

Improving Education for Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Children in Ethiopia



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.



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.



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



Comic Relief is a major charity based in the UK, with a vision of a just world, free from poverty.



Success Stories, 2016-2020

The Teaching Assistants

Promoting inclusion in the classroom and beyond



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

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 hard of hearing (HOH) students, teach sign language (SL) 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.

The project schools:

- Hawaryaw Petros, Addis Ababa
- Menelik II Primary, Addis Ababa
- Selam Fire, Addis Ababa
- Agazian Primary School, Addis Ababa
- Soloda Primary School, Adwa
- Hayk Dar Primary School, Hawassa
- Merawi Primary School, Bahir Dar
- Geda Kilole Primary School, Adama

The Ethiopian National Anthem

In sign language

We struck on this idea when Ruma Banerjee and Manjula Nanjundiah, inclusive education consultants from Seva in Action in Bangalore, were visiting DDIA and working with all 8 Teaching Assistants in Addis Ababa.

Ruma and Manjula told us about a video of the Indian national anthem 'Jana Gana Mana' in sign language, inspired by hearing and deaf children signing the national anthem together at their morning school assembly.

Last year, a professional video – fronted by no less a figure than Bollywood superstar Amitabh Bachchan – was released to great acclaim in India, bringing awareness of sign language to millions.

The idea was greeted with enthusiasm at DDIA, but – as with most national anthems – not everyone knew the words by heart. Kidane, the project coordinator, who is deaf, found the lyrics and projected them onto the wall. The TAs started practising it, one word at a time, with the help of Tesfanesh, one of the project's sign language interpreters.

DDIA's founder Alemayehu and advisor Eyasu joined in to make refinements and standardize the signs, as the TAs come from different parts of Ethiopia with regional variations. Alemayehu gave an impassioned demonstration and guided the group to 'sing' with feeling, using their whole body and heart. The group practised at lunchtime over the 3 days and rehearsed it a couple of times before recording it on film.

It was an impressive and spontaneous production, and the TAs have taken the sign language anthem back to their respective schools, where we hope it will be 'sung' at every assembly and flag raising.



Nasredin and Rawda

Menelik II Primary School, Addis Ababa



Nasredin enjoys school. He learned sign language at the age of 4 through a Deaf Association. His family members sometimes went with him, but for them the best experience of sign language training has been with the Teaching Assistant, Lydia.

Nasredin doesn't know yet what he will do later on, but his favourite subject is Maths. Many

deaf pupils enjoy and are particularly good at Maths, says Lydia.

Nasredin has several deaf teachers at this inclusive school, and has no problem understanding them. There is a slight gap in understanding with the hearing teachers, but they have learned and use some sign language too, as have Nasredin's hearing peers.

The Director, Zamaru, has noticed when speaking to her colleagues that their hands automatically start signing. 23 teachers spent 3 months learning sign language. Although it wasn't enough for fluency, they recognize the improvement in classroom communication, and would like to learn more.

The project's curriculum DVDs and other resources have been very useful, says the Director. They are in the Resource Centre and being used by teachers and pupils. This year, deaf pupils have been participating more actively, thanks to an improved ability to access the curriculum. The results will be seen when the pupils sit their Grade 8 exams this year.

There has been a definite reduction in the drop-out rate. Pupils no longer feel alienated, thanks to the mainstreaming of sign language; enrolment and retention are high. All sorts of disabilities including blindness are catered for here. The school is 105 years old, and was established by Emperor Menelik II himself. Rawda chose it especially over their local village school, because she believes Nasredin will get a better education here, and is very happy with it. The only challenge is paying for taxis and buses to get here each day.

Melaku

Geda Kilole Primary School, Adama

When Melaku started at the school there was no special educational needs (SEN) provision. The only available room was a disused library, used as a storeroom. Melaku worked with the school Director Techane and SEN coordinator Bedria to adapt the room for SEN and sign language teaching. "I told the director and teachers about my experience and how deaf people learn, and they listened. We made the classroom exciting and interesting for the pupils with lots of colours and posters. I helped the children create their own comfortable learning environment." The classroom is now actively used for SEN teaching and sign language, full of posters and resources demonstrating signs and linking pictures to signs.



