

VSO – Supporting deaf learners in Nigeria and Nepal



Purna Shrestha and **Adewunmi Christabel Omolade** describe their VSO (Volunteer Services Overseas) work in Nepal and Nigeria

Inclusion of children with disabilities – Policy Contexts

Both the governments of Nepal and Nigeria have endorsed the UNESCO definition of inclusive education, considering it as "the process of addressing all barriers and providing access to quality education to meet the diverse needs of all learners in the same learning environment". In 2018 Nigeria adopted a Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act, domesticating the international commitments under the UN CRPD (United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities) into national law. Concerning education, the law reaffirms the unfettered right to education for persons with disabilities without discrimination or segregation (Part V, art.17.1) and their entitlement to free education to secondary school level (Part V, art.17.2). Moreover, all public schools are required to be inclusive and accessible, to have trained personnel and adequate facilities (Part V, art.18.1).

Similarly, the constitution of Nepal (2015) dedicates specific provisions to the right of education for persons with disabilities. The latter are entitled to free higher education (art. 31.3) and to access free education through Braille and sign language in the case of visually impaired and hearing-impaired learners, respectively (art. 31.4). In spite of the government's commitment to the inclusion of children with disabilities, the implementation of national policies on the ground is poor resulting in far fewer children with disabilities attending schools, and those who attend the schools do not have access to inclusive learning resources. Teachers do not have the knowledge and skills to support learners with disabilities and teaching and learning materials are not accessible for learners with disabilities.

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on learners with disabilities who were already experiencing social and educational disadvantage. They face a lack of accessible public health information, significant barriers to implement basic hygiene measures and inaccessible health facilities.



Maimuna Aliyu a student in a special education school in Bunkure, Dan Hassan Kura LGA of Kano state, using a sign language visual card to demonstrate to other students



Ummi Muhd (red scarf) Usaman Suleiman (in white cap), Fatima Aliyu (Blue Scarf) Students in a primary school in Kano learning sign language (above).



VSO national volunteer Uzoamaka Diyoke teaching children sign

While the governments in Nepal and Nigeria have



Prakirti, Sign language volunteer, signs the story *the Day dreamer*

introduced distance-learning solutions to keep children learning while they are at home, learners with disabilities are least likely to benefit from these interventions because they are not often accessible to them. In this article, we present how VSO has been empowering learners with disabilities (particularly learners with hearing impairment) before and during the Covid-19 crisis.

Nigeria

VSO conducted a Social Inclusion and Gender (SIG) analysis in 12 states of Nigeria in 2019, which found that most of the children with disabilities who were studying in special schools (learners with hearing impairment in particular) were afraid of going back to their communities because they could not communicate effectively with members of their families.

Language in Enugu

There are several challenges to delivering classes in sign language in Nigeria. Firstly, there is no national sign language. The official sign language in Nigeria is American Sign Language. During VSO support to special schools in Enugu and Kano states, we discovered that teachers were using sign language inconsistently and at times, inventing their own signs. The schools did

not have adequate sign language materials. We observed that the children were taught the wrong sign language.

Secondly, there is a lack of national curriculum in sign language. The teachers follow the regular curriculum, and this means sign language is only used to interpret the regular spoken language. Students could not follow the contents of the curriculum. Finally, the poor, or lack of, awareness on learning disabilities among parents and teachers that teach in regular schools has made it very difficult for children with special needs to learn in regular schools and attend schools where they can interact and integrate with members of their communities.

VSO's solutions

Informed by the contextual analysis, VSO developed a sign language scheme of work to guide VSO volunteers in training teachers and learners on using American sign language correctly. VSO developed sign language resources to ensure coordinated teaching and learning for children with auditory learning disabilities and to support teachers in the teaching of sign language in regular classrooms for children with and without disabilities. VSO developed over 300 words in sign language that help learners to learn coordinated basic sign language for beginners.

VSO volunteers have trained 100 primary teachers who teach primary classes 1–4 in the use of Sign Language. Over 14,000 children are now exposed to learning sign language and most of them can use sign language for basic communication. This has made it easier for children with disabilities to attend classes in regular schools within their communities and integrate into their own communities as they can now communicate with their teachers and other children without feeling frustrated and left out of the learning environment.

VSO has recruited three Nigerian professional volunteers to train public primary school teachers twice a week and



VSO national volunteer Prakirti in community awareness video on child marriage and child protection.

General

support national graduate and community service volunteers in teaching learners with hearing impairments and those with multiple disabilities in Inclusive Neighbourhood Space. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, VSO volunteers regularly visited the schools and coached the teachers. As a result, children with hearing impairments are learning in the same classrooms in 15 schools; VSO is supporting them in Enugu and Kano States. During the Covid-19 pandemic, VSO produced community awareness videos in sign language and broadcast them on national television. VSO has produced sign language learning videos, which are available on VSO School android applications. We plan to train thousands of teachers, children and parents through the VSO School App.

Nepal

In Nepal, VSO is implementing the 'Empowering a New Generation of Adolescent Girls with Education' (ENGAGE) project in Nepal funded by FCDO (Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office, formally known as DFID), which aims to help improve learning opportunities and outcomes for thousands of highly marginalised out-of-school girls in the Sarlahi, Parsa districts of Province No.2. ENGAGE used the Washington Group (WG) questions as a disability screening tool and subsequently provided referrals for girls with disabilities to access services for the first time. The screening process found that one in four students had a functional limitation that required further check-up, treatment and provision of assistive devices, theory, or teaching learning adaptation. To support learners with hearing impairment, VSO recruited two national volunteers as sign language trainers who have been training VSO staff, teachers, and parents in sign languages. Volunteers have produced several learning videos on sign languages.



Pooja Regmi, Sign Language Trainer and VSO National volunteer, communicating with a young woman with a hearing impairment in the community.

National volunteers have produced videos on how to stay safe and stop the spread of Covid-19 in Nepali sign language, videos on child protection and safeguarding, and psychosocial wellbeing. These videos were shared through popular social media such as Facebook and WhatsApp, as well as broadcast on local television. In addition to sign language, the video was voice-overed in various local languages to ensure that the messages on Covid-19 prevention, health and hygiene, child protection and safeguarding, and early marriage reached marginalised groups.

<https://en-gb.facebook.com/VsoNepal/videos/429557638029491/>

My big sister showed me **videos developed in sign language** and taught me the process of hand washing and **how we can be safe during the Covid-19 situation**. My big sister also visited my house when lockdown is not very strict.

Little sister with a hearing impairment

These videos are also available on the VSO School application.

UNESCO. 2020. Inclusion: Nepal

<https://education-profiles.org/central-and-southern-asia/nepal/~inclusion>

Photo credits

For Pooja national volunteers – Krishna Mallik
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VSO National volunteer Prakriti in community awareness
– Priyanka Budhathoki ©VSO/Priyanka Budhathoki

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