

Gaining momentum in Malawi

An inspiring and successful project raising deaf awareness among families and communities in Northern Malawi is helping deaf children to succeed in school. [Karen Goodman-Jones](#) and [Rita Hopper](#) have the details

'If Malawi is to develop we must all be educated, including our deaf children.'

Reverend Maxwell Banda, Education Secretary, Central Church of Africa Presbyteria, Livingstonia Synod

The Deaf Education Project in Northern Malawi is a three-year partnership between the Woodford Foundation, the Woodford Foundation Scotland, Sense Scotland and Central Church of Africa Presbyterian Livingstonia Synod. Funded by the Scottish Government's Malawi Development Programme and Comic Relief, the project is based in Mzuzu and staffed by four highly skilled Malawian Teachers of the Deaf and Blind working across four education districts – Nkhata Bay, Mzuzu City, Mzimba North and Likoma.

The project was designed to support the Malawi Ministry of Education in working towards achieving universal primary education for all its citizens. Deaf education in Northern Malawi is primarily focused on three residential schools for the deaf. As our Malawi colleagues recognise, residential deaf education is too expensive to be accessible to all deaf children and has the additional disadvantage of removing deaf children from their families and immediate communities. Mainstream primary schools and teachers are under-resourced and there is little opportunity for teachers to acquire the understanding and skills to support deaf children in classes of up to and sometimes over 100 pupils. Deaf children also face discrimination in school, in their communities and within their own families, mainly due to a lack of understanding surrounding the causes of deafness and the ability of deaf people to reach their full potential by becoming both educated and economically active members of society.

The project was based on consultation with the Deputy Director of Special Needs Education, David Njaidi, and the Reverend Maxwell Banda who, in his capacity of Education Secretary for Livingstonia Synod, is responsible for over 700 schools, including three residential deaf schools and a new teacher training college. The primary aim of the project is to increase the number of deaf children attending mainstream schools by first identifying and recording the number of deaf children in Northern Malawi both in and out of education, and then directly addressing barriers to their education. The project takes a holistic approach to the problem by supporting families and communities in gaining an understanding of deafness and the rights



of deaf children. It also provides professional development opportunities to primary teachers to gain the skills essential for supporting deaf children in mainstream education and it has assisted in the development of a Northern Council of Deafness to bring together parents and professionals to address deaf issues in Northern Malawi. An additional element of the project was to construct a Resource Centre in Mzuzu Primary School to provide a centre of excellence for mainstream deaf education and allow peripatetic teachers of children with special needs a base for their outreach work in the surrounding communities.

The survey is an essential element of the project. Questionnaires are delivered to and collected from schools by project staff and by Ministry of Education primary education advisers, whose enthusiastic support of the project has proven invaluable. The survey asks headteachers to identify children they think have hearing problems and it is also a useful tool in raising awareness of the project throughout the schools in the region. Surveys are followed by a visit to schools to carry out individual hearing assessments on children identified as having hearing difficulties. By the end of the second year of the project (March 2012), 664 schools in four education districts had been surveyed and 1,115 children verified as deaf.

Increasing understanding of deafness at family and community levels is tackled via local workshops targeted at families and community leaders respectively. The aim of these workshops is to enable parents and communities to gain an understanding of the causes of deafness, which in Malawi include congenital deafness and tropical diseases such as malaria. Many children become deaf due to ear infections that in the developed world would be quickly treated, but which in Malawi, where health prevention and treatment are limited by both geography and economic costs, become chronic

and lead to deafness. Workshops enable participants to think about the barriers deaf children experience in attending schools – barriers presented by the attitudes of family, community, teachers and schools. Parent workshops include the production of action plans, with parents prioritising one barrier they agree to address as a group. This could be to co-operate with teachers to support their deaf children's education or to make sure that they help their children with homework. Six-month evaluation visits are carried out to assess progress, leading to either additional support or help for groups to move on to their next action point. Parent groups can also access small grants to purchase stationery or other small items they need to help the group function.

Follow-up monitoring and evaluation visits from project staff indicate that parent and community awareness and communication workshops are playing a significant role in identifying deaf children not in school. As the project's reputation has grown, we also hear of community leaders actively seeking out deaf children for assessment before parent workshops have taken place.

To date, 1,029 parents from 58 locations have attended parent awareness and communication training sessions and 289 deaf children not in education have returned to or started school. In addition, anecdotal evidence suggests that such behavioural changes within communities have also created more positive attitudes to children with other disabilities, whether these are physical or learning difficulties.

Community awareness sessions take place over one day and to date nearly 750 respected community leaders have participated. Their support for the project and their influence in reaching the deaf children in their community continue to grow.

Teacher awareness and communication training takes place over two days and focuses on teachers gaining the skills and techniques necessary first to identify and then to support deaf children in mainstream education. Many teachers, in common with parents and communities, believe that a deaf child cannot learn and it is not uncommon for a deaf child to be sent home. Many teachers want to help deaf children but simply don't know how. To date, 140 teachers and headteachers from 55 locations have participated in training sessions. Project monitoring and evaluation visits reveal that teachers start to use their new skills and techniques in the classroom immediately and share their learning with colleagues. This finding is supported by monitoring and evaluation carried out by primary education advisers and headteachers. Individual case studies show previously failing deaf pupils successfully passing end-of-year examinations and becoming more involved in everyday school life as communication barriers are broken down and deaf children start to interact with others in their classes.

The Resource Centre at Mzuzu Primary School has now been open for six months and, through the direct support of the Malawian Ministry of Education, now employs three special needs education teachers, covering specialisms in deaf education, learning disabilities and teaching blind pupils. Teachers work in the Resource Centre three days a week and in surrounding communities for two days.

It is estimated that around 30–35% of deaf children in Northern Malawi do not have access to education. One three-year programme and four project staff cannot impact on all those children. However, the project is working to ensure that all levels of society are committed to supporting the right of all deaf children to access education. It is demonstrating that with support from parents, communities and skilled teaching staff, deaf children will succeed in school. Drop-out rates among deaf children in participating schools have fallen from 80% to 5%. Parent groups are demonstrating the effectiveness of joint action – some are going out to talk to schools the project has yet to reach, and one group has set up a feeding programme for all the pupils in their school, not just those with a hearing impairment. There is a commitment from the Ministry of Education to roll out the Resource Centre model if evaluation shows it to be effective, and in one district an additional Teacher of the Deaf has been employed in an existing unit.

In a country such as Malawi, where the principle of 'education for all' has been adopted but funds to carry this out are limited, and where deaths of teaching staff from HIV/AIDS are common and class sizes routinely cross the 100-pupil threshold, this programme is illustrating that attitudinal change leading to behavioural change can make a huge impact. The dedication of the project staff and the support of the families and communities where they work are leading the way in helping deaf children to have an equal chance to access quality education with their hearing peers for the first time.

The final words are from the headteacher of a small primary school in Northern Malawi where ten of the 380 pupils are deaf because of otitis media, 'I am proud to support the project's training of parents, communities and teachers. This intervention has resulted in all but two deaf pupils progressing well in the last academic year. Esther, who was previously unable to read or write, can now read simple sentences; Antony, who had previously repeated standard 2 three times, has now successfully graduated to standard 3; Haven, who repeated standard 3 a number of times, has now graduated to standard 4. The two children who have not progressed have parents yet to attend parent workshops. Thank you for changing our negative attitudes to our deaf children.'

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