of rights—determines the situation, the void, that most Deaf people inhabit in poor countries.

Living conditions for Deaf people in developing countries frequently involve violations of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Lane et al. 1996:202). According to WFD,

...a large majority - maybe as much as 90% - of the world's Deaf children and adults have never been to school and are thus more or less illiterate. It has frequently been observed that sign language is repressed in many countries and its use is not permitted in education. The consequence is that Deaf people are not aware of the rights they have, and live as a highly marginalised group...in most developing countries. There is usually no or only very little access to information for Deaf people, which means that they do not even know what is happening in their immediate society and even less so in the world (Haualand and Allen 2009:10).

With no education, most Deaf people in poor countries cannot read their own name or count to 10. Unemployment rates in the deaf community are high and most live in poverty. Some nations do not permit their deaf citizens to earn a driver's license. A few nations have legal limits on the rights of deaf people to marry and raise a family. Some developing countries do not allow Deaf people to vote in elections (I-DEAF n.d.). Though legal restrictions on the rights of Deaf people are less than in the past, family and social attitudes may prevent Deaf individuals from exercising their rights. Equal citizenship seems to be a 'paper status', not a status Deaf people experience in reality (Haualand and Allen 2009:22).

Lack of resources is part of the cause for poor education provision, lack of specially trained teachers and interpreters, and absence of medical care, vocational programs, legal and social services for Deaf people. But resource constraints are often exacerbated by 1) a widespread lack of awareness, knowledge, and information about what it means to be Deaf; and 2) a lack of respect for and understanding of Deaf culture and sign language (Wilson 2005). Deaf people are thought to be uneducable and to have no ability to reason. In that negative context, it is extremely difficult for Deaf people to get any means to earn a living or contribute to their community. They face a lifetime of economic hardship and stigma, precluding the chance to fulfill their potential (Woodford Foundation, n.d.)

In such impoverishment, some deaf people find themselves used and exploited. Deaf slave rings were recently found to operate in Mexico and France. In these deaf slave rings, deaf people from impoverished countries/areas are recruited by better off deaf people to form groups of street peddlers. The peddlers are totally controlled by the organization and all money from peddling is taken away so that the peddlers cannot escape (about.com: Deafness, n.d.).

De Clerck (2011) reported a similar situation in Cameroon: groups of deaf beggars in Douala and Yaounde´ are controlled by a transnational west and central African 'deaf mafia' that lives off the exploitation of Deaf people who have limited education. Promises of money draw poor and naive young Deaf men and women into a network of begging, stealing, slavery, and sexual violence and abuse. De Clerck (2011) noted that the larger Deaf community is negatively affected by these beggar groups because they cause Deaf people to lack trust in each other. Systematic sexual abuse of deaf children and women in deaf schools and in the adult deaf community may have the same effect (De Clerck 2011:1427).

Because of their powerlessness and invisibility, the numbers of Deaf people in poor countries are not known. WFD's survey of Deaf organizations (Haualand and Allen 2009) revealed that responding organizations could not provide a reliable figure of the population of Deaf people in their countries. The World Health Organization (WHO), however, estimates that there are about 59 million people in the world (0.9 % of the total population) with a hearing loss classified as severe or greater. Eighty percent, or 47 million, of them live in a developing country (WHO 2005 in Haualand and Allen 2009:14).

These 47 million Deaf people are dispersed over the seven regions covered by the WFD survey: Eastern Europe and Middle Asia; Asia and the Pacific; South America; Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean; Eastern and Southern Africa; Western

and Central Africa; and the Arab region. It is important to understand the varying conditions of Deaf people in these regions. Urban areas usually have more to offer Deaf people: this is where schools are most likely to be found, where Deaf organizations may be set up, and where development projects and aid may reach Deaf people. A community and shared language likely exist so that Deaf people have some social resources to draw on. This scenario is the best one for Deaf people in developing countries.

But there are also vast, scarcely populated areas where, if born there, Deaf people may be isolated among hearing people perhaps for their entire lives. The best possible context for those rural Deaf is a family/ neighborhood that cares enough to develop and use home signs with the Deaf person, and include him/her in livelihood activities. This means farm or house work. Though positive in offering the Deaf person some inclusion in society, it could also mean exploitation of them as slave labor. As yet uncounted millions of Deaf people live this lonely life, completely isolated from other Deaf people, having neither community nor language. It is awful to imagine their abject existence.

Little is known about their lives because without access to language, their cognitive development is severely delayed and they have little means to communicate. They exist at the very margins of society. In Thailand, when such children finally (with luck) arrive at a residential school, they are described as ‘know nothings’ (Reilly and Reilly 2005). In Cameroon, Deaf people who use only gestures and have grown up in rural areas without attending deaf schools or otherwise being in touch with other deaf people are referred to as ‘chickens’ (De Clerck 2011:1424). In Burma, where there are only three Deaf schools serving the entire country, the “know nothings” are often so poor they do not have the basic requirements of life--food, clothing and shelter (Kyaw Kyaw, personal communication November 2011).

