



Deaf  
Development &  
Information  
Association  
(DDIA)

# Improving Education for Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Children



## A Demonstration Model



*A project implemented by the Deaf Development and Information Association, Addis Ababa, in partnership with Disability and Development Partners (UK), and supported by Comic Relief*

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## 1. Introduction

The project *Improving Education for Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Children* in Ethiopia was implemented from 2016-2020 by the Deaf Development and Information Association (Addis Ababa), in partnership with Disability and Development Partners (UK), with funding from Comic Relief (UK). DDIA signed an initial project agreement with the Federal Ministry of Education – and now, at the end of the project, offers its lessons and experience for consideration by the Ministry.

The project aimed to address the communication and educational needs of deaf and hard-of-hearing (HoH) children, and to create the conditions for them to be included in mainstream primary schools. Four project schools were in Addis Ababa, and one each in the towns/cities of Adama, Adwa, Bahir Dar and Hawassa.

A main innovation of the project was the placing of a deaf Teaching Assistant (TA) in each school, equipped with appropriate educational materials (sign language dictionary and DVDs of the Grades 1-4 curriculum explained in sign language), to pave the way for deaf/HoH children's inclusion. The TAs supported these children's communications needs, enabling them to attend and enjoy school, and gave them sign language training, as well as to their hearing peers, teachers, siblings and parents.

Key to the project's success has been not only the quality of the resources produced, but how effectively the deaf TAs have used them in the classroom, raising the quality of teaching to include deaf and HoH children, and raising awareness among hearing teachers, pupils and parents, that deaf and HoH children must not be left behind in education.

This document sets out the main areas of the project model: Teaching Assistants, sign language training, awareness-raising, curriculum resources, and classroom materials. It will be accompanied by copies of the resources, a booklet of case studies, some short documentary films, and a policy paper calling for inclusive education in Ethiopia.

## 2. Deaf Teaching Assistants

8 deaf Teaching Assistants and a deaf IT teacher were appointed at the beginning of the project. These new staff members were each assigned a project school where they would act as role-models for deaf and HoH students, teach sign language to school community members, work to improve the quality of education available for disabled students, and reach out to the communities surrounding the schools to increase awareness of disability rights.

In the course of the project, the TAs had opportunities for continuing professional development, including from specialist inclusive education consultants from Seva in Action in Bangalore, India.

The TAs have been champions for deaf children in school, supporting them in lessons by interpreting, explaining, clarifying, checking comprehension and answering questions. They have helped new deaf and HoH pupils – of different ages – to settle in and develop their sign language skills at the start of the school year. At social times, too, they have helped children to communicate with their hearing peers, and acted as tutors and mentors, helping pupils to deal with any problems they face.

The TAs have also helped their schools to develop their SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) teaching, through discussions, workshops, whole-school sign language training and the development of classroom resources (see page 6). In some cases, they worked with the children to produce their own accessible materials.

Importantly, the TAs have been adult role models for deaf children, whose self-esteem has grown with the realization that their education is of real value, and that they could grow up to be teachers themselves one day. Parents, too, observing that deaf people can become qualified, valued employees in their community, have had their attitudes towards their children changed.



TAs share their experience working in schools, and lessons learned on promoting inclusive education at DDIA's first annual inclusive education workshop in June 2017



The TAs and DDIA staff sign the Ethiopian national anthem

DDIA has worked with the school administrations and Education Bureaux to lobby for the continued employment of the TAs in the project schools, at least for the remainder of the academic year following the end of the project – and, wherever possible, beyond. The model and its beneficial effects are offered for replication in other schools and in other parts of Ethiopia.

### 3. Sign Language Training

The main barrier to deaf children's education is rarely to do with environmental factors: it is communication. The best medium of communication is sign language, but – notwithstanding national and international policies promoting the linguistic identity of deaf children – there is practically no sign of it in mainstream schools, effectively excluding them from school and from normal linguistic and cognitive development. School can be a silent, confusing world, and many deaf children and young people drop out altogether, with limited outcomes and prospects.