Melaku has also been teaching sign language to teachers, parents and school children. "At first it was hard: people didn't want to come. They said, 'Why should I learn? I'm not deaf,' but the director encouraged all Grade 1 to 4 teachers, and the children have told their parents to go." According to Melaku, the enthusiasm of the children has been far greater than he expected: "In Year 1 I taught sign language to 23, so I expected about 24 in Year 2. But on the first day, I went into the classroom and there were 48 children there! I didn't think I could teach that many, but they all insisted on staying and learning."

Melaku is very positive about the impact the project has made on the school: "People are learning, now that they are excited about the language." But he wants to do more, particularly in teaching sports to children who are deaf and HoH. "Twice a week at lunchtime I teach deaf and HoH children PE. We do mobility exercises, and learn how to be flexible and improve strength. We also learn football and to communicate together through sport."

Hagos

Hayk Dar School, Hawassa



“When I started at the school, teachers and students didn’t know a single sign. Deaf students were at a major disadvantage” explains Hagos Melesse, the deaf TA working at Hayk Dar Primary School. One of the biggest challenges in his first year at the school was explaining the purpose and

value of sign language to a community that had largely been unaware of its existence, and pessimistic about the abilities and prospects of deaf community members. “When the training programme was announced, there was no awareness. People would ask, “What is the use of this?”

Hagos quickly began working to create awareness of sign language and the communication needs of hearing impaired people, by creating posters and teaching aids that he put up in classrooms and around the community. When training for parents and teachers started, Hagos taught participants carefully and step by step. Once people understood the value of sign language, they were quick to engage in the classes, and apply what they learned. “I see parents applying what they have learned at home, really facilitating communication.”

There are many deaf children being hidden in their homes, barred from attending school. Hagos makes it a priority to find these children, convince their families of the value of education for disabled children, and get the children enrolled in school. He collaborates with local partners in order to reach as many children as possible, working through government bodies, the media, and parents who have participated in the training.

Hayek school’s Director is equally happy with Hagos’s contributions: “Having a deaf TA in our school has made us feel supported. Before, we didn’t have the expertise or resources to adequately support deaf or hearing-impaired students”.

Abenezeer and Almaz

Hayk Dar School, Hawassa

Abenezeer is in Grade 1 and aged around 10. His mother Almaz, like all the parents of deaf pupils here, took a 3-month sign language course with Hagos, the TA. Before, they could only communicate through touch and gesture, but now Almaz and Abenezeer’s sister, use sign language with him.

Almaz thanks God: it has brought so many changes. For example, he knows when someone signs his name wrongly, and he corrects them.

Three months of sign language was not really enough, but unfortunately Almaz was unable to attend the refresher course. She knows the other parents, but they all live far apart, limiting the possibilities for mutual support.

Abenezeer says he was very happy in the special reception class, but less comfortable now that he has graduated to the inclusive Grade 1 class. His mum points out that there are benefits, even though it’s tough. Abenezeer can understand the teachers thanks to Hagos and his sign language interpretation. His Amharic teacher also uses the sign language he has learned. This and Maths are Abenezeer’s favourite subjects.

Hagos also helps to interpret between Abenezeer and his hearing friends at breaktime, and when has to do tests, explaining and summarizing what’s required. Abenezeer feels he is doing well. Asked if he enjoys school, he signs, “I love it.”



Yeamlak and Bisrat

Geda Kilole Primary School, Adama



Yeamlak is 8 years old and is deaf. She lives with her father in Wonji town some 20 km away from the nearest school catering for deaf, HoH and disabled kids. Her father Bisrat travels with her by bus every day, stays until school is over, and they return home together. Geda Kilole Primary School operates a shift system to cater for over 4,000 children, and is the first school in Adama to have special needs education and teachers, supplemented by this project's Deaf Teaching Assistant, Melaku, and a second deaf teacher.

Yeamlak attends morning school which is over by about 1pm; they get home in time

for lunch and for Bisrat to open his barbershop. He works late every school day and full days on Saturday and Sunday to support the family. Yeamlak's mother, like thousands of other Ethiopian women, has gone to a middle eastern country in search of employment. Yeamlak is their only child but Bisrat has other family commitments. His two sisters are not well, and his mother is elderly; all of them need his support. He works hard to pay the bus fares and look after his family.

