A Project for Deaf People in Afghanistan

By Soo Choo Lee, SERVE, May 1999

**Introduction**

Afganistan has been in a continuous state of conflict for the past 20 years, since the Russian invasion in 1979. When they left in 1989, different factions fought on the gain power. This civil war has been going on till today. In 1996 a fundamentalist group called the Taliban emerged as a major power and by the beginning of 1997 had control of two thirds of the country. It has an estimated population of 17 million, of which nearly 1/3 is either killed, disabled or displaced.

War has devastated this country. It is left with no communication system, no financial system, no postal system, poor sanitation, no proper roads and a broken ineffective educational system. Teachers are scarce and unmotivated as they were paid very little every few months. Most professionals have emigrated. Schools books, furniture, teaching equipment and materials hardly exist, except for those few sponsored by UNICEF and other NGOs (non governmental organisations).

**Deafness in Afganistan**

There is a higher prevalence of deaf people in Afganistan than in most countries of similar development because of several factors.

* Injury caused by mines, bombs, accidents, natural disasters, burns, torture and trauma. We know of one deaf teenager who was blinded because of a mine explosion.
* Lack of preventive services, including vaccination programmes, like rubella, mumps, polio and TB has resulted in a higher incidence of disability.
* Cultural inter-marriage among close relatives, especially in the rural areas increases the risk of multiple forms of disabilities.
* A high rate of birth complications (especially in undernourished women) with inadequate medical care gives rise to various kinds of disabilities.

Many deaf people are hidden from view, especially deaf women and girls. Since 1996 the Taliban militia have restricted all females to the confines of their homes, with no access to education and employment. The veil that women have to wear makes in impossible for signing or lip reading. In some areas girls are allowed to attend school for the first 3 years. The impact of the deafness is doubled due to induced poverty and the lack of equal opportunities. They are excluded from a range of sustainable livelihood opportunities: from social sector services (education in particular), and often from community life itself.

Services and programmes are desperately lacking. Besides our programme, there are 3 other NGOs that work with deaf people:

* A local NGO supported by UN, in the capital city Kabul. They run a small day school of around 40 children and vocational programmes for deaf adults. Sign language and oral methods are used.
* A foreign NGO providing vocational training to marginalised young people.
* A United Nations Development project, CDAP (Comprehensive Disabled Afgan Project), runs CBR programmes in 6 different regions in the country. Deaf people have been identified and deaf adults integrated into employment, but they face difficulty in placing deaf children in local schools because of the communication barrier. SERVE SERVE (Serving Emergence Relief and Vocation Enterprise) is a British Christian Charity Organisation, founded in 1972, whose main work is in Eastern Afganistan. Its projects respond to the overwhelming needs of the nation in the important areas of Health, Environment, Relief and Disability.

**SERVE**

Hearing Impaired Project (SHIP) was first established in September 1992 in Peshawar as a response to the growing needs of deaf Afgan refugees. It is mainly funded by CBM (Christoffel Blindenmission, Germany) and Radda Barnen (Sweden).

For 2 years the programme was successful in providing vocational training, sign language and literacy training and basic audiological services to more than 60 deaf Afgans (children and adults) in Peshawar and the surrounding refugee camps. It must be noted that the sign language taught was SLI (American Sign Language) as the founding co-ordinator and the project worker were American volunteers.

Two years later in 1995, when the security situation improved, SERVE made a decision to relocate this project to Jalalabad, Afganistan. The two American workers have left in 1994, and a decision was made by the new co-ordinator and the project team to do away with ASL, and use the local indigenous Afgan sign language. Sign language recording/documentation was started and given priority. A small day school was started with one class of 5-6 deaf children. Basic audiological services continued for a year, until the life of the local audiometrist was threatened and he had to leave the country.