Through the *Improving Education* project, sign language support for deaf and HoH children – both in separate small preparatory classes when they first arrive in primary school, and then in inclusive classrooms with hearing peers – has enabled them to understand lessons, take part actively, engage with teachers, ask questions, sit tests, and access the other aspects of school life.



Sign language training for teachers...



...and parents

In the course of the project, 341 teachers, 170 parents and 303 siblings and peers took at least 3 months of training. The sign language training given to parents, siblings and peers, hearing teachers and other stakeholders, has had a significant impact – not only on the educational experience of deaf and HoH children, but on their lives as a whole.



For many parents, their ability to interact with their deaf children has been transformed. Some mothers wept as they explained how it felt to really communicate with their child for the first time. The kindling of hope in the hearts of deaf children and their parents is an experience DDIA aspires to replicate nationwide.

A challenge that emerged from the project, which focused on primary school Grades 1 to 4, is the lack of TA support for children in Grades 5 to 8, and how the initial extension of sign language training to Grade 5 teachers can be sustained and extended as the children get older.

## 4. Awareness-Raising

The project has improved understanding of the needs and potential of deaf and HoH children, the rights of disabled people and inclusive education among the school communities it has served: from staff to parents, other local people and government authorities.

Parent-Teacher Committees were established at each of the 8 schools, in order to boost parental involvement in the education of their deaf children, albeit with differing levels of participation and engagement. Some of the most dynamic parents, however, have in the process become activists for inclusive education themselves.



Members of the committee at Geda Kilole Primary School in Adama have met with government education officials, and have been campaigning to make the school a welcoming place for all disabled children – and for more inclusive provision.



Awareness-raising workshop, Merawi Primary

Over the course of the project, national and regional workshops focusing on inclusive education were held in different regions of Ethiopia, where participants included teachers, parents, the education authorities, religious leaders, representatives of national and regional government, teacher training institutions, deaf associations and other stakeholders.

The International Week of the Deaf (last week in September) has provided opportunities to spread the message of inclusive education, involving 300 deaf children, parents, teachers, representatives of deaf associations and relevant government bodies. Children sang the Ethiopian national anthem in sign language, which has become a popular way to unite deaf and hearing children, and promote the use of sign language in project schools.



This idea was based on experience from India, where a video of hearing and deaf children signing the national anthem together at their morning school assembly inspired a version fronted by Bollywood superstar Amitabh Bachchan – bringing awareness of sign language to millions.

The Teaching Assistants reached out to other local schools to share the experience, resources and benefits of the project with them. This is a process which DDIA intends to continue after the project's end.

## 5. Curriculum resources

As part of the project, resources were produced and distributed for use by teachers, teaching assistants, deaf pupils and their families. In order to make the Grade 1-4 curriculum accessible to deaf children, a sign language primer was published as a book and on DVD in Amharic, English, Tigrigna and Afaan Oromoo – taking account of the different mother tongues spoken in primary schools in different regions of Ethiopia.

The Maths, Science and English curriculum was also translated from Grade 1-4 textbooks into Ethiopian Sign Language, on DVDs with subtitles and narration in the 4 languages. This is the first resource of its kind in Ethiopia, and we hope it will boost the language acquisition and educational progress of deaf children.



Sign Language primer in four languages: in book form...



...and on DVD



Grade 1-4 English and Science curriculum in Ethiopian Sign Language



Grade 1-4 Maths curriculum in Ethiopian Sign Language and regional languages

School Directors give positive feedback on these materials, which are available in their resource centres/libraries, and in use by teachers and children. The only drawback is that families tend not to have devices at home where DVDs can be played. However, a computer and a projector were supplied to each of the project schools for classroom use.

Awareness-raising publications were also printed and distributed, as well as exercise books and other stationery for deaf children's education. The project resources continue to be distributed to schools, regional education bodies and NGOs beyond the project areas.

