

# Deaf Education: Empowering Deaf Persons in Africa through Knowledge



## Conference Report

26 – 30 September 2016  
Premier Hotel OR Tambo  
Johannesburg  
South Africa

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The 4<sup>th</sup> DeafNet Africa Conference (26 – 30 September 2016) held at the Premier Hotel OR Tambo in Johannesburg - South Africa, brought together an interdisciplinary group of delegates from 26 African countries and 5 other countries worldwide involved in the fields of deaf education and advocacy. The tone of the main conference was set during opening speeches delivered by DeafNET CEO Mrs Suzette Willemse and DeafNET Chairperson Reverend Attie Smit. This conference engaged African delegates from a wide range of professional disciplines in knowledge transfer and inter-professional collaboration to maximize the wellbeing of African Deaf people and improve their overall quality of life. The conference was comprised of workshops, plenary presentations and discussions, poster sessions, election of DeafNET Africa Committee and a gala dinner. The main objectives of the conference included:

- Strengthening and expanding existing networks
- Gathering and disseminating knowledge that empowers educators of the Deaf to equip Deaf learners with knowledge, social competencies and vocational skills equal to their hearing peers
- Raising awareness in the private and public sectors of society about Deaf human and civilian rights, as well as Deaf potential and abilities - including access to equal education on all levels
- Advocating and promoting sign language as a tutoring language for sign language users on all levels of education
- Adopting resolutions and a conference declaration as guiding documents for the next 4 years
- Electing regional representatives and office bearers

Two workshops were held before the main conference commenced. The first workshop focused on the *Red Star Training Method* and was facilitated by Mrs Ina Senekal (De La Bat School of the Deaf). The Red Star Method is a four-step process that contains the characteristics of natural language development and is aimed at empowering teachers with methodologies to impart reading, writing and sign language skills to Deaf learners. The



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method has proven to be particularly useful in providing Deaf children with literacy and communication skills.

Ms Ruth Morgan and Mr John Meletse, both from the University of the Witwatersrand, facilitated the second workshop on *Storytelling*. Inspired by Ms Morgan's book *Deaf Me Normal: Deaf South Africans Tell Their Stories*, the workshop emphasized the importance of helping African Deaf people share their experiences and stories as part of the healing process and to raise awareness about Deaf culture. This workshop also served as the foundation for DeafNet's upcoming project aimed at documenting the life stories of Deaf people in Africa.

The main conference was divided into the following plenary sessions:

### Early Childhood Development

This theme dealt with the importance and various challenges of implementing inclusive education for Deaf children in different African countries. The role of parents, governments, Deaf role models and educators was highlighted in raising awareness within communities regarding sign language, deaf education and the rights of African Deaf persons. Having access to education has consistently been shown to improve the socio-economic conditions of Deaf people, thereby significantly improving their lives and producing more Deaf role models within communities. Despite this, it has been shown that approximately 6000 Deaf children in South Africa are currently out of school. The majority of Deaf learners exit South African schools at a ninth grade level still being illiterate. Furthermore the underdevelopment of sign language in the country has also led to marginalisation in schools. This in turn has negative implications for young children's psychosocial development and future economic prospects. It is for this reason that South African Minister of Basic Education Angie Motshega's keynote speech reiterated the importance of inclusive, accessible and quality education for all Deaf learners of school-going age. Among the common challenges identified by the different countries in terms of inclusive education and knowledge provision for young Deaf children included:

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- A lack of policy implementation at the level of government, especially with regards to the rights of people with disabilities
- Lack of mechanisms to effectively track the number of children who are currently not in school
- A lack of resources to properly train educators and interpreters in schools, as well as provide quality learning materials for Deaf children
- A shortage of skilled professionals such as medical doctors, physiotherapists, nurses, audiologists, etc. to cater to the special needs of Deaf children
- Communication barriers between Deaf learners and their hearing teachers/fellow learners, and especially between hearing parents and their Deaf child
- A lack of financial and psychosocial support for the parents of Deaf children, both as caregivers and as teachers at home
- Inadequate support and limited awareness about the special needs of Deaf children - often resulting in the child being neglected, discriminated against and/or marginalised in different environments. This negative treatment often becomes even worse in cases where the Deaf child is also HIV positive, and may lead to the complete isolation of the child from his/her peers
- The shortage and inaccessibility of Deaf schools that provide basic skills to Deaf children from a young age to ensure the same cognitive development between these children and their hearing counterparts