A story of a Deaf girl in rural Tanzania gives a glimpse of such a life, with the added oppression of being a woman... It was my first week of doctoral fieldwork in 1992 when a deaf girl was murdered in my village. Having no language, no education, and no prospects at all, she had supported herself by selling sex. But she could not communicate her price. An argument with a client ensued; he became enraged and strangled her.... Unfortunately, such a life, and death, may happen frequently in many parts of Africa where Deaf girls often sell sex and sex workers often die of AIDS.

Issues in Development Assistance

How can the Deaf renaissance reach the millions of Deaf people in developing countries? Many Deaf (and hearing) people in more privileged circumstances are aware of their plight and want to do something about it, but may have poor knowledge on development, and/or in the case of hearing people, poor knowledge on Deaf people. There is an overwhelming lack of financial resources. It is a slow process of change, fraught with issues of power inequality.

In the absence of any state provision for deaf programs, there are several outside sources of aid to Deaf people in poor countries. These are church, non-government, and government organizations. However, their effectiveness in empowering Deaf people varies widely. To evaluate four American development assistance projects in

Jamaica, Wilson (2005) first laid out best practices that should be guiding principles of development organizations in their efforts to empower Deaf people overseas. These are:

1. The provider organization should employ Deaf workers from home.
2. The provider organization should support and work with indigenous, local Deaf organizations in the recipient country.
3. Indigenous Deaf people should be involved in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the program.
4. The provider should have knowledge about Deaf culture and about issues relating to communication, language and Deaf education.
5. The provider should have awareness of how the local culture understands deafness.
6. The provider should be accountable to the people who support it financially.
7. The provider should network with others who work in the field of Deaf rights and development.

Sadly, Wilson (2005) found that all four organizations in her study fell far short of best practice. Instead of empowering Jamaican Deaf people and their communities, the aid was actually oppressive and fostered dependence of Deaf people on foreign assistance. In the case of a church agency, aid was contingent upon religious conversion. In all four agencies, the employees were hearing and did not have knowledge of Deaf people or their issues. These hearing people planned and implemented the projects without any inclusion of the local Deaf community. Major decisions about schooling were made by hearing Board members who had no knowledge of Deaf education. They did not think that Deaf people were qualified or capable of contributing to projects for Deaf people. Even when Deaf people's opinions were solicited, they were not taken seriously. Deaf culture was neither taught nor encouraged; Jamaican Sign Language was not used by the hearing teachers. Children were treated as babies, their self-reliance was not developed, and the education was poor. Deaf people felt left out of the system. Employees of the aid organization would come and go without ever getting to know the local Deaf community. Many of these aid agency employees felt bitter and frustrated about their own ineffectiveness but did not know how to make changes.

The Jamaican Deaf adults who were interviewed offered suggestions for actions that would enable the Deaf community to work for its own empowerment and lessen the need for U.S. assistance in the future (Wilson 2005). But this would require new policies and practices on the part of the donor agencies.

Because sign language is such a priority for Deaf people, there have been many examples of transfer of a sign language to a new location. Historically, missionaries and other well-meaning people from the U.S. have spread ASL to other countries "to help the Deaf people there who are so poor and have no language" (Betsy Keyes, personal communication, February 2012). Perhaps the most famous case is Andrew Foster, a Deaf African-American missionary, who in 1979 founded a Deaf school in Cameroon that was the source of ASL influence throughout West and Central Africa that continues today (De Clerck 2011; Lucy Upah, personal communication April 2012). When ASL was introduced to Hawai'i in the 1950s, its use in school caused the decline of the indigenous sign language that had previously flourished (Linda

Lambrecht, personal communication October 2011). This spreading of a world-dominant sign language to a needy area is “linguistic imperialism” (De Clerck 2011) and against WFD policy. The policy of the WFD is that indigenous sign languages should be given priority over imported sign languages such as ASL (Lane et al. 1996; WFD 2007). Why? Because language is intricately interwoven with culture and each one is valuable in its own right.

Many U.S. individuals and groups involved in development assistance do not have academic background or training in international development, but are sincere in wanting to “help.” Unfortunately, “helping” automatically sets up an unequal relationship and the perception of aid recipients as helpless and inferior, in need of being saved by powerful outsiders. This dependency paradigm is damaging for both giver and receiver (Earth 1996).

