

## **The momentum of change in Deaf education in Namibia will not be stopped** **- a successful conference on Deaf education is held in Namibia**

During 23 and 24 August a conference on deaf education in Namibia was held in Okahandja. The conference was a part of a joint project between the Ministry of Education and the Icelandic International Development Agency (ICEIDA). The project, which began in 2007, will finish at the end of the year and at the conference progress was reviewed. The main purpose with the conference was to discuss employment opportunities of the Deaf and make recommendations on how to improve and broaden these opportunities.

Dr Vilhjálmur Wium, ICEIDA's Country Director in Namibia, addressed the almost 100 conference participants. In his welcoming remarks he highlighted some of the main achievements of the project. "I told conference participants about the Deaf



learners that have gone on past Grade 10 studying in a mainstream school with the assistance of interpreters. In the past, Deaf learners could not do that because the special schools for the Deaf do not offer Grades 11 and 12," Dr Wium says. "In addition, close to 40 Namibians are currently studying towards their teacher's degree with Namibian Sign Language (NSL) as a minor subject.

That means that in the beginning of 2012 Namibia will have teachers that know NSL and have some understanding of Deaf culture when they start teaching Deaf learners. This will be a giant step in the education of the Deaf."

Dr Wium also mentioned that over 20 Deaf adult literacy promoters and Sign Language instructors currently receive salaries from the Ministry of Education. They teach Deaf adults Sign Language, numeracy skills and various life skills. Many Deaf adults have no education to speak of and live in isolation from society. "The adult literacy classes have had an instant impact on their lives," Dr Wium claims. "Also around 40 Sign Language interpreters have been trained. Soon, Sign Language interpretation will be offered as a degree programme at the University of Namibia. This is important, because lack of good interpreters is one of the biggest bottlenecks

facing the Deaf community. The interpreter training is another intervention that has made a significant impact on the Deaf population.”

Finally, Dr Wium brought up the establishment of the Centre for Communication and Deaf Studies, but that centre will play an instrumental role in Deaf education for years to come.

Dr Wium gladly agreed to write a short summary of the conference:

“Mr Alfred Ilukena, Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Education, opened the conference. His opening statement was quite emotional as he shared with participants his childhood experiences. Mr Ilukena was brought up by his elderly uncle. At that time, his uncle has lost both his hearing and eye-sight. In spite of that, his uncle was very much in charge of the household. He made sure that maintenance of houses and fences was properly done and that planting and harvesting of mahangu was done correctly and that the right time. Mr Ilukena ended his statement by sharing with conference participants the difference between the possible and the impossible. That difference is only based on the willingness of people to achieve their dreams and longings. If the willingness is strong enough, then nothing is impossible. These words were particularly directed to the Deaf conference participants. Finally, the Permanent Secretary promised to do everything in his power to implement the recommendations made by the conference.



With his speech, the Permanent Secretary set the tone for the conference. Without doubt the conference exceeded the expectations of the organisers. Many inspiring talks were delivered, with speakers coming from Namibia, Iceland, S-Africa and Uganda. Conference participants watched the premiere of a documentary film on the

life and work of four deaf Namibians. The view was unanimous that the film was a success and should be aired on Namibian television in order for its message to reach as many people as possible.

Representatives of Namibian employers attended the conference. They explained the various difficulties that come with employing deaf people. First and foremost, these difficulties relate to communication problems between the deaf and the hearing. However, the industry representatives also noted that there are a number of benefits associated with deaf employees. For instance, deaf people tend to be very dedicated at work and much prouder of being employed than the typical hearing person. Therefore, the productivity of the deaf is often higher than the productivity of the hearing.

Towards the end of the conference the Secretary General of the Namibian Employers' Federation, Mr Tim Parkhouse, delivered a speech. He started off by informing participants that if anyone was interested in reading his prepared statement, then that same person would find it in the dustbin of the conference hall. Mr Parkhouse is a seasoned employer and has been at the forefront of the Federation for a long time. He stated that he could not recall when he had learned as much in as short a time as at this conference. He said that his eyes had opened; his mind had opened; and in fact his ears had opened to the plight of the deaf in the employment market. He vowed that as long as he had any influence within the Federation he would work towards improving the situation of the deaf. He plans to soon hold a breakfast meeting, inviting some of the major companies in Namibia and encourage them to employ deaf people.

Conference participants agreed that the conference had reached its goals. It was noticeable how good the invited speakers were, resulting in a programme that was captivating throughout. Working groups were established to propose recommendations. Each group had a well defined topic to discuss, making the proposals relevant and to the point. A small editorial committee will write a final strategic report which will be submitted to the Ministry of Education and its Minister.



The active participation of the deaf community in the conference was noticeable. The deaf community is much more vocal than in the past and clearly better aware of the need to fight for its own rights. For instance, one young learner, Mr Petrus Uushona, who will finish Grade 12 at the end of the year, stood up and asked the Ministry of Education why deaf learners always failed national examinations. He demanded answers. "When will we get good teachers that are fluent in Namibian Sign Language," he asked. When Mr Uushona was not happy with the Ministry's reply, he asked for the floor again and repeated his question. A number of other deaf participants raised important issues that are close to their hearts. This active participation of the deaf community is a far

cry from a similar conference that was held in 2007. At that conference the deaf participants were quiet, seemingly content with sitting on the sidelines.

It was good to see the quality performance of the Namibian Sign Language interpreters. They showed a high level of professionalism in all their work. Those conference participants not used to observing Sign Language interpreters at work were impressed when Ms Júlía Hreinsdóttir from Iceland made a speech in Icelandic Sign Language. Her speech was translated into English by an Icelandic interpreter. Another Sign Language interpreter translated from English into Namibian Sign



Language, and a third interpreter from English into Ugandan Sign Language. Watching this, many participants realised the importance of good quality interpreters.

Finally, many conference participants thanked ICEIDA for its efforts in the field of deaf education in Namibia. Some, however,

expressed concerns over the closing of ICEIDA's country office in Namibia and asked whether progress in the education of the deaf will now stop. It is my view that this is an unlikely event. The joint projects undertaken by ICEIDA and the Ministry of Education over the past few years have created such a momentum of change that it will hardly be stopped. Already, responsibilities of many of the project components have been transferred to Namibian organisations and agencies. In addition, I was encouraged by the speeches of the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Education and the Secretary General of the Namibian Employers' Federation. Both used much stronger language than would be expected from people of their standing at such a conference. That raises hopes that they actually mean what they say, and that they will make meaningful efforts in promoting deaf issues. The future of the deaf community in Namibia is, in my humble opinion, much brighter than before," concludes Dr Vilhjálmur Wium, Country Director of ICEIDA in Namibia.

**Photos:**

1. Dr Vilhjálmur Wium and Alfred Ilukena Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Education.
2. Some of the Deaf in the audience.
3. Petrus Uushona, young Deaf learner demanded answers from the ministry.
4. Julia Hreinsdóttir (right) and a Namibian interpreter.