To address some of these challenges, a number of projects currently underway across the African continent were presented during this plenary. For instance Ms Emmie Wienhoven presented on how the creation of curriculum-based tools for teachers aided in improving the literacy skills of young Deaf children in Tanzania, while Ms Marie-Louise Kanda Malu illustrated the benefits of applying the Red Star Method in the DRC (the most notable findings of this being the rise in Deaf learners' levels of understanding, confidence and academic achievement). Dr Joyce Nalugya (Uganda) also used her personal experience as the parent of a Deaf child in a paper entitled *Quality education for the Deaf African child is possible: Parents discover your value* to argue that parents of Deaf children are able to

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provide a stable, loving environment with the support of various stakeholders. She further called attention to the fact that parents must learn the language used by their Deaf child as this demonstrates proactivity and raises awareness, promotes a supportive environment and aids in the behavioural training and development of Deaf young children.

## Sign Language and Education

The pivotal role of sign language in empowering Deaf people with knowledge was addressed during this plenary. Researchers and educators - as the traditional producers and imparters of knowledge respectively - shared their professional experiences of studying and teaching sign language in different countries. This session shed light on some of the challenges faced by African countries in teaching sign language to students, including issues regarding the affordability and accessibility of quality sign language resources, the lack of collaboration between developed and underdeveloped countries in developing contextually-based methodologies for better knowledge production and dissemination, as well as the failure of many institutions to cater for students with multiple disabilities (for instance Deaf-blind individuals). Professor Anne Baker explained the importance of (sign) linguists in studying the structure and function of sign language in various contexts to effectively teach sign language, produce teaching materials and diagnose children/adults with language disorders. She also alerted the audience to the shortage of skilled sign linguists, experts in deaf education and sign language teachers within the African context. Many Deaf people are often excluded from learning due to the dominance of oralism in schools and the lack of translated teaching materials. In a presentation titled *Online Science in Sign: The British Sign Language Science Signs Glossary*, Ms Rachel O'Neill (Edinburgh University) demonstrated attempts to bridge this gap in learning by working with various Deaf science and technology graduates to produce an online platform with over 1 400 STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) terminology and definitions translated into British Sign Language. This project was undertaken in recognition of the fact that there is extensive terminology in STEM subjects and most of the learning support available to students is only provided in spoken language –

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thus further contributing to the exclusion of many Deaf students and teachers in these fields. Both existing and newly developed signs are used in the glossary project, and an app is currently being developed to make the glossary more accessible to the Deaf community.

Mrs Ingrid Parkin, the principal of a leading Deaf school in South Africa, also cautioned against comparing one Deaf school to another, because there is a myriad of factors that influence the way that different schools operate and each school faces different challenges depending on where it is located. During her presentation, she called attention to the following issues:

- The gap that often exists between what happens inside Deaf schools and what Deaf activists are lobbying for – there is a need to understand the needs of the contemporary Deaf child and explore the role of technology in deaf education at school
- Sign language classes alone cannot make sign language teachers fluent in the language and in Deaf culture. This is because you cannot force someone to engage in the activities of the Deaf community, therefore it becomes important to employ skilled Deaf people who can bring Deaf community and culture into the school. This has been shown to increase the ability of students/teachers to learn sign language.
- The importance of school headmasters in changing the school curriculum and implementing vital policy recommendations needs to be recognised – blame cannot be solely attributed to teachers when things go wrong in educational settings. Moreover, increased State funding and collaboration between stakeholders is necessary to successfully implement these recommendations. Principals also need to recognise that it is equally their responsibility to ensure that Deaf learners are able to find further opportunities and stable employment after leaving school.



