



Empowering Deaf Youth & Civil Society in Ethiopia:

Allying with local leaders in delivering a comprehensive set of services to strengthen Deaf education, livelihoods, advocacy, care, and overall wellbeing



DEAFNESS IN ETHIOPIA

Ethiopia is one of the least developed and highly impoverished countries in the world with a population of more than 93 million, ranking 173rd globally on the Human Development Index. Aside from the many daily struggles faced by millions of Ethiopians, having a disability adds an extra layer of hardship that makes even the most routine activities difficult or even impossible. The 2011 WHO/World Bank World Report on Disability lists hearing loss and Deafness as the most common disability worldwide and one of the most debilitating.

Nationwide, an extreme lack of services and opportunities make daily life very challenging for the majority of the Deaf community. Regular obstacles often include the inability to:

- access basic information or services
- receive an education
- communicate with others (including their own families and communities)
- hold a meaningful job or trade
- participate in basic community activities due to stigma and social exclusion



Over the past several years, Visions Global Empowerment (“Visions”) volunteers have been researching, networking, conducting site visits, and piloting initiatives in Ethiopia in an effort to help educate and empower the Deaf community. In 2013, Visions formally added Ethiopia to the list of countries it serves (along with India and Sri Lanka). Now, Visions’ Deaf Education & Empowerment initiatives in Ethiopia are some of our fastest growing programs and have already made a tremendous impact.

“A lack of accessible communication and information affects the lives of many disabled people. Individuals with communication difficulties, such as hearing impairment...are at a significant social disadvantage...This disadvantage is particularly experienced in sectors where effective communication is critical - such as those of health care, education, local government, and justice.”

~Excerpt from the World Bank & World Health Organization World Report on Disability – 2011



Members of the Ethiopian Women with Disabilities National Association (EWDNA) display some of their handicrafts for sale. EWDNA is one local partner organization that shares Visions' commitment to empowering persons with disabilities, including Deaf women.

“...discrimination against any person on the basis of disability is a violation of the inherent dignity and worth of the human person.”

~Excerpt from the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, ratified by the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia on July 7, 2010.

HUMAN RIGHTS

Ethiopia is one of 159 countries that pledged its commitment to respecting the rights of persons with disabilities under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD—2008) and to developing crucial services for and inclusion of disabled persons under current national development strategies. As articulated in the CRPD, “...discrimination against any person on the basis of disability is a violation of the inherent dignity and worth of the human person.” Further, the Federal Ministry of Health (FMOH) of Ethiopia recently included disability programming in its national health strategy and has undertaken a commitment to ensuring proper access to care and services for disabled persons, including the Deaf. Despite these commitments, the reality remains that life is a daily struggle for most Ethiopians as is, and the realization of the goals established for achieving parity amongst the disabled remain a very distant dream.