Bisrat has become part of the school and a member of the parents' committee. With other parents and staff, he has met government education officials, and campaigned to make the school a welcoming place for all disabled kids, and for more inclusive provision. Along with other parents, Bisrat took sign language lessons provided by Melaku, and is so grateful to be able to communicate with his daughter and support her in her education.

He is so proud of Yeamlak, a charming, bright child, popular with her teachers and other children, and to see her progress and learn each day alongside her peers. He believes that she can be educated as any other child and will reach her full potential.

Wondemagegn

Selam Fire School, Addis Ababa

Wondemagegn became deaf after falling ill as a young child, and was lucky to have learned SL early, through visits to deaf cafés and social gatherings. "My appointment here was met with curiosity. Many people doubted me, but this job has helped people realize I can do anything," he explains.



Wondemagegn overcame initial communication barriers in the classroom by lip reading. Demand for his sign language courses has been high: he has added additional sessions to accommodate pupil interest, and volunteers once a week at Gelan and Atse Zerayakob Primary Schools.

In addition to running SL courses for teachers, parents and students, Wondemagegn has been producing inclusive teaching resources, and challenging his colleagues to think about inclusion in the classroom. He is working to make his vision – that all community members have access to education, regardless of their disability status – become a reality.

Wondemagegn prides himself on his innovative ideas. 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, 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 into a competition in Addis Ababa for the most innovative SEN teaching resource, and won second prize. Wondemagegn was awarded a certificate of appreciation, and helped earn the school recognition from the Bureau of Education.

"I enjoy my work, and with my volunteering in the 2 outreach schools I hope to help even more children. I visit children in their communities, talk to their parents and encourage them to get involved. People are now understanding the needs of deaf children, and that they can learn, too."

Merawi Primary School

Bahir Dar, Amhara Region



Merawi town is in a poor area 36 km South of Bahir Dar city. Built in 1949, it is an old school by Ethiopian standards, but the wattle buildings are due to be replaced by new concrete ones. It is a very large school, with over 2,100 pupils, 60 per class on average, split into morning and afternoon schools.

The director gave a succinct description of the school, its location, staffing, children with disabilities, and his plans for the new school. Parents and the community are expected to contribute about 60% in labour and materials; the rest has been raised by the government from foreign aid. The government budget per pupil per academic year is 45 birr, just over £1.

The director 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.

Selam

Soloda Primary School, Adwa



Soloda Primary is in Northern Ethiopia, in Adwa where Ethiopians defeated the Italian colonists in battle. Before the project began, there were no teachers capable of communicating with deaf students using sign language. The appointment of a Teaching Assistant has enabled 30 teachers and 30 parents to take sign language training.

Selam Tikue (centre, wearing green jacket) is a deaf girl studying at the school. She started her education at a different school, but was forced to leave because she could not cope with the school environment: teachers were not supportive and had no sign language knowledge. Selam went without education for more than five years.

When DDIA started working at Soloda, Selam joined the school in Grade 3. Now she is in Grade five, and finds the school environment much more conducive to learning. Selam's mother says that she regrets the five years her daughter spent without education. She is now 19 years old and should really be a 10th Grader by now.

According to Selam's mother, Roman Kinfe, the Teaching Assistant has played a vital role in furthering her education. Roman has had sign language training herself and is happy to have this new means of communication, although she is concerned about what help her daughter will get after the project ends.

The Director of the school testifies that the project has had a positive impact on students who are deaf and hard of hearing, pointing out that there are many other deaf and HoH children in Adwa and the surrounding area who are unable to come to school due to their families' precarious economic situation.

Parents at Geda Kilole Primary School, Adama

Shuge (top row, far left) has a son and two daughters, all of whom are deaf. Shuge himself uses crutches to get around. He lives alone with his children. “I find life very hard. I’m disabled and cannot work. Before, my children could not go to school either: they stayed in the house with me. I need my children to support me, but I feared they would be disabled and unemployed like me.

“Melaku (the deaf TA) was very helpful. He said they could have a future. I didn’t believe it at first, but then I saw him teaching, and realized that deaf people can get jobs after all.

“Learning sign language has helped me a lot; now we have a way to communicate. It has taken me a long time to learn, and I fear it will never be easy, but the children are learning at the school and teach me new signs. The school is like a family. I am very happy to be learning sign language and thankful for the work of DDIA and the school.”