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## Adult Education and Training

In a discussion session facilitated by Ms Meryl Glaser (South Africa) and Mr Sekerani Kufakwina (Malawi), Mr Deon De Villiers of the National Institute of the Deaf (NID) gave a presentation on *Further Education and Training* in South Africa. Plans to increase funding in higher institutions of learning (in the form of bursaries awarded to Deaf students and research grants to conduct impactful research within the field of Deaf education), as well as work together with various African governments to provide accreditation papers that are recognised in different countries were discussed. The latter was identified as a common problem when attempting to find employment or study at higher institutions outside of one's own country. Great strides are also being made within the South African context regarding the recognition of prior learning experience to gain admission into higher institutions in the absence of a matric certificate. This will go a long way in terms of allowing older Deaf people who do not possess matric certificates to access higher education and skills training to improve their lives.

Within higher educational institutions themselves, crucial research studies/programs have been undertaken to increase Deaf culture awareness and the inclusion of Deaf students in mainstream universities – a program piloted by Susan Lombaard, Herkulaas Combrink and Zanete Malan at the University of the Free State is an example of this. This program aimed to promote the social inclusivity of Deaf students by offering lessons in basic South African Sign Language to 6 297 hearing first-year students and exposing these students to Deaf culture. Researchers found that the program was essential in creating awareness, fostering a better understanding and respect of Deaf culture and the role of interpreters, breaking down barriers between hearing and Deaf students, creating an environment of inclusivity and increasing hearing students' eagerness to interact and engage with Deaf students. However, many panel presentations and discussions witnessed at this plenary point to a lot of work still needing to be done in addressing the problems faced in Deaf adult education and skills training. Among these challenges is a lack of resources and research outputs to fully address the needs of adults with multiple disabilities and the scarcity of well-paid employment opportunities within the Deaf community once students become qualified. Particularly within



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the highly demanded Deaf interpretation programs offered by some higher institutions in the country, there are a number of curriculum, dialectic, experiential and employment issues that still need to be addressed moving forward.

## Human Rights, Health and Wellbeing

The penultimate plenary of the DeafNET Africa conference primarily focused on the health, wellbeing and human rights of persons with disabilities under the facilitation of Dr Patrick Smith (South Africa) and Mr Makhosini Makhubu (Swaziland). For this session, Dr Danny Titus of the South African Human Rights Commission presented a report on *Human Rights/ United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)*. This international report focused particularly on i) access to and recognition of sign language, ii) the inclusion and acceptance of linguistic and cultural identity, iii) bilingual education and iv) sign language interpreting and accessibility. Here are some of the major findings of this report:

- Most governments still do not recognize Deaf people as people. Moreover, Deaf people are not allowed to obtain a driver's license in some countries.
- Deaf people are not denied education in many countries, but the education they are exposed to is often of a very poor quality. Thus, many countries report high levels of illiteracy among Deaf children.
- Only 30 countries have a code of ethics that secures the autonomy of Deaf people in situations where sign language is involved.
- 77 countries recognize that Deaf people have a right to work and earn a salary, but only 47 of them have anti-discrimination policies that pertain to Deaf people in the workplace.
- 52 countries are ignorant about HIV/AIDS issues and how these issues affect Deaf people. There is also very little health education provided to members of the Deaf community on this subject under the false assumption that issues regarding HIV/AIDS do not affect, or are not applicable to, the Deaf community.

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Therefore, the Human Rights Report (2009) largely points to Deaf people not being able to enjoy full human rights in their respective countries. The challenges faced by Deaf people specifically in accessing quality healthcare due to language barriers were emphasized by many panel presenters during this plenary. The lack of interpreters at clinics/hospitals was at the core of this problem, and many creative solutions were presented during this session to address (and potentially alleviate) this healthcare issue. One example was given in Mr Jonathan Amuah's presentation on the Ghana National Association of the Deaf (GNAD)'s involvement in a pilot project aimed at teaching sign language to selected healthcare providers. Moreover, several other sign language interpreters are currently being trained in Ghana to assist in the healthcare setting. Another example was provided by Ms Prangnat Chininthorn (South Africa) in a presentation entitled *Accessible health information for Deaf people who use signed language for communication*. Ms Chininthorn developed an interactive app in collaboration with local Deaf people which uses sign language and pictures to provide Deaf people with a better understanding of medical jargon and other important information pertaining to their health.

