

Nasser Ssenyondo was invited to represent Deaf Link Uganda at a conference organised by Namibia's Ministry of Education and the **Icelandic International Development Agency (ICEIDA)**. Held in Windhoek, Namibia from August 23 – 24th 2010, the Conference theme was **DEAF EDUCATION FOR LIFE: Linking Deaf Education and Employment**. Nasser presented on the sub-theme: **Access to Employment: How can we strengthen the link between Education and Employment?** The conference was attended by several national and international organisations working in the field of Deafness. Issues discussed revolved around access to education and employment opportunities for deaf and hard of hearing individuals in Namibia and Southern Africa.

THE SITUATION OF DEAF & HARD OF HEARING PEOPLE IN NAMIBIA

Found in Southern Africa, Namibia has a population of about 2.1 million and is made up of the Namib Desert which gives it a climate that is typical of semi-desert, with hot days and cool nights. Although it is a barren desert, Namibia is rich in mineral wealth. According to the national situational analysis, it is estimated that there are over 1,800 deaf people in Namibia, although the deaf dispute this figure arguing that numbers are much higher and therefore the actual figures remains unknown.

The **National Federation of Deaf People of Namibia** and the **Namibian National Association of the Deaf** participated in the conference, but during the conference I noted that these organisations have not been as aggressive, as those in Eastern Africa, in advocating the welfare and needs of deaf and hard of hearing people in the country. Namibian deaf people use Namibian Sign Language (NSL), which is similar to American Sign Language, however, according to the deaf youth I interacted with, they felt a need to develop a homogenous and independent NSL that is accessible to all deaf and hard of hearing people – an initiative being facilitated by ICEIDA who are the major donors in the field of Deaf Education and Sign Language. There are also very few trained sign language interpreters compared to the large number of deaf people in need of interpreter services. The Namibian government is committed to supporting access to interpreter services and pays professional interpreters in Namibia, which is a tremendous achievement for the Deaf Namibian, who would otherwise not afford the expense.

The majority of deaf people in Namibia have no access to education and school enrollment for deaf children is extremely low. There are very few schools for the deaf, which also lack specialised teachers. I was surprised to learn that there is only one deaf graduate with a bachelor's degree in Education from the National University of Namibia! High unemployment levels and lack of skills is still a huge challenge, although the government, private sector and NGOs are making initiatives to address unemployment among deaf and hard of hearing individuals. There was good representation from various companies and government agencies that employed the deaf and appreciated their enormous potentials and hard work, noting the importance of their contributions to the national work force, despite challenges of communication. The Government was represented by the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Education, his deputy and civil servants from various Ministries. He noted that although Namibia is still a young country which gained independence from South Africa in 1990, it was making relevant strides in development, moving forward at an impressive and commendable pace. He stated that it was everyone's responsibility within the community to contribute towards supporting development in all its forms. *"The term deafness doesn't mean that one is incapable or vulnerable,"* said the PS, giving a classic example of his blind uncle who taught him many life skills while he was growing up: *"Despite being blind, I acquired several skills from him that enabled me become successful in life."*

ICEIDA was commended for its work in supporting the education of the deaf and availing employment opportunities through skills training. However, there was a feeling of uncertainty as to the continuity of these programmes since the ICEIDA funding was due to end soon. Without proper long term planning, Deaf Namibians will find it difficult to carry on independent of foreign support.

I learnt a lot from this conference and found that Deaf Namibians possess a positive attitude and respect for work. Deafness has no physical boundaries, as I noticed that there were many deaf people living in Namibia who came from as far as Congo, to do business! Some had never attended formal education – therefore, it proved that formal is not the only recipe for success. The fact that the deaf have extremely limited opportunities for education cannot hamper their potentials to acquiring skills for employment to become productive members within their communities. It is great that the private sector is working jointly with deaf and hard of hearing to extend employment opportunities; and that adult education for the deaf is being used as a tool to improve and strengthen literacy abilities and skills training.

On the other hand, some of the observations I made including the very slow pace at which Deaf Education was moving with lack of trained teachers and inadequate interpreter services for the deaf. The active involvement of the deaf related to issues that affected their lives was very minimal – they depend mostly on others to make decisions for them – which makes them vulnerable to exploitation. Mostly noted is their over reliance on foreign aid and support, which I find so wrong and disabling. Because the Namibian National Association of the Deaf is currently inactive, there is an urgent need to form strong grassroots organisations of the Deaf.

The conference was a sign of optimism and a channel of opportunities. It brought about awareness about **Deaf Link Uganda** to the outside world and possibilities of future work partnerships between Deaf and Hard of Hearing Namibians and Ugandans. From my work with Deaf Link Uganda, I feel that Deaf Namibians can achieve a lot if they stand on their own - even without much support, they can work around the absence of funding. In future I envision a development of meaningful networks between Deaf Namibians and Ugandans!

My deepest gratitude goes to the Icelandic International Development Agency for inviting and sponsoring me and my interpreter to attend this conference, on behalf of Deaf Link Uganda. It is a great honour and privilege to have been an active participant.



Nasser was a Key Presenter at the conference that was well attended by professionals in the field of Deaf Education and Employment of Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals in sub-Saharan Africa.



Nancy: the official interpreter for Nasser Ssenyondo at the conference.

Nancy Katumba Muwangala shares her experience:

The journey from Uganda to Namibia was challenging because we had to travel late in the night but luckily secured transport to Entebbe Airport. We then had a long wait as our flight was to take off in the wee hours of the morning. All the flights were on time until we reached Windhoek where we were retained at the airport for lack of visas into Namibia. We waited for some hours at Windhoek International Airport before obtaining permission of entry into Namibia. Thanks to Jenny and other conference organisers who worked hard to see that everything regarding our entry was done fast. We received a warm welcome at Okahandja Country Hotel, an exceptionally beautiful place, quiet and conducive for a conference.

The Conference was great! Everything was highly organised, the interpreter's seats and microphones were all well set, so I had no problem re-arranging seats. My client's presentation was superb! "*It was as if he was the one speaking*" one lady and gentleman commented. Many participants commended our team work with Nasser; his presentation was clear and he was confident which was due to his thorough preparation while in Uganda. The second day of the conference was mostly focused into group discussions; my client did a great job as a participant. His superb ideas got him chosen to make a final presentation on behalf of the group.

I noted some things about the Interpreters from Namibia and realise that there is a need for them to undergo a real Interpreter's Course which includes: The code of ethics; the Psychology of Interpreting; communication skills in English; Sign Linguistics; Co-working and other course units in line with Sign language Interpreting. Nevertheless, they tried their best and I highly commend them, because through my interaction with them, they were not properly trained the way we are in Uganda.

Our trip back to Uganda was comfortable, although we still had to travel in the wee hours of the morning. I was surprised to find that nights in Namibia are extremely cold! I was absolutely unaware of this, thinking Namibia was as hot as Uganda!



My deepest thanks to ICEIDA for extending an invitation to **Deaf Link Uganda** to attend the Conference, we are grateful that the organisation sponsored both our travel and accommodation, cordially welcoming us with warm hospitality throughout. I believe that this conference will bear positive results that will ultimately transform Deaf people's lives in sub-Saharan Africa, and bring about change of attitude among hearing communities on our Continent.