A Better Development Model/ Linguistic Rights

In light of the vast need and lack of human rights experienced by Deaf people in developing countries, it is important to extend to Deaf communities a better kind of assistance. In contrast to the clueless organizations studied by Wilson (2005), are organizations whose activities are based on theories of participatory development. This approach has grown out of the liberation theory of Paulo Freire (Freire 2009); nowadays it uses the UN and global governance discourse on development and human rights.¹ In this kind of project, local Deaf people are actively involved and work collaboratively with people at all levels of the foreign organization.

WFD emphasizes the linguistic rights of Deaf people—i.e. the right to sign language and education in sign language—as the basis for all subsequent striving toward equal citizenship. Development of a country’s sign language(s) parallels the maturity of the Deaf community; thus a sign language dictionary is an important milestone. A book is extremely important for reaching remote, unconnected Deaf people and introducing them to their natural language.

Paradoxically, the fact that developing countries have little access to audiological services, screening, hearing technology, or professional expertise (Jauhiainen 2001), is a boon for indigenous sign languages. Increasingly, Deaf communities in developing countries have undertaken systematic description and analysis of their indigenous signed languages. This activity can be supported by organizations or individuals from rich countries, who, increasingly, are Deaf themselves.

Cambodia is an example of a country that imported ASL. Following years of genocide and civil war, a French non-government organization, “Krousar Thmey,” established the first Deaf school in 1997. Also in 1997, the Khmer Sign Language Group was established, with the Deaf Development Program and Krousar Thmey working in collaboration to research Khmer Sign Language and disseminate the

¹ This discourse is inspiring but does not engage with structural and systemic factors that limit what can be achieved (skewed global economy, unsustainable development model, destruction of resource base, 2008 global financial crisis, etc.) Critical academic studies can be referenced to add this important dimension (Biyawila 2011).

information to the Krousar Thmey school and its branches, and throughout the Deaf community. But because the Khmer Sign language research was proceeding very slowly, it was felt that Khmer Sign Language was not developed enough to be the only sign language in use. Krousar Thmey decided to adopt ASL at the Deaf school until Khmer Sign Language was further developed. What has happened is hybridization between Khmer Sign Language and ASL (DAC 2003) similar to the west-central African case.

A famous sign language success story, with no outside influence, is South African Sign Language (SASL). SASL is recognized since independence in 1994 as a minority language in multilingual South Africa. Much effort by the Deaf Federation of South Africa, as well as noted academic and research programs, have resulted in a *Dictionary of Southern Africa Signs*. A developed sign language increases access to educational opportunities for the Deaf that allow them to move towards an academic curriculum (Reagan et al. 2006:195-6). SASL was developed through a planned strategy to integrate sign languages from the various regions to forge one national sign language (Bruno Druchen, personal communication, 4 July 2012). Other countries could benefit by studying South Africa's example.

As reported by Miles (2001), the British aid organization Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) has begun accepting Deaf volunteers. In existence since 1958, VSO had sent 27,000 volunteers abroad, but among them only five had been Deaf (as of 2001). A returned Deaf volunteer began an appeal for "Deaf Volunteers for the Deaf Developing World" and the VSO has taken it up (Miles 2001).

Miles (2001) also mentioned how Deaf Nepalis are working on the codification of Nepali Sign Language with American Peace Corps assistance.

World Education Inc. (a US NGO) working with Deaf refugees from Burma in Thailand supported the development of a Karen Sign Language dictionary (Connie Woodberry, personal communication, January 2012). In countries such as Burma with various ethnic sign languages, a good policy is needed to avoid suppressing minority sign languages in the push to develop a strong "national" sign language (observed in my work with the Deaf Resource Center, Yangon, Burma).

While sign languages are gaining ground, still only 44 countries have any kind of formal recognition of the country's sign language(s). Recognition of sign language implies positive support of the linguistic and cultural identity of Deaf communities; for both there is still a long way to go (Haualand and Allen 2009:22)

Deaf education in developing countries is too big a topic to discuss here, except to say that the bilingual approach is becoming more and more widespread in schools for Deaf children, especially in North Europe and in North America. In developing countries, however, belief in the oral method is still strong. The WFD survey found that the vast majority of country respondents reported that the Total Communication (TC) approach (which uses speech and signs at the same time) is the only, or one of several, educational approaches in their country. There remains a huge amount of confusion about what Bi-lingual bi-cultural Deaf education is and why it is better than TC for Deaf children (Haualand and Allen 2009:29-30).

What do Deaf Communities Need?

Deaf people need material resources as well as an improved social context that allows them access. When Wilson (2005) asked the Jamaican Deaf people what they really needed, they said:

1. Interpreter training programs
2. legal aid
3. leadership training
4. job skill training and assistance in finding jobs
5. teacher training in Deaf education and multilingual education
6. continuing education for Deaf adults (e.g. on HIV or parenting skills)
7. establishment of local and national deaf organizations
8. awareness-raising about Deaf people for hearing people
9. acquisition of TTYs and computers for communications off the island
10. development of a Jamaican Sign Language dictionary

Deaf organizations in developing countries, once they have succeeded in being set up, need capacity-building support. They need skills in leadership, team building, organizational management, fundraising, financial management, and networking. To implement projects, they need to know development concepts, strategic planning, project cycles and project management including evaluation. They need to develop confidence and problem solving abilities.