## 6. Classroom materials



Lydia, Teaching Assistant at Addis Ababa's first primary school, Menelek II, with posters showing colours and clothes – accompanied by photos of the corresponding signs. Deaf pupils came in at lunchtimes to help create these posters.



Wall displays in the SEN classroom at Hayk Dar Primary School in Hawassa. Other displays use locally-available materials, e.g. an abacus made of bottle-tops, or a collage of spices which children can feel and smell as well as touch.



Wondemagegn, Teaching Assistant at Selam Fire Primary School in Addis Ababa, has produced innovative, inclusive teaching resources, and challenged his colleagues to think about inclusion in the classroom. His favourite method is to create working models of objects or activities, illustrated with flashcards showing him giving the appropriate sign. On a table in the SEN classroom is a large model farm (see photo), with tractors, pigs, and cows. "I realized that many children learn by doing: as they pick up each item, they see the sign for it, and learn while playing." This model was entered was runner-up in an Addis Ababa competition to find the most innovative SEN teaching resource. Wondemagegn earned a certificate, and recognition for the school.

## 7. The Project Film

A film student and a film graduate from the University of East Anglia in Norwich, UK, travelled to Ethiopia in late 2019 to make a documentary of the project, with footage of the work in schools and interviews with those involved.

Short films about the project will be available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCRPx6K127nodGGWJG6qK4jw>



## 8. Project Outcomes

### Enrolment

Enrolment of deaf and HoH children in the 8 project schools was 126 when the project began, but increased to 341 through the *Improving Education* project. In the 2018-19 academic year, for example, 100 new deaf and HoH children were enrolled in school for the first time. Many children had been hidden away due to stigma among families and communities, or because their parents were unaware that their child could be enrolled in mainstream – or indeed any kind of school.

### Retention

The high school dropout rate among deaf and HoH children who cannot access the curriculum, cope with the environment or adequately communicate is a nationwide problem. Catering for their needs has dented this rate in the project schools, some of which also took on new deaf pupils in the course of the academic year.

### Achievement

Thanks to sign language support, interpretation, tutoring and mentoring from their teaching assistants, 341 deaf children in Grades 1-4 were given a boost to their educational attainment. Average class marks went from a baseline of 50% to 66% in the third year of the project. Even more importantly, perhaps, DDIA also observed a marked improvement in the deaf children's sign language fluency and self-confidence, in and outside the classroom. In one project school, a deaf IT teacher also taught deaf and HoH children basic IT skills.

### Diagnosis of preventable hearing loss

Alongside the project's core activities, hearing assessments were carried out in the project schools and two others. A total of 524 children had hearing tests, of whom 95 were found to have ear infections or foreign bodies in their ears, and were referred to hospitals for treatment.



### Resources for inclusive education

See pages 5-6 for details of the educational materials produced through this project. DDIA will continue to offer these resources to schools and education authorities in other parts of Ethiopia, including rural areas where deaf children's access to education is most limited.

