



Signs of progress

David Justice, International Programs Director of Discovering Deaf Worlds, underlines the value of building local capacity to celebrate deafness...

According to the World Health Organization, there are approximately 278 million deaf people in the world, 80% of whom live in low/middle-income countries. Further research from the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) has discovered that at least 90% of deaf people in developing countries receive no formal education, and of those who do, only 1-2% receive an education in sign language. These studies combined help us realise that there are over 200 million deaf people in the world who will most likely never go to school or fully develop a language, and it is not uncommon for deaf people in developing countries to be isolated, abandoned, abused or even murdered because they are seen as a burden to their families.

At the same time, throughout the world there are many well-established doctors, lawyers, profes-

sors, accountants and engineers who are deaf. Many of them identify as being 'culturally deaf' rather than 'disabled', and use sign language to communicate. Most of them come from a supportive environment with language accessibility, interpreting services and disability rights, allowing them greater opportunities to compete on a par with their peers who can hear.

Despite the additional challenges faced by deaf people in developing countries, there are several organisations and humanitarians working to improve education, employment and human rights circumstances for deaf people in these communities. These include: deaf Kenyans who are educating their community about HIV/AIDS; deaf Indian women who are advocating for equal employment rights; and deaf Filipinos who are lobbying their government for



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The fight against discrimination: UN and WFD

Discrimination based on disability still exists in the modern world. There have been several UN conventions designed to address this issue, the main one being the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (signed in 2007), which was set up to 'promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity'.¹

The UN's spokesorganisation for promoting the rights of deaf people worldwide is the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD). The WFD ensures that people who are deaf receive the same human rights as others and provides legal and administrative measures to preserve sign language in individual countries.

The WFD holds a world congress every four years to highlight the human rights of deaf people. The next congress will be held in 2015 in Istanbul, Turkey.

¹ www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml

recognition of Filipino sign language in their deaf schools. All of these deaf advocacy organisations are doing so because they believe that deaf people and deaf culture bring a unique and valuable contribution to the diversity of our society, and must be preserved, supported and celebrated.

Similarly, Discovering Deaf Worlds (DDW) has established a vast network of over 250 deaf advocacy organisations from 50 countries, with a primary goal of advancing the self-determination of signing deaf communities through local capacity building. The purpose is not to establish foreign-led advocacy programmes or drive funding towards the resolution of deafness. Rather, DDW partners with local deaf community leaders and provides organisational development training and process consultation to ensure these leaders reach their highest potential to become effective and efficient change agents in their communities.

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Five years ago, I met a deaf woman in Cambodia who came from an impoverished family. She told me stories of her abusive childhood. Her father felt that his deaf daughter would never get a job, or help provide for their family, so he beat her daily because she was a burden. In her adult years, however, this deaf woman found work at a non-profit organisation, a café, which hired, trained and provided steady employment for her and a number of other deaf and disabled people in her town. Once the subject of abuse for 'getting in the way', this deaf woman was now the primary breadwinner for her family.

Equal access not only improved the life of one individual, but became a tremendous opportunity for an entire family. DDW, WFD and hundreds of other deaf associations worldwide are working to create these kinds of equal opportunities to embrace the diversity and contributions of deaf people in our society.

By investing in partnerships with local people, seeking to maximise use of local resources, and strengthening the capacity of local leadership, we can do our part to ensure sustainable improvements are made.

We live by a quote from philosopher Lao Tzu: "A leader is best when people barely know he exists, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: We did it ourselves." This is at the heart of our values, for this is what defines 'empowerment'.



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