

Communication in Burundi

Kamala Achu explains about deaf education in Burundi and the first steps that need to be taken towards the development of a full sign language



What happens to education in a country that suffered a civil war that lasted nearly ten years, caused the deaths of more than 350,000 people and the displacement of over a million? Burundi, with a population of 8.5 million, is one of the poorest countries in the world. What about the deaf children of Burundi? How do they learn and communicate? What kind of sign language is used? In looking for answers to these questions we found that very little has changed for deaf people in Burundi in more than 30 years, since the first school for deaf children was started. The Government and Ministry of Education have not yet taken responsibility for or addressed the educational needs of deaf children or tackled the challenge of communication and sign language.

There are only two formal schools for deaf children in the country, both of which are residential. The Centre d'Éducation Spécialisée pour Déficiants Auditifs (Centre for Special Education for Hearing-Impaired – CESDA) in Gitega was started in 1981 by the Catholic Diocese and it follows a Belgian model where lip-reading

and oralism are promoted. Ecole Ephphatha pour les Sourds (EES) in Bujumbura, the capital, was founded a few months earlier, also in 1981, by a deaf missionary from America called Andrew Foster who started other Ephphatha schools in many African countries using American Sign Language (ASL).

The total enrolment in 2011 at the two schools was 420 children. However, the number of deaf children of school age is not known, and neither is the number of young deaf adults under the age of 30 years. The data is simply not there and no previous census has included a question about disability or deafness.

There is no sign language dictionary and only two attempts at recording signs in Burundi are known. The first was a small publication of 83 verbs and nouns published by Ecole Ephphatha pour les Sourds; the other was a small manual of 500 words produced by DeafNET (part of The National Institute for the Deaf in South Africa) in co-operation with the Association Nationale des Sourds du Burundi (Burundi National Association of the Deaf – BNAD).



It is commonly accepted that ASL is the basis of the sign language used by those who sign in Burundi; however, the influences from neighbouring countries such as Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and Rwanda are keenly felt and commented on. The need for a Burundian sign language emerged strongly at a recent meeting to discuss priorities with several deaf and hearing groups. There was no consensus about the existence of a Burundian Sign Language. However, the majority felt that Burundian culture and traditions and also regional differences within the country have to be taken into consideration, as well as all the nuances of the various languages spoken in Burundi – Kirundi, French, Swahili and English. Maurice Murishi, headmaster of EES, recounted how his teachers had got together to decide the sign for 'Moses' as they had found different and conflicting signs for the name.

In October 2011 DOOR International Afrique launched *Connaitre Dieu comment?* (How to know God) a set of six CDs containing 32 Bible stories. The cover says it is in Burundian Sign Language; however, at the recent meeting mentioned above there was no recognition or acceptance that a Burundian Sign Language had been developed. There is no comprehensive dictionary and no evidence of a process having taken place to develop the sign language which would necessarily have involved deaf people, parents of deaf children, the schools and the deaf association and others such as professors from the linguistics department of the University of Burundi.

The groups mentioned above called for more research because there is a mixture of sign languages, and deaf people from one province will not understand those from another. Anyone who has attended an Ephphatha School will be using a sign language based on ASL. Pupils from CESDA will depend more on lip-reading, although teachers there say that they now teach sign language and that it is not unusual for

children to start developing their own 'secret' signs. Deaf people who have had a chance to travel to or to study in neighbouring countries will be subject to those outside influences because they will have picked up local vocabulary.

Fabien Hamisi of the BNAD says that it is a question of building capacity, helping to develop sign language from what exists and is being used now. The BNAD runs classes in informal settings in three rural areas where groups of deaf children and young adults are taught sign language and basic literacy and numeracy. Others, including the teachers from the two schools, the parents and interpreters, propose systematic research first to ascertain the level, quality and in-country similarities and differences of sign language and then to identify clearly the influences from neighbouring countries. Most of all they want a sign language that is rooted in and reflects Burundi's rich cultural and linguistic traditions. This will be a complex and challenging task and will necessarily involve all the key players mentioned here as well as others who could provide more technical assistance.

There is no doubt that the form of sign language used now in Burundi is a vibrant and expressive tool. After all, according to the BNAD, nearly 1,000 deaf people use sign language as their main language and it should be the base from which a uniquely Burundian national sign language is developed and refined.

Please email your comments to mail@ddpuk.org and visit our website at www.ddpuk.org/

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