

Disability Inclusion

insight series

Inclusion of deaf youth that have never learned sign language in **vocational training**

Living in silence no more!

Since 2014, Light for the World has been working with technical and vocational training centres and employers in Rwanda, Kenya and Ethiopia to improve the inclusion of youth with disabilities in the trainings and ensuing employment. This programme is called EmployAble. As youth with disabilities were successfully being enrolled in and graduating from vocational and community-based trainings, the team realized that youth with certain impairments were still left out. One of these groups were deaf youth who did not speak sign language.

In the context of these three countries, it is often not likely that a deaf person will have attended any education, and particularly not accessed any location where they would have encountered and learned sign language. Many live in silence, and communicate through a crude, self-created system of signs with their families and/or caregivers, if at all.

The team in Rwanda therefore decided to look for a solution: how could deaf youth that do not speak sign language receive training and then transition into employment?

The EmployAble approach

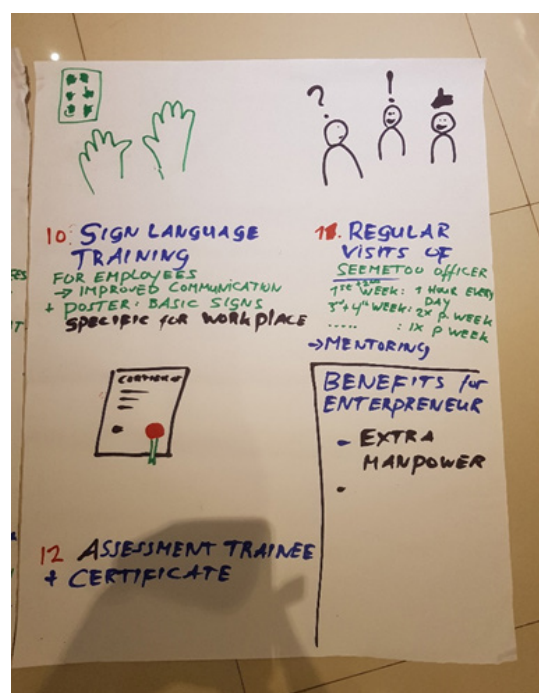
Starting in 2014, the goal of EmployAble is to work with vocational training centres and community-based trainers to ensure that youth with disabilities can be included and receive an education. EmployAble partners work with employers to challenge and support them to provide inclusive work settings. Trained youth with disabilities are guided to work, receiving accompaniment and accessibility support, together with employers and colleagues. This has gone quite successfully, and since 2014 around 1200 youth with disabilities have graduated from vocational training courses.

Needing to find a solution to the inclusion of deaf youth with no knowledge of sign language

Of the 1200 youth that have so far gone through vocational training as part of EmployAble, roughly 277 were deaf. Integrating deaf youth into vocational training courses or apprenticeships worked quite well, often by placing a sign language interpreter in the classroom with the youth, or by training teachers on lip-reading for those deaf students that can lip-read. However, integration through such methods often requires a pre-existing knowledge of sign language as means of communication, and in countries such as Rwanda, Kenya and Ethiopia, there is a significant group of deaf individuals who have simply never learned sign language. These youth were not able to communicate with sign language interpreters, and often required their parents as a means for communication. This meant that these individuals were automatically being left behind in accessing education, even in such a programme as EmployAble which intends to ensure that all disabled young people can access training. A specific solution thus needed to be found.

Setting up a lab

The team decided to look for a solution by setting up a lab – a space where organisations and people come together to look for solutions to complex problems. The organisations involved included Light for the World, Umbrella of Persons with Disabilities in the fight against HIV/AIDS and for Health Promotion (UPHLS), the Rwanda National Union of the Deaf (RNUD) and three technical and vocational training centres. These partners were chosen because of their involvement in inclusive vocational training through EmployAble; RNUD was involved because of its expertise in working with deaf persons.