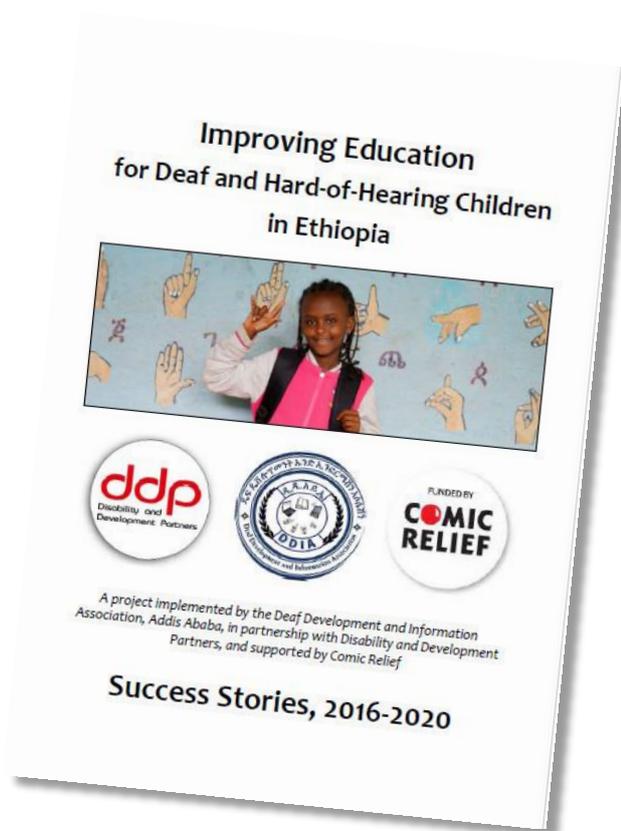
### Public awareness and policy

The deaf Teaching Assistants have made a positive impression and a lasting impact in the target and outreach schools, and won the enthusiastic support of school leaders, hearing teachers, pupils and parents. The project has brought both practical experience and knowledge of the context of deaf education to these school communities and to Ethiopian educationalists more widely.

We hope that this practical model of inclusive education for deaf and hard-of-hearing children, presented to the Ethiopian Ministry of Education at the end-of-project conference, will feed into its educational roadmap for the coming decade.

## 9. Case studies

Please see the Success Stories booklet (in English/Amharic) for examples from the 8 schools of children, their parents, teaching assistants... and the effects the project has had on their lives.



... The director of Merawi Primary School praised the Improving Education project and acknowledged the work of the deaf Teaching Assistant, Marilegn, who has motivated teachers as well as the deaf and HoH children to learn sign language, and raised awareness of their needs. As pupils and parents gathered, the level of sign language conversation showed that Marilegn had done his job! Pupils were engaging exuberantly, excited to have visitors including 3 deaf colleagues.

Disabled and deaf children attending school in rural areas is a new phenomenon. Children work hard, and are often tired and hungry when they get to school. If a family has cattle, the children are expected to help out, and regularly have to be switched between morning and afternoon school.

Among the parents and guardians of Merawi deaf children were two Orthodox priests, who are highly respected role-models, stressing the importance of education for all. The brother of one deaf pupil hoped that he too could become a teaching assistant like Marilegn.

## 10. Policy paper

The present synopsis of the *Improving Education* project was the basis for a presentation to the conference in Addis Ababa in February 2020, attended by 111 stakeholders and representatives of educational, community, NGO and government bodies, including the Ministry of Education.

Though the process has been interrupted by the Covid 19 crisis, a policy paper based on the inclusive approach and model developed through this project will be presented to the MoE when the situation permits, calling on the government to improve education for deaf and hard-of-hearing children through their explicit inclusion in the country's educational roadmap. We also argue for the extension of support for deaf and HoH students to school Grades 5-8.

DDIA offers the experience set out in this demonstration model – deaf Teaching Assistants; sign language training for pupils, teachers, families and peers; inclusive curriculum and classroom resources; and building awareness of the needs of deaf and HoH children – as Ethiopia takes inclusion from an aspiration to a reality in its education policy.

Ethiopia has ratified the UNCRPD and other international agreements on the rights of disabled people. The government has also selected 800 model inclusive schools promoting the education of disabled children. However, theory and practice remain divergent – though the efforts made so far are commendable, given the government's limited ability to finance all unmet educational needs.

## Annex: The History of Deaf Education

The written history of Deaf people goes as far back as the Hebrew law of 1000 BC. Deaf people were also mentioned in the works of Greek philosophers around 355 BC. In 1521 AD Rudolf Agricola, a Dutch humanist, believed that the Deaf could communicate via writing. He advanced the theory that the ability of speech was separate from that of thought. In 1501-1576 AD Girolamo Cardano was the first physician to recognize the ability of the Deaf to reason and the first to challenge Aristotle's belief that hearing was a precondition for understanding.

In 1760 the first public school for the Deaf opened in Paris; it still exists to this day. In 1817 the American School for the Deaf was founded by Mason Cogswell, Thomas H. Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc. And in 1864 the first college for the Deaf was established in Washington, D.C., now called Gallaudet University.