The Human Rights Report presented by Dr Titus is essential because it provides much needed information about what needs to be considered and done in areas such as legislature, deaf education, workplace policy, as well as the role of private companies and civil society in promoting human rights for persons with disabilities. Change within these areas will only become possible once governments commit to the values enshrined in the UNCRPD and fulfil their own responsibilities towards this convention. Since punitive measures at an international level are currently not in place to ensure that governments fulfil these responsibilities, the degree of policy implementation and social change that will result from such conventions cannot be determined. Besides relying on their respective governments (which are often ineffective), Deaf people are encouraged to join non-governmental organisation that advocate for their rights, such as the Human Rights Commission. Involving local media and mobilizing public support is also seen as an effective way of shaming governments that commit gross human rights violations against persons with disabilities – thereby forcing these governments to publicly account for their actions.

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## Deaf Education and Community Integration

. “*The empowerment of Deaf persons cannot be achieved with piecemeal half-hearted approaches, which is why we need Tirisano*”

– Professor Rebecca Lekoko, University of Botswana

The above quote exemplifies the objectives of the plenary session on Deaf Education and Community Integration. Professor Lekoko presented a paper on *Empowering Deaf through a symbiotic relationship of communities and institutions: Enlivening the African’s spirit of Tirisano*. In the paper, she calls attention to the role of *Tirisano* (roughly translated into ‘working together’) in addressing the challenges faced by Deaf people when it comes to social inclusion, political participation and access to quality education and healthcare within African countries. Communities, state institutions and civil societies are called upon to advocate for the human rights of Deaf people and ensure the successful implementation of vital policies and initiatives, especially at a community level. This in turn brings about change in the lives of many Deaf people and promotes a strong sense of community integration and social cohesion within different communities. Other examples given of how community members can form partnerships to foster action for the Deaf is through vocational training, socioeconomic empowerment programmes and strategies to curb the high rates of unemployment and illiteracy within the Deaf community.

Ms Erna Moller’s conference presentation entitled *RampUp: Readiness to the inclusion of Deaf persons in faith communities* also highlighted the crucial role that interactions with members of the community play in contributing to the social integration and overall wellbeing of Deaf people. Speaking specifically about inclusion into local church groups, Ms Moller addressed the role of faith in helping Deaf people live meaningful, productive lives. She noted that Deaf people face as many difficulties within church establishments as they do in society in general - including judgmental and/or patronizing attitudes and practises from their fellow church members which focus on the disability and not the person, unwanted sympathy and exposure to oppressing theological beliefs (for instance the widespread belief



that disability is a result of sin). She believes that working together by educating fellow believers raises awareness within the community and is vital in dispelling negative beliefs and harmful stereotypes about the Deaf community. Further active steps also need to be implemented in the community to achieve social inclusion, such as the Annual Disability Awareness Sunday organised by The Leprosy Mission, an organisation that she is part of.

Considering the various issues that were discussed and engaged with throughout the conference, the following resolutions were adopted as the 4<sup>th</sup> DeafNET Africa Conference ended:

### **Early Childhood Development**

1. National Associations of the Deaf (NADs) and stakeholders encouraged to utilize the availability of role models in the form of parents of Deaf children to promote parental involvement in the education of the Deaf, as this will foster attitudinal change.
2. NADs to support the establishment and empowerment of parent support groups, both socially and economically.
3. Countries are encouraged to explore innovative teaching methodologies for Deaf children, while largely maintaining the existing curriculum with the aim of improving learning, reading and writing of the second language.
4. NADs to partner with other relevant stakeholders to lobby their governments to increase budgetary provision for quality education to address the challenges of teacher training, instructional materials, as well as the support costs of employing sign language teachers and interpreters.
5. To encourage the involvement of principals, HODs, NADs, Deaf community leaders and other school management boards in policy and decision making processes.
6. DeafNET to support the replication of the Red Star Model in other African countries.
7. NADs and their relevant stakeholders to link the Sustainable Development Goal 4 - which ensures inclusive and quality education for all and promotes lifelong learning – while also considering Article 24 of UNCRPD<sup>1</sup> on Education; to ensure the

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<sup>1</sup> UNCRPD refers to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

- educational needs of the Deaf and Deaf-blind and to maximize their academic and social development.
8. Advocacy for Early Identification and Intervention for Deaf children in line with CRPD Article 25 (b) on Health. This will provide countries with appropriate strategies for promoting early communication among Deaf children. Additionally, lobby Early Childhood Development Centre educators for training on Deaf education and signing.
  9. NADs should work with their government and other stakeholders to collect evidence on Deaf people and their related challenges to inform policy formulation, planning and budgeting.