Storyboarding a potential solution

A group of individuals from the different organisations, as well as staff from vocational training centers and four deaf youth who do not speak sign language, and their guardians or parents, came together for a one-week workshop. There, they spent the week analysing the problem – and designing a potential solution.

Make it work! Tips on organising a lab

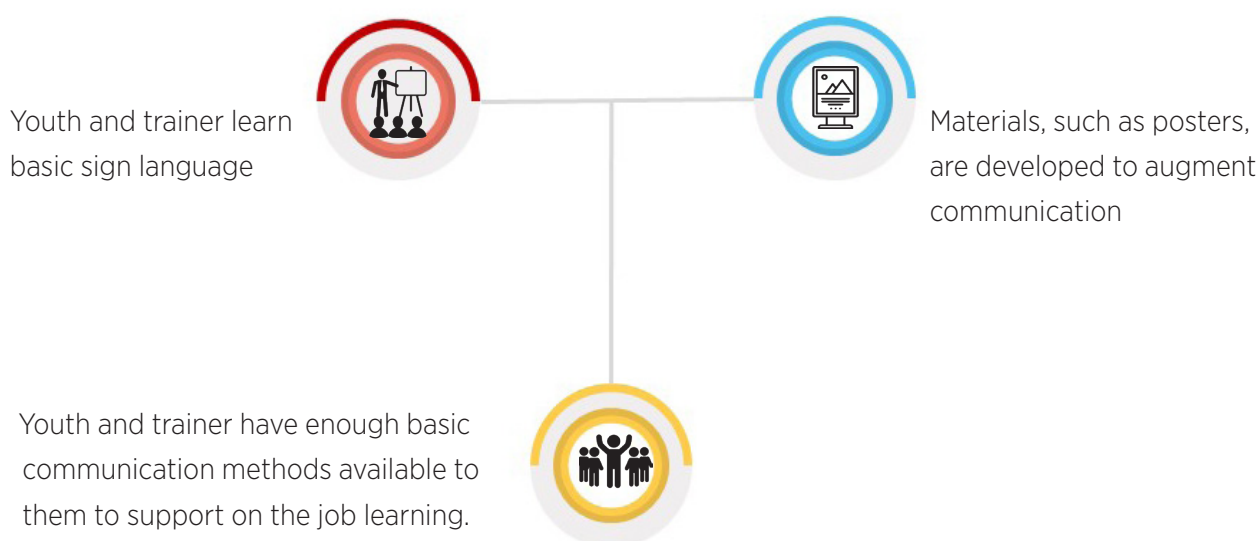
- Ensure that the end users of the solution (in this case: deaf youth who do not use sign language) are always at the center of your efforts.
- Develop a design brief for all participants of the lab, describing the problem, the goal, and what is in or out of the scope of the lab.
- Involve multiple actors. By designing a solution together, the commitment to contribute to the overall objective grows rapidly.
- When ideas come up, stimulate (potential) users to provide open feedback. Welcome reactions like “This will not work because...” Ask open questions: “which part of the solution do you like?”

A two-part solution

The team agreed to test a two-part solution for on-the-job training. The two parts consisted of:

- (1) providing the youth with a crash course in sign language and;
- (2) developing methodologies to support communication on the job.

Four youth, two male and two female, were selected to test the solution on. The youth were selected through RNUD. The team also found two entrepreneurs willing to work with and train the youth: one shoemaker and one running a hairdressing salon. The shoemaker has a physical impairment himself, and was motivated to participate in this experiment as he knows how hard it is for youth with disabilities to have an opportunity to learn a trade and earn a living. The hairdresser was chosen, amongst many interested candidates, because of their performance.



Learning sign language

Acknowledging that some language skills are needed for working, learning, and daily life in general, the youth were placed in an intensive one-month, six hours per day, sign language training, in this case provided by RNUD. The sign language training was accompanied by literacy and numeracy training as the youth have never been at school or had dropped out. Signs learned focused mostly on commonly spoken words, such as greetings, as well as equipment and tools that they would come across in the workshop.