STATISTICS

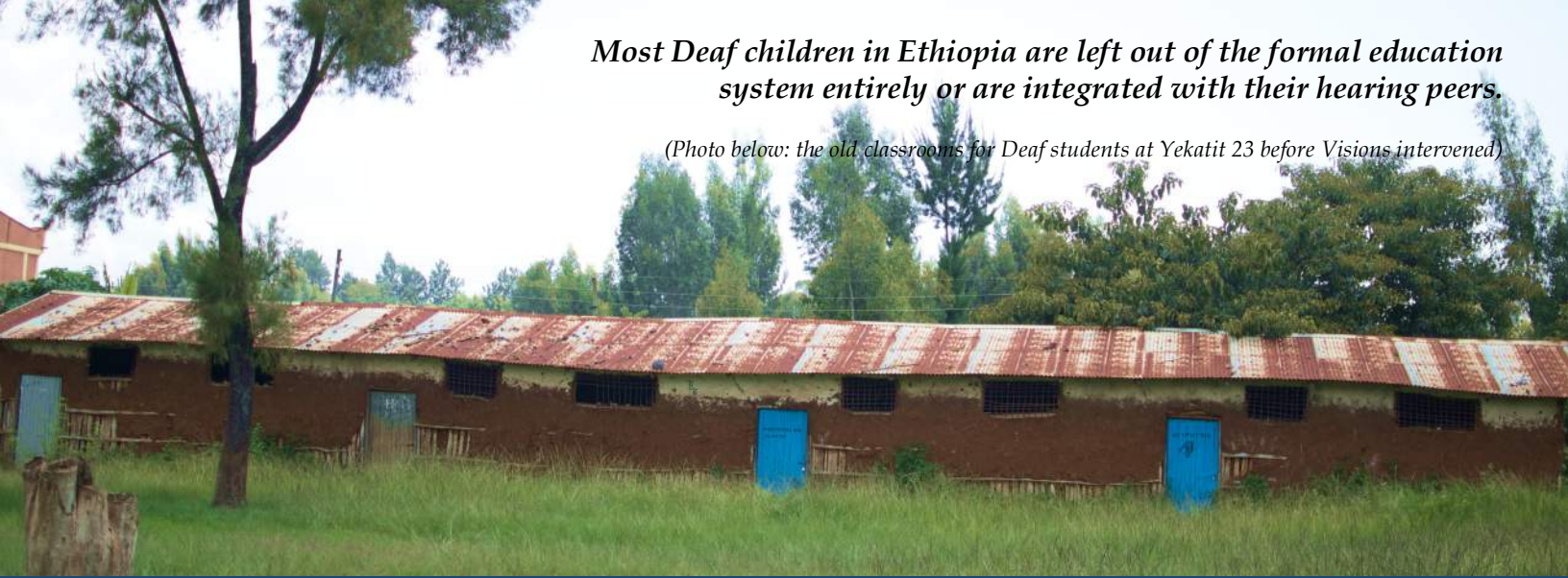
A 2011 report by the Addis Ababa University Dept. of Linguistics on empowering the Deaf in Africa recently stated, “Ethiopia is the second most populated country in Africa. However, at present there is no clear data on the deaf population in Ethiopia. The 1994 national population census put the number of deaf people at about 194,000... Whereas research conducted by the Institute for Educational Research, Ethiopia shows that the percentage of the population with disabilities is 3.0 out of which 14.4% are deaf. This puts the number of D/deaf persons at approximately 335,250.” These estimates are almost certainly far below the actual reality, due to incomplete data and an inability to adequately survey the population. The Ethiopian National Association of the Deaf more accurately pins the figure at around **1—2.5 million Deaf and Hard of Hearing (HoH)** persons nationwide of a total estimated 14.5 million persons living with disabilities in general. Unfortunately, the full extent of the problem is far from being fully understood.



With Visions' support, a Deaf Resource Room was established at Yekatit 23 School in Bahir Dar in 2014. In just 2 years, the # of youth benefitting from the programs and support offered here has increased by 228%.

Most Deaf children in Ethiopia are left out of the formal education system entirely or are integrated with their hearing peers.

(Photo below: the old classrooms for Deaf students at Yekatit 23 before Visions intervened)



