

Deafblind education in Africa

Rodney Clark, past CEO of Sense and current Chair of Deaf Reach UK, shares some background to deafblind provision in East Africa

I was touched and honoured to be asked to write some words on the development of deafblind education in Africa as an introduction to Ismael's DR Congo article. These are very much personal reflections, starting with a first encounter almost 40 years ago.

In 1984, I was three years into my CEO role with Sense and was participating in the abortive World Conference of the International Council for the Education of the Visually Impaired which was being held in Nairobi, Kenya that year. The conference coincided with a failed coup by some disaffected young army officers, which was sufficiently obstructive to cause it to be abandoned. With time on my hands, I visited the Kenya Deaf Children's Society which ran most, if not all, of the deaf schools in the country. Thanks to CBM, and almost certainly its East African Director, the late Joe Morrissey, I was asked to work with the architect on plans for a new Deafblind School at Kabarnet to replace one that had been established some years previously. Until that time, I had not been aware of any provision for deafblind children in sub-Saharan Africa.

Deafblind International (Dbi) was established in 1976 and has always been a very strong worldwide network. I was its Secretary/Treasurer for 20 years and was in the privileged position of watching the growth of services, particularly education, across many developing countries during that time. We were regularly approached by delegates from these countries seeking help at the most basic levels.

It is not possible to mention all of the INGOs that have worked hard to develop new deafblind services in Africa, but, in addition to Dbi, a major part has been played by Perkins International (Boston, USA), the Nordic Countries (through FSDB, the Swedish Deafblind Association), the Cristoffelblindenmission (CBM, Bensheim, Germany), Sense International (London, UK), Kentalis (Sint Michielsgestel, Netherlands) and Signo (Norway).

Through the 1980s and 1990s, we saw new services being developed in Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Tanzania and Uganda. In addition, much work has also been undertaken by the World Federation of the Deafblind, which is hosted by FSDB in Stockholm, and which held a major conference for its deafblind members at Entebbe, Uganda, some years ago.

DeafReach started life as a small grant-making trust in the UK but three years ago it grew into an INGO, and its main programme is in Rwanda. This came about as the result of a Strategic Planning exercise for East African partners in 2015, where Rwanda was identified as greatly needing external support for service development, since it did not enjoy the same level of Government support as its neighbours.

As shared in a recent edition, May 2019, DeafReach's work in Rwanda focuses on two deaf schools, Umutara and Nyabihu, with the main project being the development of Vocational Training for both deaf and hearing students with Friends of Handicap in Rwanda (FHR), which is the parent

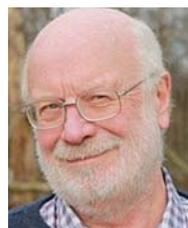
charity for Umutara. This school was founded by Eleanie Kamana, who took refuge in DRC with her uncle, Rev Botanyi Kamonyo, during the Genocide. Kamonyo leads an organisation called CENYESED, which runs three deaf schools in DRC.

It is DeafReach policy to undertake a Strategic Planning exercise with any potential partner, and our Operations Director, Howard, worked with FHR early in 2018 to produce plans for both the charity and the school. As a result, Kamonyo asked if Howard would help CENYESED to do the same. This work was carried out this Spring (2019) and during the process, it was decided to turn the school at Goma into a deafblind school. It is therefore planned that Howard will work with CENYESED on a specific Business Plan for this development later this year.

A DeafReach group made visits to Rwanda and Uganda in February 2019. Whilst in Arua, looking at Signal and Signhealth Uganda's work with deaf and disabled children in the South Sudan refugee settlements, we met with Dr Ismael Byaruhanga, an Audiologist and Executive Director of a deaf school in Aru, DRC. He was in Arua as part of a Lions' project for clinical evaluations of the deaf pupils in the primary schools in and around Arua. He told us of his wish to open his own deafblind school, as he knew of a number of children. Ismael has also been a graduate of the deafblind training programme at Groningen University, in the Netherlands, and will be a fantastic resource for the professional training that will be required for the new services, both in DRC and Rwanda.

Given the impetus of these two developments in DRC, and knowing that there was no educational service for deafblind children in Rwanda, we decided to do some active research there. Later this year, Howard and Eric Ngabo, the son of Louis, the founder of Nyabihu School, will tour the country in an attempt to identify children in need of a service.

It is an immense pleasure to be involved in work in Africa. The people we work with are so inspiring, so able and so committed, it is only the economic situation of their country that holds them back. What a joy therefore to be able to help meet this gap, and to discover just how far relatively small sums of money will go. ■



Rod Clark OBE has worked in the field of sensory impairment services for almost 50 years. He was Chief Executive of Sense between 1981 and 2001, Chairman of Signhealth from 1991 to 2011. During his time at Sense, he established Sense International. He helped establish Signal (Sensory Impairment, Globally, Nationally and Locally) supporting deaf children and youth in Africa. He has been Chairman of DeafReach since 2015

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