Dinknesh (top row, 4th from left) has 4 children, one of whom is deaf. “Before learning sign language I tried to communicate with my son using gestures, but it was impossible. It was hard for me, as there were so many things I wanted to say as a mother, but could not: he didn’t understand.

“When I was told about the sign language training, I decided to learn so I could start helping my child.” Dinknesh can now use basic sign language and demonstrates a wide range of signs for various household objects as well as different greetings and simple phrases.

“He used to be a different person, and I was ill with worry. Now I believe my son can live an normal life. My other children all learn sign language at school and communicate with him, and we are a much happier family.”

Sign Language for Children and Parents

Dawit and Easter, Agazian School, Addis Ababa

Being deaf is not a barrier to success, say pupils and parents attending sign language classes run by deaf teaching assistants in the project’s eight schools.

Among the attendees are deaf or HoH pupils and parents from the Agazian and Selam Fire Schools in Addis Ababa.



Speaking about his teaching assistant, 10-year-old Agazian School pupil Dawit Abara says: “He is intelligent, he’s smart and he’s helpful. He brings deaf and hearing people together and shows us what deaf people can do.”

Dawit is seasonally deaf, which means that it is most difficult for him to hear during the colder rainy season. He practises sign language skills with his mother. Both participated in SL training through the project.

His mother Easter Tesfaye is very happy to have found a school for him. “In the past, I was worried I wouldn’t get a school that could teach him and he wouldn’t be able to learn.”

Having attended the sign language training and met the teaching assistants, Easter has a renewed sense of the importance of ensuring that her son goes to school. “My son has a great interest in education,” she says. “I’ve learnt that it is my obligation as a parent to send him to school. It’s really valuable.”

The sign language courses have been especially important for the families involved, as they have no access to rehabilitative resources such as hearing aids.

Sign Language for Children and Parents

Rawada, Selam Fire School, Addis Ababa

Rawada Muradi Sama, whose son became deaf at the age of two, echoes the sentiments of Easter Tesfaye (see page 6). She says that when he initially became deaf, a charity gave her a referral for a hearing aid – but it eventually broke, making communication significantly harder. Rawada sees sign language training as a more appropriate way to support her child.

Her son, now 13 years old, attends Selam Fire School. There has been a significant shift in his attitude to school since the deaf teaching assistant started working there, she acknowledges.



“In the past,” she says, “he used to tell me he was scared of the teachers. But now tells me that he is enjoying the lessons.” Reflecting on the training, Rawada says: “Signing has been a helpful skill for me, and I hope to carry on improving in the future. I want to learn sign language so I can help pupils communicate.”

Rawada explains that the sign language classes also provide a support network where parents can meet, discuss their children’s progress and share experiences.

Parents at Selam Fire School



Senait has one child: a son, who is short-sighted but hearing. Senait did 3 months of sign language training at Selam Fire School. As her son is not deaf or HoH, she didn’t initially feel it necessary to participate, but other parents she knew with children in the SEN class began attending, so Senait decided to join them.

“We have learned signs such as making tea, making injera (Ethiopian sour flatbread) and greetings. Sign language is important: when people can communicate, they feel they belong.” Senait now uses basic sign language with her son, who has been learning it at school with the deaf teaching assistant Wondemagegn. Occasionally she meets up with

other parents to practise. “I have an interest now,” says Senait. “Now I help other parents learn.”

Lamrot has a daughter in Grade 1, a son in Grade 5, and a toddler. Her daughter is hard of hearing. “Raising a HoH child was very hard,” she says. “There was no support: I was completely on my own, and thought she would have no opportunities.” Lamrot had no understanding of sign language. “I thought deaf people were taboo. Everyone did: we didn’t want anything to do with them. But when DDIA came to the school, my daughter asked me why I wasn’t learning.”

Lamrot completed the 3-month course. “After that, I changed. I realized that deaf people are just like me and you. Now my son is learning. When my children come home we do it together: they show me signs they have learned in class and we practise them. Sign language makes life so much easier: my daughter understands me now, and I want to keep improving. I have passion for sign language now. I would like to set up a parents’ association to challenge stigma. So many deaf children are still kept at home. I want to help them become free, so they can learn.”