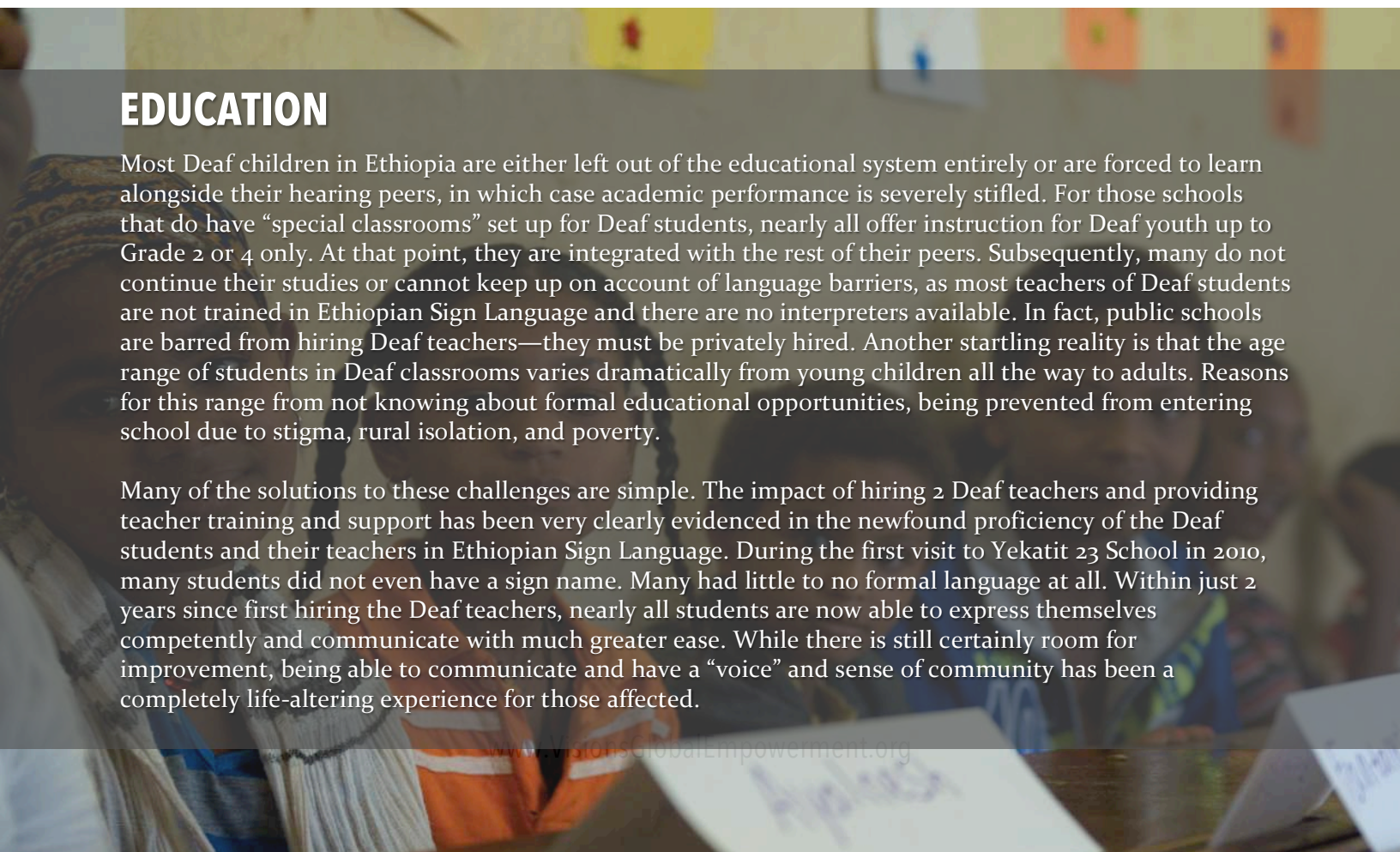
STIGMA & SOCIAL EXCLUSION

One of the greatest challenges Deaf people face in Ethiopia on an everyday basis is the stigma attached to Deafness. Until Ethiopia's new federal constitution took effect in 1995, Deaf persons were categorized in criminal and civil codes as “mentally disabled”, and restrictions were imposed on them with regard to owning property, joining the workforce, and carrying legal standing. Additionally, the Deaf were excluded from financial support that other disabled students have traditionally enjoyed. Formal discrimination in the past has contributed to societal prejudice and mistreatment, with **many Deaf persons being hidden away and essentially barred from participating in daily public life**. Deaf Ethiopians are unable to find employment due to poor educational background and societal misconception that they are incapable of learning, handling responsibility, or communicating with others.

