Signs from the Global South: Development with Deaf Communities

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International development organisations need to centre the voices of deaf and disabled people from the Global South. It's time these organisations give greater consideration to deaf cultures and sign languages, and to issues of linguistic deprivation and illiteracy rates, which remain shockingly high in countries all around the world. In spite of decades of fierce campaigning, Deaf communities in the Global South still disproportionately suffer from poverty, cultural stigma and prejudice against signed languages. Such attitudes can result in widespread early-years linguistic deprivation, low outcomes in literacy and inaccessible education for deaf communities, which later compound other challenges deaf people encounter in these settings. In discussions of a new praxis of global development, thought should also be given to linguistic oppressions, and the importance of preserving signed languages and deaf cultures as another facet of human diversity. Efforts to understand how to emancipate and empower deaf people on the ground are greatly assisted through the implementation of a capabilities lens, which highlights ways of being and activities which deaf people value in their daily lived contexts.

While travelling far from the familiar comforts of home, meeting deaf people in a range of locations was an exciting and eye-opening experience, and raised my awareness of the plurality of sign languages and deaf cultures that exist across Earth. In Chile, it was deaf friends who introduced me to the national dance of cueca, to Chilean Sign language (ChSL) and took me to the Chilean Nacional Fiesta de Independencia de Espana, an annual festival to celebrate the country winning independence from Spain in 1810. I met deaf women who had migrated from their factory jobs in Peru to Santiago to find a better life, deaf Haitians and Venezuelans fleeing violence and conflict, and Chilean teachers and students, who worked in a deaf school. A few years later, I started doctoral research with a research institute based in the U.K, and met other experienced deaf campaigners from a range of Global South contexts including India, Uganda and Ghana. Across these contexts, deaf communities' aims to erase linguistic deprivation, improve educational access and outcomes, and to raise general quality of life for deaf individuals and communities had similar aims to achieve social justice.

As a deaf woman with moderate-severe hearing loss, who grew up with spoken English as my first language in a hearing family, I personally began to learn British Sign language (BSL) formally in classes at the age of 22. The structure of British Sign language differs slightly from that of American Sign language (ASL), and I initially struggled with the ASL alphabet, which is similar to the alphabet of ChSL. For many of the deaf people in resource-poor contexts with whom I work, assistive hearing devices such as cochlear implants or hearing aids are too expensive (Bento, Bahmad et al. 2018, Kerr, Tuomi and Miller 2012). Of those children who are born to Deaf families, with whom they communicate in sign from a young age, they are least at risk of suffering from language deprivation in their early years (Storbeck 2012). However, in the United States and many European countries, it is estimated that up to 90% of deaf children are born to hearing parents, and it could be inferred that in developing countries, this proportion might be just as high, if not higher (Mitchell and Karchmer 2004: 139). As a consequence, it is of vital importance that sign language classes are provided for hearing families, and that accessible education is made available for deaf learners, who can achieve and are highly capable when adequate linguistic support is provided by educational authorities, municipal councils or mandated through legislation for civic or linguistic rights.

Deaf people, especially those whose first languages are signed languages, prefer to be identified as a linguistic

minority group (WFD). The World Federation of the Deaf works for the recognition of, respect for and promotion of signed languages as part of human diversity and aims to improve the status of national sign languages (WFD). Other definitions of deaf communities claim that deaf communities inhabit socio-cultural spaces as a disabled group. It is this working definition that is most useful in terms of the approach of the United Nations and development organisations for umbrella work on development with disabled groups (Man and Lee 2011). Others have suggested that deaf communities are a quasi-national group, albeit without a geographical homeland, as deaf languages, cultures and ways of being are based on a shared social, cultural and linguistic heritage, with deaf sign language users often raised by deaf parents or acquiring signed language and deaf cultures at deaf schools (Kymlicka 1998: 95). It has been suggested that one of the reasons for such strong cultural affiliations amongst the deaf is that 'the obstacles to integration in the mainstream are enormous – much greater than for immigrant groups, or even for more traditional 'national' minorities' (Kymlicka 1998: 102). Regardless of how deaf individuals might opt to identify themselves, there is no doubt that the presence of strong deaf signing communities in resource-poor contexts in the Global South can be a powerful force for advocacy and positive change.

The UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) has made some provisional intentions for people with disabilities. The definition includes those with sensory disabilities, such as the deaf (UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development). This is an important step forward, as it acknowledges the progress that still has to be made for persons with disabilities. In Global South settings that are resource-poor, the legal protections afforded to disabled persons can be negligible in comparison with the protections afforded by Equality Act 2010 in the United Kingdom, or the American ADA Act 1990, which though imperfect, at least provides basic safeguarding. The UN SDGs which are particularly relevant include Goal 4, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable education, and access to lifelong learning opportunities, as well as equal access to vocational training for the vulnerable; Goal 8 which aims to promote decent access to paid work for all and Goal 10 which promotes the political, economic and social inclusion of all, including those with disabilities. There is some overlap between the aims of the Sustainable Development Goals, and scholars' employment of the capabilities approach as a framework with which to evaluate individuals' daily freedoms and their wellbeing.

Capabilities Realisation

The capabilities approach was developed by Amartya Sen as an outline of the principal objective of development, which Sen viewed as being to expand people's capabilities, and their choices. The theory influenced the subsequent Human Development Index, where life expectancy, education (literacy rate, gross enrolment ration and net attendance ratio), and per capita income rations were used to rank countries in terms of their development, and were drawn upon as a measure of human development by organisations such as the U.N. In turn, philosopher Martha Nussbaum built further on the framework, which suggested that people's capabilities should be defined as people's 'ability to do and be certain things deemed valuable' (Nussbaum 1998: 273). The framework allows comparisons to be made between different countries across a core range of capabilities in areas such as*Life*; *Bodily Health*; *Bodily Integrity*; *Senses, Imagination and Thought*; *Emotions*; *Practical Reason*; *Affiliation A*; *Affiliation B*; *Other Species*; *Play* and *Control Over One's Environment*, and is especially useful for making public policy recommendations. The framework can compare between different countries outcomes of particular relevance to deaf signers, such as access to sign language, access to literacy, access to education, to employment and to wellbeing. The framework consists of capability inputs, conversion factors which can enable or inhibit an individual's ability to achieve the capability, and functioning, which means an individual can do, or be what they desire. For example, in the case of access to literacy (capability input), enabling conversion factors might be: access to an English language course in the area, or a deaf tutor, or a tutor who knows sign language. After the individual is able to use basic literacy skills, it is clear to see they have achieved the capability (known as functioning).

Where a rights-based approach draws on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD) to outline peoples' basic political and economic entitlements, questions about the approach in resource-poor contexts remain. For example, if there is no institutional way in which these rights are enforced, a right set down in law is of little use for deaf peoples' daily lives on the ground. Another question is whether rights could be considered as a side-constraint on goal-seeking action. Finally, in a rights-based framework, if an individual has a right to something, such as free healthcare for example, then another individual or an institution has a duty to provide

these (Nussbaum 1998: 274). For deaf communities there are also questions about whether rights are held by the individual or by other entities such as the family, and by religious, ethnic and linguistic groups. Although people can have a 'right *to* a certain achieved level of wellbeing, *to* certain resources with which one may pursue one's life plan, *to* certain opportunities and capacities with which one may, in turn, make choices regarding one's life plan,' there is no doubt that as a measure of achieved wellbeing, and ways with which to compare this amongst different contexts and different factors, the capabilities framework is more fit for purpose (Nussbaum 1998: 274). The framework tells us more about participants' daily lives, what they are and what they do, and how this contributes to their quality of life.

Multiliteracies

Deaf individuals across India, Uganda and Ghana, particularly those living in rural areas, those with limited access to sign languages or those growing up in hearing families and those with inaccessible education, are particularly vulnerable to the marginalizing effects of illiteracy. Research suggests that adult literacy programmes, as well as positively impacting reading, writing and numeracy skills, can also have a positive impact on labour market participation, consumption/income and improved health (Blunch 2017: 2).