The education of the Deaf in Ethiopia was initiated by Scandinavian and American missionaries: Swedes opened the first school in Ethiopia at Keren in Eritrea (when it was part of Ethiopia); in the early 1960s, American Church of Christ missionaries started a school in Mekanisa, Addis Ababa. The American Baptist Church opened the Alpha School for the Deaf, near Bole Airport, a few years later. Both of these schools have continued teaching deaf students to the present day. The Mekane Yesus Church established a residential school in Hosaena town 4 decades ago, and recently a similar residential school opened in Nekemte, Western Ethiopia. There are also many more inclusive classrooms now for deaf children in regular government schools.

The missionaries brought with them the sign language used in their countries, which had a strong influence on the development of Ethiopian Sign Language. Deaf Ethiopians used American and Nordic versions of sign language for communication, and English for reading and writing. At the end of the 1970s, the Ministry of Education, National Association of the Deaf, and special schools for the Deaf established a committee to prepare the first national sign language book with a complete manual alphabet of the Ethiopian Geez alphabet. Other sign language dictionaries were published by the schools for the Deaf and the Ethiopian National Association of the Deaf (ENAD).

In 2008, Addis Ababa University launched a 3-year Bachelor of Arts programme on *Ethiopian Sign Language and Deaf Culture*. Since then more than 200 Deaf and 70 hearing persons have graduated from the programme, which is the first of its kind in Africa.

Education is the key to achievement and progress for any human being. This key tool to enlightenment has remained inaccessible to deaf children and adults for centuries, simply because people including the ancient philosophers believed that if people could not hear, they could not think, learn or reason. This line of thought was disproved in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century by scholars who paved the way for Deaf people's education.

There are many international and national laws and declarations promoting Deaf education. UNESCO's Salamanca Statement and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, Article 24) are the notable international instruments for promotion of education for people with disabilities in general and the deaf in particular. The 2030 agenda and sustainable development goals all point to equity and equality in every sphere of social and economic life with the motto, 'Leave no-one behind'. All these policy instruments support the use of sign language for the instruction of deaf children, and the idea that children should stay with their parents and access education in their locality with other non-disabled children. School doors should be open to all, and accommodate them according to their needs.

## Organizational background

### Deaf Development and Information Association (DDIA)

DDIA was founded in 2008 by Deaf people and professionals working with the Deaf community. The objectives of DDIA are to enable deaf people to have access to development, education and information in an accessible form that they can understand.

To this end, DDIA has conducted training for deaf men and women in deaf and disability awareness, computer literacy, livelihoods and vocational training activities. Deaf people have been given seed funds to start businesses. In the process, many young deaf people gained valuable experience in running their own enterprises, which in turn increased community awareness of the capabilities of deaf persons to work and earn a living.

Training has also been provided in sign language and deaf awareness to sign language interpreters, health professionals, parents and other interested members of society. Since 2016, DDIA has implemented this inclusive education project for deaf children in 4 schools in Addis Ababa and 4 more schools in the Amhara, Tigray, Oromia and Southern Ethiopia regions.



[www.ddiaethiopia.org](http://www.ddiaethiopia.org)

DDIA is a deaf-led Ethiopian NGO that aims to improve the lives of young deaf people through advocacy, awareness-raising, inclusive education, skills and enterprise training and support. DDIA are champions and ambassadors of the skills and talents of these young people.



[www.ddpuk.org](http://www.ddpuk.org)

DDP has been working on disability and development for over 27 years. Our vision is one of inclusion, where disabled children and adults can access all the opportunities that their societies have to offer. In our partnerships with disabled people's organizations, inclusion is at the heart of everything we do – so that disabled people are not left behind.



[www.comicrelief.com](http://www.comicrelief.com)

Comic Relief is a major charity based in the UK, with a vision of a just world, free from poverty. It works in partnership with the British Department for International Development.