EDUCATION

Most Deaf children in Ethiopia are either left out of the educational system entirely or are forced to learn alongside their hearing peers, in which case academic performance is severely stifled. For those schools that do have “special classrooms” set up for Deaf students, nearly all offer instruction for Deaf youth up to Grade 2 or 4 only. At that point, they are integrated with the rest of their peers. Subsequently, many do not continue their studies or cannot keep up on account of language barriers, as most teachers of Deaf students are not trained in Ethiopian Sign Language and there are no interpreters available. In fact, public schools are barred from hiring Deaf teachers—they must be privately hired. Another startling reality is that the age range of students in Deaf classrooms varies dramatically from young children all the way to adults. Reasons for this range from not knowing about formal educational opportunities, being prevented from entering school due to stigma, rural isolation, and poverty.

Many of the solutions to these challenges are simple. The impact of hiring 2 Deaf teachers and providing teacher training and support has been very clearly evidenced in the newfound proficiency of the Deaf students and their teachers in Ethiopian Sign Language. During the first visit to Yekatit 23 School in 2010, many students did not even have a sign name. Many had little to no formal language at all. Within just 2 years since first hiring the Deaf teachers, nearly all students are now able to express themselves competently and communicate with much greater ease. While there is still certainly room for improvement, being able to communicate and have a “voice” and sense of community has been a completely life-altering experience for those affected.



VISIONS IN ETHIOPIA...

Building Deaf Civil Society & Empowering Deaf Youth

Over the past several years, Visions Global Empowerment (“Visions”) volunteers have been researching, networking, conducting site visits, and piloting initiatives in Ethiopia in an effort to help educate and empower the Deaf community, a population for which there are virtually no public services and formal opportunities for education, employment, or social inclusion and mobility.

Visions has hired Deaf teachers, helped facilitate the establishment of a **Deaf Resource Room** at Yekatit 23 School in Bahir Dar (complete with computer lab), provided **scholarships and mentoring** support for 12 Deaf young adults to pursue educational and vocational endeavors, and kick started the efforts of a whole team of U.S.- and Ethiopia-based volunteers to develop a **training manual** and program for teachers of Deaf students and school administrators. For the third year running, a 2-week summer **service learning trip** was held in Ethiopia, in which 9 American volunteers joined hands with 17 local volunteers in conducting educational training programs that benefitted 73 Deaf youth and young adults. **Two US-based universities** have also recently formed partnerships with Visions to run officially sanctioned and accredited service learning trips to Ethiopia—one with Nazareth College (Rochester, NY) this December 2014/January 2015, and one with State University of New York at New Paltz (SUNY New Paltz) next June 2015. Including the upcoming Nazareth College trip, 36 Americans have now volunteered their time abroad with us in Ethiopia.



The impact of Visions’ efforts in Ethiopia has been dramatic. Within just 2 years, the number of Deaf students and young adults who attended formal schooling or received academic support at Yekatit 23 School in Bahir Dar grew by 228%, from 32 individuals in 2012 to 73 individuals in 2014. Additionally, the number of schools in the district (in which there are 32 total) that had “special classrooms” designated for Deaf children grew from just one (Yekatit 23 School) to three (including Tenna School & Donna Berber School; opened in 2014). One itinerant/roving teacher of Deaf children was also hired to serve all Deaf students throughout the district. And in the summer of 2014, Yekatit 23 School was named **the top performing school** amongst 32 schools in the Bahir Dar District and was honored for its achievement at a special ceremony

Rebecca Swenson *International Volunteer-2014*

“Participation in the Visions Deaf Education and Empowerment program in Ethiopia this past summer has reinvigorated my love for traveling in Africa and provided me with an amazing experience that has reinforced my career goal of spreading Deaf Awareness to others.

