

Deaf Entrepreneurs Break Economic Barriers.

By Nassozi B. Kiyaga

¹According to the International Labour Organisation, Africa stands as the region with the largest percentage unemployed. However, the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor found Africa the second most entrepreneurial region in the world, just behind South America.

While there is evidently enormous entrepreneurial potential and economic power among disabled Africans, the majority are unemployed and have no opportunities to develop productive skills necessary for the job market. It is commonly believed that they are incapable of intelligence and possesses no significant abilities worthy of recognition or investment. They are not trained to prepare for a working life because their families think that they cannot work and will not need to work, but be infinite dependants! Vulnerable to economic dependency and poverty, they face discrimination in all socio-economic activities, and are greatly disadvantaged due to stigma, negative cultural perceptions towards disabilities and profound ignorance about their potentials – factors that push them to the margins of society as an insignificant minority. Many in employment frequently experience incessant exploitation and abuse from employers who treat them subserviently, paying them meager wages or none, and continually subjecting them to long and arduous working hours under oppressive working conditions. Deaf and hard of hearing individuals are particularly disenfranchised due to communication barriers; many are denied the right to acquire gainful skills for employment, yet given opportunities they are highly capable of participating in the work force and leading productive lives. Self-employment therefore provides the most viable solution in finding innovative ways to overcome socio-economic barriers, identify and recognise potentials deaf and hard of hearing people possess, necessary for developing skills towards self-sustainability and economic sufficiency.

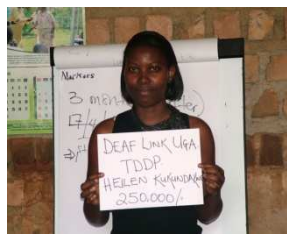
Four successful deaf women entrepreneurs: recipients of **Phase One DLU-TDDP micro-credit loan**.



Esther Aguti



Faridah Zawedde



Helen Kukundakwe



Rehema Night

²**Tweyambe Deaf Development Project (TDDP)** began as a result of receiving financial support from Sodra YWCA-YMCA (Stockholm –Sweden), Friends of Deaf Link Uganda who raised SEK 5,000 (approx. US\$500) towards Deaf Link Uganda projects. The funds were used as seed money for our Micro-credit Loan Project for the Deaf set up to promote Deaf Enterprise, by identifying deaf and hard of hearing entrepreneurs managing and running their own business so as to give them an opportunity for a small loan to increase income and expand their businesses.

¹ Warungu, J. (ed.): *Making Business Fashionable*. BBC Focus on Africa (April – June 2010). Page 44

² **Tweyambe** is an indigenous term in the Luganda language meaning: **Self-Help**.

TDDP creates opportunities geared towards the economic welfare of self-employed deaf and hard of hearing entrepreneurs by supporting individual initiatives for employment. Deaf Link Uganda highlights and creates awareness about particular enterprises and productive skills deaf individuals possess, having made major economic breakthroughs without any support, except their fierce determination to make it against all odds! Successful individuals in their own right, deaf entrepreneurs are significant role models, therefore the TDDP loan helps boost their earning capacities by providing additional capital at a small interest rate. Such exemplary deaf individuals are proof that it is possible to achieve economic success, enter the job market and create jobs to overcome unemployment, economic discrimination, dependency and poverty.

Our free-of-cost Business Skills Training program provides opportunities to learn about and acquire basic business management skills, such as book keeping, recording sales and profits, etc. This educational programme is also a forum where deaf entrepreneurs interact and share their experiences with peers, in their capacity as role models and mentors. They are a source of inspiration and encouragement as deaf youth are able to learn from them and one another, identify economic opportunities and develop business networks vital for economic growth. Unemployed deaf youth become aware of practical approaches essential for self-employment.

The challenges all entrepreneurs face are more pronounced for women entrepreneurs: Women in general are the totally under-utilised economic force in Africa, yet across the continent there are excellent business women capable of handling family budgets and managing their homes. Deaf female entrepreneurs, greatly marginalised and underrepresented in business are economically disadvantaged because of gender-based bias and deafness, yet the Government of Uganda places particular emphasis on the role of women in poverty eradication and economic growth.

Through TDDP, Deaf Link Uganda has taken an opportunity to challenge negative misconceptions about the economic capacities of deaf business women. The organisation is making initiatives that respond to cross-cutting issues related to gender inequalities existing in business, by focusing particular attention to deaf female entrepreneurs. Because of the economic disadvantages they face such as exposure to discriminatory practices, **Phase One** of TDDP gave priority to self-employed deaf females to be the first beneficiaries of our small scale micro-credit loans. We have made significant achievements by targeting this special minority of business entrepreneurs, who would otherwise remain obscure.

It is important that nations provide economic opportunities and platforms to address challenges faced by disabled people in the job market, by recognising their potentials, removing all barriers to economic development and making way for innovations and possibilities that will increase the incomes of disabled people, enable them gain self-pride and confidence, and learn basic business skills in finance. A visionary project, TDDP propels deaf and hard of hearing entrepreneurs to greater economic heights and a better future!

Anyone who undertakes any kind of business is an Entrepreneur. Disabled Africans have such great possibilities to set up their own business. It is terribly absurd to ignore and undermine their economic potentials! **Alex Lawoko (DLU Business Skills Instructor).**