In Ghana rates of literacy, defined as the ability to write short, simple statements on everyday life, and to do basic arithmetic, stand at 79% (Knoema 2018), while in Uganda, at 76.5% (Knoema 2018) and in India, at 74.36% (Knoema 2018). However, there is a lack of research into literacy rates amongst the deaf in these countries. In the United States and the United Kingdom, where access to assistive technologies and sign language classes are more widely available than in the Global South contexts discussed here, research has demonstrated that 'literacy problems are more widespread among deaf children than hearing children' (Herman, Roy and Kyle 2017, p. 2). Within the sample, which included deaf children aged 10 – 11 years, 82 of whom used oral communication, and 59 of whom used sign language for communication, 48% of the oral group and 82% of the signing group were reading English below their age level (Herman, Roy and Kyle 2017, p. 2). Consequently, it can be presumed that across the sites of capacity-building projects in India, Uganda and Ghana, that deaf people also suffer disproportionately from low literacy.

After participation in English classes, which were taught by local deaf peer tutors, participants in a peer-to-peer deaf multiliteracies project across the three countries reported that they felt increased confidence in using English vocabulary, and English grammar skills. They also stated they felt more confident with using Indian Sign language in a learning context, and that being able to clarify questions about English tasks set with deaf peers in their L1 language such as Indian Sign was really beneficial for them in the process of English language learning.

In terms of capabilities enhancement, for deaf individuals in these contexts, access to literacy greatly enhanced core capabilities such as being able to use basic numeracy, and to read simple sentences. Deaf participants in projects discussed how access to literacy opened up a range of valued freedoms, such as being trusted to go the bank and use an ATM by themselves, without parental guidance, being able to use a shopping list for remembering items while going to the market, and being able to read signs in train stations for getting around. Access to basic literacy also afforded participants better access to aspects of life in their communities that they could acquire through reading subtitles on television for example, or being able to communicate better with surrounding hearing communities through writing information down. Enhanced literacy skills are a very powerful tool for the deaf, and in India, knowledge of English carries many benefits for the worlds of work and education. Being able to read and write for deaf signers is a vital capability that in turn can unlock many other capabilities, perhaps most importantly, education.

Peer-to-Peer Education

A small selection of development projects in my study had started to work with deaf tutors when delivering education projects. The implications of the work for multiliteracies outcomes of deaf learners were interesting but for the capabilities realisation of participants, and their ability to pursue valued goals, the benefits were demonstrably multifold. Alongside enhancing literacy, access to peer-to-peer education encouraged processes of social belonging, which is termed affiliation in the capabilities lens, and arguably enhanced participants' ability to exert control over their environment, and to engage in future planning in their lives (Nussbaum 2007).

For deaf learners, peer-to-peer education can often address the linguistic hegemonies and cultural dissociations that can accompany being taught by hearing teachers who have limited or no knowledge of sign language or deaf culture. An additional benefit is that employment is created for local deaf adults, and it draws on their first-hand knowledge and experience of their national sign languages.

In educational settings with the deaf, the focus often lies on literacy enhancement and access. However, the classroom is a space for deaf people to interact with peers and to acquire knowledge through incidental learning. The use of sign language in this learning environment has important implications for peer-to-peer socialisation and development. Sign language use amongst the deaf while in interaction with peers allows people to learn skills which include the ability to look at social situations with a variety of perspectives, skills such as negotiation, conflict management, tact and other social communication skills important for socialization (Antia and Kreimeyer 2005: 164). One study has split the process of peer-to-peer socialisation into the categories of social skills, interaction and participation, sociometric status and acceptance and affective functioning (Kluwin, Stinson and Colarossi 2002). For deaf signers, learning and responding in a peer-to-peer environment greatly enhanced processes of social learning, interaction with peers and participating in a learning environment. Within this learning context, it is clear that there would be less of a power differential that might be present in a mixed learning classroom between deaf and hearing peers as a consequence of language access.