After the one-month of training, they were further supported in learning sign language through sign language coaching twice a week, for a three month period.

The employers, too, were supported to learn basic sign language through the sign language coaching at the workplace. The coaching took place at the workplace, and was focused on facilitating communication between the deaf trainees, their employers and colleagues.

So why did the trainees have to attend such an intensive sign language course, rather than simply teaching them the sign alphabet?

Deaf youth who have not learned sign language, have also most often never had any form of education, and thus also not learned to read and write. Communication through spelling is therefore, unfortunately, not an option.

“I am learning how to fix shoes, and learning sign language at the same time. I am the only deaf person in my family, and used to feel left out and oppressed by my family. No one in my family could communicate with me. Now I have learned some basic sign language, and I am very happy with my job. I learn my job through a hearing teacher. Communication is still hard, and the teacher has to show me everything as he can’t always explain it in sign language. But there is another deaf student in the company as well, so I don’t feel alone, and we support each other if one of us has trouble understanding the assignment.”

Ishimwe Bolis, trainee shoemaker

Supporting communication on the job

To support and augment communication on the job, RNUD developed posters specific to the trades. These posters contain images of general signs, such as hello and thank you, as well as trade-specific signs, such as towel and teaser comb for hairdressing, and hammer and sole for shoemaking. Some of the signs for specific tools or professional methods did not exist earlier, and therefore needed to be developed by RNUD first.

The posters were placed in the workshop, and helped to facilitate communication between the employer and trainees.



Meet Fofo (short for Alphonsine), a young lady with a hearing impairment from Rwanda. She was born deaf and has not had opportunity to go to school. Due to this, she could hardly communicate with her family and community. She used a mixture of made-up signs to communicate to her mother but beyond that, she was not able to fully express her feelings and life aspirations.

Her parents were very concerned about her future and thought it was best if she married a much older man. Fofo had other dreams, but could not object as she did not have many options as a deaf young lady in Rwanda.

But life had something different in store for her: Fofo was selected to participate in the LAB for young persons with hearing impairment who did not know sign language. She got a short intensive course in basic sign language and started working in a hair dressing salon. An employee of the salon was taught sign language to be able to communicate with Fofo and the other deaf young women participating in the LAB. They used signs that were specially developed and put on a poster for the most frequently used words and techniques in hairdressing. Fofo learned to become a hairdresser and she was retained as an employee in the hair dressing salon following her training.

Fofo is hopeful for her future and has a renewed self-determination, now that she can cater for herself and a family.

"I am so happy! My life was so boring and bad compared to now. I have hopes again. My dream? That I can marry with someone who loves me. Wait and see: I will be a happy woman." says Fofo.



Fofo (R) using sign language to communicate with a colleague

Weaknesses and strengths of the two-fold approach

So what were the results after having the youth learn and work on the job?

After a six month training period, the shoemaker considered the two deaf shoemaking trainees to be competitive, and decided to keep them in the company. Now both have a contract and are earning wages. Fofo, one of the trainees at the hairdressing salon, was similarly offered a contract by her employer and is earning monthly wages. Of the four youth, only one was not retained by the employer, as she had additional traumas beyond her hearing impairment, and therefore was not able to master the trade.

Weaknesses

With the current system, youth are provided with one month sign language training, as well as regular follow-up coaching at the workplace. Posters are developed and used to ease communication. This is a good base, and a great way to open up communication possibilities to those who had never before been able to communicate. But it is definitely not enough to learn a language and go beyond the basics, which means it still requires patience for trainees and trainers to understand each other.

In addition, the trainees have not learned to read or write, as most deaf youth have never attended school, and customers do not know sign language. This means that trainees are not able to communicate with clients or customers, or sometimes even with their own colleagues, independently.