**Present Activities (as of January 1999)**

1. School for the Deaf cum Resource Centre. The day school has grown to accommodate 6 primary classes of around 60 deaf children (with an increase of 1 class per year). A class of 7 young deaf girls meets in a home-based class. The school also functions as a training and resource support centre. In 1997 eleven rural teachers were given training in disability awareness, sign language and teaching methods.
2. Sign language documentation The first book of Jalalabad regional sign language, recorded by deaf people was published in 1995 with 620 signs. A revised edition came out in 1998 with 1200 signs.
3. Deaf Clubs & Employment Support Programme Three deaf clubs were established with over 50 deaf adults, attending literacy and sign language classes and other recreational activities. The program has also established a network of master-craftsmen who take in deaf apprentices to gain work skills. Over 30 deaf people have completed their programme and now in employment, while others continue in learning trades such as tailoring, carpentry, bicycle-repairing and the making of sweets.
4. CBR Programme. This programme started in 1997 with 2 rural districts, and has expanded to 4 rural districts in 1999, identifying over 500 people with various disabilities. Home-based training is given by community workers and volunteers, while others are being referred to appropriate services. Children with disabilities are integrated into local schools wherever possible.
5. Special classes for deaf children.

Over 80 deaf children of ages 5-12 were identified by CBR workers in 2 districts of 10 villages, who have never attended school. The local committee in these villages approached the Education Authorities for teachers to be trained in sign language. They could not afford extra teachers, but we were allowed to train existing teachers who are willing to teach a special class of deaf children after school hours (schools run for about 3 hours a day). Ten classes for deaf children were started in 10 villages, with 11 teachers.

**Some Barriers/Restrictions and Opportunities.**

1. The female deaf population has no access to education or employment. In the city we have a lady teacher with 7 deaf girls coming to her home. Similar situations can be replicated, but with caution. In one of the villages a deaf man comes to the special class with his deaf daughter bringing in sing skills as well. Vocation skills such as tailoring, embroidery and soap making are gradually introduced to disabled women in their homes.
2. Photographs and pictures of living things are banned. So is the use of puppets, dance and music. We compromise by drawing stick figures or faces without eyes. Nose and mouth (even mosquitoes with severed heads!). Mud, palm leaves, nut shells have many uses, e.g. to shape figures.
3. Lack of electricity is big problem for deaf people when it gets dark, especially in winter when the days are shorter.
4. Lack of infrastructure can be a problem. There is a village school with 400 children and no school building as it was destroyed during the war. Classes were held under the trees. CVM was approached and they provided funds for a building with 4 rooms of which 2 were used as special classes for deaf children.
5. The gradual interest of parents and siblings to attend sign classes is a big plus. The local community is involved in providing trade skills to disabled people, including deaf people. The local CBR committee, comprising of village leaders, educational people and parents of disabled children work together to help monitor the special classes and work at other issues of disability. One boy with mobility problems came to school by himself on a trained donkey "the best wheelchair in the world!", as noted by one of our consultants.
6. Lack of legislation resulting in the absence of curricular and text books. There are at least 3 NGOs producing their own text books. We have to develop our own to suit deaf people.
7. As the country is in a transition, the opportunity exists for advocacy of inclusion education before policy gets formulated. There is a general acceptance of other disabled children in mainstream schools. However, it is only when the schools are working efficiently that the additional task of providing for children with disabilities and difficulties in learning can be accomplished successfully.
8. Lack of access to information with scarcely any library resources, books, magazines or local newspapers make learning a bit more difficult. English is not known widely. Training for emigrated, and younger teachers often leave for other jobs for economical reasons. Teaching and learning by "rote" is the principal method used.
9. Within the rural communities, the poverty is often lack of access to basic information and skills, which would make a dramatic difference to the quality of life, particularly for disabled children. CBR programmes could address some of these needs.
10. Disability awareness is gaining momentum with our child-to-child programmes in SERVE's Basic Health Education project. This is however still urban based. Even with our provision of free learning opportunities for deaf children in the city, not all families with deaf children are responding.
11. The collaboration with other related agencies to develop and share resources works well to improve services for our target groups. Discussions are going on in areas of wider sign recording, audiological evaluations and teacher training. Time may be taken up for dialogue and to sort out differences in approach.

This project is a small beginning and we face various problems as with any NGO in the South. There is a lot to learn from the community, and we are learning as we go along. Any ideas, comments and suggestions are most welcome.

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[Inclusion and Deafness Seminar Report](http://www.eenet.org.uk/resources/docs/repindex.docx)

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