### **Sign Language and Education**

10. Sign linguists to collect a variety of signs for use in education to enhance quality methodologies and learning in all aspects.
11. A need for more qualified sign linguists and educators in deaf education at all levels.
12. A need for increased formal training opportunities for teachers to improve their sign language competency. This in turn has budget implications.
13. NADs to ensure that their advocacy issues are in line with the updated current needs of Deaf learners within the existing rapidly changing education systems.
14. A need for Deaf educators to be qualified in both National Sign Language and teaching qualification.
15. Need for STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) signers through researching for more vocabulary of signs to support science career pathways for the Deaf.
16. Use of social media to promote sharing or exchange of STEM knowledge
17. Stakeholders in Africa to work with their governments to increase opportunities for Deaf children to further their education beyond primary / basic education.
18. NAD's to advocate for more representation of Deaf people in parliament and/or government bodies to increase the voice of Deaf persons at different levels.
19. Increase mentorship and experiential learning opportunities for sign linguist trainees.

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### **Adult Education and Training**

20. Promote adult literacy training courses for Deaf adults to increase their competency with sign language in day-to-day life experiences.
21. DeafNET to promote exchange (co-enrolment) programmes for its members to gain experience and knowledge from other model countries.
22. Need to contextualize sign language training to accommodate contextual and cultural opportunities and demands.
23. Encourage more South African people (especially Deaf people too) to enrol for Deaf interpreter courses and lobby for course funding.
24. National Institute of the Deaf (NID) to strengthen the academic qualifications offered to Deaf students to gain more recognition across Africa.
25. Assessment and evaluation of sign language programmes should be carried out.
26. Promote involvement of skilled sign language instructors/teachers in sign language training.
27. Advocate for the introduction of sign language interpreter training programmes in higher education and training institutions, and introduce professional Deaf interpreter courses.

### **Human Rights, Health and Wellbeing**

28. Advocate for recognition of sign languages in national legislations and formulation of policy guidelines for its implementation.
29. Countries that have ratified the CRPD to increase advocacy efforts to ensure its domestication and alignment into the national laws.
30. NADs to work with other DPOs to follow up with their governments on periodic reporting to the CRPD committee of experts on key issues of concern.
31. Lobby governments to recognize and promote the cultural and linguistic identity of the Deaf community in line with CRPD, and promotion of research on Deaf-specific areas.



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32. NADs to partner with health service providers and provide sign language training courses for its practitioners to bridge the communication barrier to health access.

### **Deaf Education and Community Inclusion**

33. Adopt the approach of working together and forming partnerships to foster action and more impact on Deaf communities.
34. Integrate vocational and self-reliance among the Deaf
35. Promote capacity building and socio-economic empowerment programmes to improve the livelihoods of Deaf people.
36. Develop strategies to address unemployment and poverty among Deaf people by lobbying for their inclusion in government programmes.
37. Inclusion of Deaf people in all aspects of community life including faith-based communities.



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## Elected DeafNET Africa Committee Members

The DeafNET Africa Committee (DAC), previously named the Africa Contact Group for Mental Health and Deafness (ACGMHD) has been elected on the final day of the conference. The following representatives (some pictured below with DeafNET CEO Mrs Suzette Willemse in the middle) were elected to be part of the DeafNET Africa Committee (DeafNET's volunteer network):



- Chairperson – **Woinshet Girma** (Deaf) from Ethiopia
- Deputy Chairperson – **Innocent Djonthe** (Deaf) from Cameroon
- Northern Region – **Lina Squalli Houssaini** (Deaf) from Morocco
- Central Region – **Marie-Louise Kanda Malu** from DRC
- Western Region – **Jonathan Amuah** (Deaf) from Ghana
- Eastern Region – **Edgar Bwire** (Deaf) from Uganda
- Southern Region – **Tshepo Maseko** (Deaf) from South Africa
- Indian Ocean Islands – **Irani Jankee** (Deaf) from Mauritius

Suzette Willemse

Chairperson: DeafNET Africa Conference 2016

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