Because of the need to learn at least basic sign language, as well as the fact that RNUD staff visited the workshops regularly to coach the trainees and trainers in their communication with each other, the approach is quite time and cost intensive. However, some of the costs, once made, do not have to be made a second time around, such as the costs for developing the new signs and the posters. This makes training more youth cheaper in the long run.

Strengths

The most important benefit of this approach is that it does seem to be effective in getting deaf youth into work places. These youth, who did not have any opportunities, training, or even communication skills earlier, are now earning money, budgeting, and supporting their families – all of which are making them happy.



Gloriose, a shoe-maker trained under EmployAble

Beyond simply the youth, change is seen in the parents as well, who are starting to feel proud and believing in their children, as well as advocating amongst other parents of deaf children that their children are worthwhile. Although the methodology is time intensive and costly, this pales in comparison to the alternatives. These alternatives are either to not do anything, in which case the youth remain unemployed and dependent on family, or for them to follow the usual trajectory that other deaf youth do: learning full sign language, attending education, transitioning into vocational training, and only then transitioning into work. This methodology has deaf youth bringing home an income within six months.

Make it work!

Tips on getting youth who do not speak sign language into training and employment

- Engage employers, and get them to learn some basic sign language to ease communication.
- Workplace sign language coaching is an effective way of addressing communication issues as they come up.
- Don't simply match youth who want to learn a trade to an interested company – but make sure there is a proper match. This ensures that youth aren't learning a trade they aren't interested in, or are being placed in a company too far from their place of residence.
- Ideally, the emphasis should be on ensuring that trainees are retained in the company after training. If they decide to transfer to another employment, it would require providing their new workplace with disability mainstreaming training, etc.

“What a big positive effect is (...), is that before we started with this project, I could see that parents had no trust in their children. There was a lot of oppression. They didn't believe their deaf trainees could do anything. But when they started working, they got more confidence in themselves, they started to believe that deaf people can work. This influenced their parents too. And they made them proud. And parents start telling other parents about their deaf children. And that will have a bigger effect. And that makes a big difference.”

Jean Damascene Bizimana, RNUD

Conclusion

Deaf youth who have not learned sign language, of which there are many in a country like Rwanda, have often not had any education, have no form of communication, and therefore do not transition into training and employment. The EmployAble team in Rwanda therefore experimented with a dual methodology of learning sign language and supported communication between trainees and trainers to understand whether this would be enough for on-the-job training and employment.

Although only a small group of trainees have been involved in the experiment, results seem positive. Most have, indeed, started earning an income within several months, gained full-time employment, and indicate being happy to have at least a basic form of communication with others.

The methodology is time intensive and costly, mostly due to the need to provide the trainees and trainers with at least a basic understanding of sign language, as well as the fact that – for many trades – new signs need to be developed as they do not yet exist in Rwandan sign language. However, results are promising as deaf youth are earning an income and attitudes towards them are changing, and the methodology is well worth experimenting with further as a way to transition deaf youth with no communication mechanisms into gainful employment.

For more information:

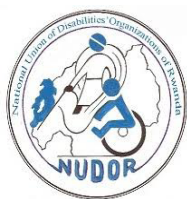
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EmployAble Program: [I Am EmployAble Publication](#)

The Umbrella of Organizations of Persons with Disability in the fight against HIV/AIDS and for Health Promotion (UPHLS) works for an inclusive society where persons with disabilities are empowered and enjoy wellbeing and dignity. UPHLS partners with the National Union of Disability Organizations in Rwanda (NUDOR) in the Employable program, as well as with the Rwanda National Union of the Deaf (RNUD).



Light for the World has established the Disability Inclusion Lab as a space for NGOs, disabled people organisations, governments and businesses to come together to make disability inclusion work. Learn more about their work on lab.light-for-the-world.org.

The Disability Inclusion Insight Series is a series developed by Light for the World. The series shows different approaches taken by organisations on disability inclusion in economic empowerment, providing inspiration and practical support to development professionals in their endeavours to make disability inclusion happen within the designs of current and future programs.

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