It is evident that these categories impacted not only on learning, but also on capabilities realisation to some extent across senses, imagination and thought in terms of learning processes, across affiliation in terms of social integration and social belonging in educational settings and on control over one's environment, as education across many subjects would allow deaf learners to become better-informed citizens and enable them to participate in civic matters at a local level. Participants commented on the benefits that learning from a deaf tutor bestowed, on the clarity of meaning after technical points were translated into sign language for explanation, and on the effects it had on their own plans for future training. Deaf participants' self-esteem and confidence were enhanced in such learning environments, deaf tutors benefitted from access to training, employment and income and a positive virtual cycle could be set into motion in the event the development intervention was long-term. It would appear positive realisation of a range of core capabilities, and subsequent knowledge, positive esteem and wellbeing would multiply amongst others who participated in the project over time.

Deaf Networks

Deaf communities as a linguistic minority group, can find it challenging to access surrounding phonological societies. Perhaps partially as a consequence of this, and partially as a result of the vulnerability many deaf signers in resource-poor contexts experience due to a lack of language and a lack of information, internal intra-community hierarchies in the deaf community are influential. Status is conferred by experience, by the proficiency in the use of national sign language, by connections to deaf families, proximity in local Deaf associations and other factors. Within a variety of development projects, deaf people who were from rural areas, those who did not have an opportunity to attend deaf schools, or those born to hearing parents with no access to deaf culture greatly benefitted from project interventions to teach sign language and English.

Development projects facilitated networking opportunities for deaf people in these project sites, increased the potential of access to future job opportunities, and allowed people to exchange contact information. Participants' ability to realise core capabilities for wellbeing, such as interaction with peers and surrounding hearing communities in an L1 language, highlights how development projects facilitated participants' realisation of the capability of affiliation through social integration and belonging. Access to a network of deaf peers also allowed the transmission of deaf cultural values to take place, and could arguably comprise a similar niche to the capability of freedom of expression, which Nussbaum cites in relation to religious practices and ethnic traditions. For deaf signers, learning about their cultural and linguistic heritage is important for fostering positive self-concept and building self-esteem. Many deaf project participants spoke of how they valued being able to meet and socialise with new deaf people, felt comforted by the fact they could seek support from a local deaf network, and were grateful for chances to learn another sign language in the cases where they were able to meet deaf peers from other Global South countries.

Conclusion

Although it has no borders as such, and cannot be found on a map, it has been said there is a country of the Deaf. It can be observed in deaf schools found throughout nearly every country, in deaf associations and clubs, and in family homes, sometimes there on a daily basis and in other instances, the more fleeting flicker of sign language amongst people walking across a town's paved market square. The recognition and promotion of signed languages, the natural language of the deaf, offers a powerful route to lasting and effective change. What is shocking is that this linguistic minority group continues to encounter such challenges, in spite of such a rich and vibrant culture. It appears that by addressing linguistic deprivation, deaf children are afforded a better start in life in their early-years. Through ensuring accessible education, the literacy rates of deaf children would improve substantially. Finally, peer-to-peer tutoring by other more experienced deaf people from the community would show deaf people that they are capable of working, learning and teaching their peers, given that they are supported with adequate linguistic access. Finally, access to strong, extensive deaf networks, give deaf individuals and communities a more powerful foundation as linguistic minorities from which they can campaign for positive change, and advocate for stronger disability legislation. These areas offer some of the most effective ways in Global South contexts to begin to address the intertwined issues of marginalisation, unemployment and poverty that deaf minority communities face. The capability-enhancing effects of literacy and of education are particularly vital for expanding the range of opportunities that are open to deaf individuals. By trusting in deaf peoples' capabilities, development projects can go some way further towards reversing the deficit perspective often held towards disability and deafness, and instead create emancipatory narratives, where deaf people can act autonomously and lead the way.

About the author:

Eilidh Rose McEwan is currently a PhD candidate at the International Institute for Sign Languages and Deaf Studies, at the University of Central Lancashire, Preston, United Kingdom. Her research focuses on the capabilities of deaf people in Global South contexts, and the interrelation of capacity-building projects with capabilities realisation and agency. Her work has appeared in Third Force News, Posability Magazine and The Evening Times.