Programmatically, Deaf organizations need vocational training for their members, and assurances that there will be jobs after training. Relationships must be built with well-meaning employers who promise to hire trained Deaf people. Social protections must be created for Deaf people in need. The Deaf organization should be intimately involved with sign language development and Deaf education in the country. Most challenging of all, there must be strategies for reaching “know nothing” Deaf people in remote areas, exposing them to language, and bringing them into the Deaf community.

There is also a huge need for research on Deaf people and their issues in developing countries, including:

1. Case studies of successful Deaf organizations. How did they do it? What problems did they overcome? Do they have hearing members or allies to ease their access problems? What are their goals and activities? How do they build membership? How do they fund themselves?
2. What attempts have been made to reach “know nothings” in remote areas? What are the attitudes among better off Deaf people toward “know nothings”? How can these people be located, brought into Deaf society, and given language? Is it too late for adults?
3. Documentation of indigenous sign language(s) and development of sign language dictionaries. How have countries dealt with regional or ethnic variations in developing their national sign language? Have minority sign languages been sacrificed in the effort to build a strong national sign

language?

4. Case studies of country transitions from oralism to Bi-Bi Deaf education. How was a policy change enacted? Were Deaf people involved in the change, or were hearing people responsible? What is the situation in the transitioning schools and between hearing and Deaf teachers?
5. Studies of the effects of neo-liberal economic policies on Deaf people. As governments privatize education, health care and social services, what are the effects on Deaf people? As rural livelihoods are compromised by development, how are Deaf people affected?
6. What are the human rights violations of Deaf girls and women who experience both Deaf oppression and gender oppression? How have Deaf organizations supported (or not) their Deaf women members? What particular forms of discrimination/ abuse/ sexual violence do Deaf women face in different locations?
7. Do the conditions of Deaf people improve once the country has signed and ratified the CRPD? How do Deaf organizations lobby for and then leverage the international agreement to their benefit?

Deaf people in developing countries do need direct material assistance and research is often criticized for not giving back to the informants. However, research can raise awareness and point the way for informed strategy and material improvements. It can be done in a participatory way that develops the skills and knowledge of the participants. Research can therefore be a method for Deaf empowerment.

The Way Forward

This paper touches on various aspects of the Deaf World in developing countries. The WFD surveys of the seven developing regions have revealed the low position of Deaf people in many countries. The needs are huge due to poverty, marginalization, limited rights and the ignorance of the dominant societies. Millions of Deaf people lack equality of citizenship, language and community. The reality is depressing. Where are the resources to address all the problems?

There are no easy answers. In the world as it is, aid is necessary. Deaf organizations in developing countries may have some financial support from their governments but it is woefully inadequate to cover the huge need. Foreign aid therefore should be done in a way that gets the greatest value in empowering Deaf people and building up their equality.

Development organizations of all kinds should incorporate best practices as outlined by Wilson (2005) so that they can do the most possible to support/ empower Deaf people. All development organizations and development workers should be familiar with WFD activities and follow WFD policies. Their work in the developing country should support and augment the work being done by the National Association of the Deaf there.

Deaf organizations and individuals in Europe and the U.S. should never forget the “know nothings” around the world, and should seek new ways to support the NADs of developing countries. Ultimately, those NADs are responsible for the Deaf people in their country, including the “know nothings.” But without resources, they cannot accomplish much.

Individuals from the U.S. who are lucky enough to spend time in a developing country should commit to learning the local sign language and supporting WFD policies there. It is an honor, privilege and amazing learning experience to cross into another culture. In return, visitors, whether Deaf or hearing, paid or volunteer, should offer whatever skills and resources they can.

WFD is a small organization that is single-handedly doing so much to support the rights of Deaf people in the developing world. Though it is a tough time economically, Deaf individuals, communities, and organizations in developed countries *can* find new ways to support Deaf people abroad. Where there’s a will, there’s a way. Part of the challenge is to spread awareness of the realities in developing countries so that more privileged Deaf people and organizations will be inspired to contribute. This is a compelling reason for research.

There is a larger role for academia that is yet to be fulfilled. So many issues, so many places, so much to learn. Students could gain an incredible education by immersing in the language and culture of a Deaf community in a developing country while adding to the knowledge base. Where possible, participatory research could build the knowledge and skills of local Deaf people.

A Deaf renaissance in developing countries is a long way off. It requires resources and work. But that vision, those Deaf people, deserve it. Ultimately their oppression is our oppression. Our efforts *can* make a difference.

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