...Participating in the Deaf Leadership Capacity Training was informative, thought-provoking and productive. It really got all the participants thinking about goals for developing a “Thriving Deaf Civil Society in Ethiopia”. It was fantastic to see the Visions model for encouraging and empowering local partners to take ownership of their work and become leaders.

It was such a joy to work with the Deaf children at the Bahir Dar School. I really enjoyed the positive energy of the students. I loved being able to experience Ethiopian Sign Language and compare the similarities and differences to American Sign Language. It was great to be immersed in the Ethiopian culture. It was a fantastic trip!”





Bimirew Misganaw
Grade 2 Deaf Student, Yekatit 23 School

When Visions volunteers first met then 6-year old Bimirew at a special summer camp organized for the Deaf students at Yekatit 23 School in Bahir Dar in July 2012, he was an extraordinarily frustrated child and a persistent disruption to classroom order. Suffering from a chronic neurological disorder, Bimirew had been labeled “dumb” and incapable. Many Ethiopians still believe anyone with a disability or suffering from a major illness has been “cursed by God.” At the time of our first meeting, he knew not a single sign...

After sitting patiently with Bimirew for a few days, a Visions volunteer was able to teach him and have him retain his first official words — “want” and “please” — which he immediately started using — liberally. He soon learned his name and a number of other signs, all within a span of just a few days. Within that short period, an entire world of possibility opened up to him, and we know his life was forever changed. Over the course of the following year, he benefitted greatly from having regular access to Deaf teachers and a host of educational support programs through Visions. When a Visions

team returned to conduct another summer camp for Deaf children in August 2013, the same volunteer who taught Bimirew his first words witnessed him carry on a nearly 45-minute conversation with another Deaf student (who also has Down Syndrome) — a surreal moment in which two supposedly “incapable” children that had been neglected and dismissed their entire lives found joy, companionship, and self-expression through newly acquired language skills.

Utilizing an “allies” approach, Visions believes in forming lasting partnerships of equals that build the capacity of local civil society groups and help devise thoughtful, long-term solutions to community challenges.



Volunteerism is a core component of Visions' efforts in Ethiopia — with both domestic and international volunteers regularly giving their time, services, and expertise. Over the last 3 years, 36 American volunteers have joined hands with more than 20 local counterparts over multiple visits in conducting programs and laying the foundation for efforts that empower Deaf children and the Deaf community at-large. In July 2014, Visions volunteers (pictured here) conducted a 3-day local capacity-building training in July for 17 local leaders from Addis Ababa & Bahir Dar, including interpreters, teachers, university lecturers, and Deaf leaders.



LIVELIHOODS DEVELOPMENT

Over the course of the last few years, incredible progress has been made in bringing education, opportunity, and hope to the Deaf community in Bahir Dar. With Visions' support, 12 Deaf youth and young adults have since benefited from a Scholarship Program to support academic and vocational development, including:

- A "Visions Hairdressing Salon for Men" that employs 3 women and 1 man
- An independent carpenter
- A sewing collective of 4 young women
- A small roadside shop
- Assistance for 2 undergraduate students to attend Addis Ababa University

Looking to the future, the next batch of scholarship recipients have already been identified and are awaiting sponsorship. As always, the underlying goal with these efforts is to promote personal development, income generation, and self-sufficiency. Join us in shaping the next generation of young Deaf leaders!



Harron Ali
Carpenter & Scholarship Recipient

24-year old Harron went remarkably far in his education. After completing Grade 10, he began working with a local carpenter doing woodworking. However, he was never able to move beyond the work he was doing as an assistant and thus remained in poverty. In December 2013, he became one of 12 Deaf young adults to whom Visions gave a scholarship to pursue livelihoods development activities. Visions volunteers who had participated in the earlier Summer 2013 service learning program returned home and began collecting funds to support Harron and his counterparts. Harron used his scholarship money to purchase equipment that would allow him to have his own business. He also received mentoring support from our Local Project Coordinator, who guided him and several of his colleagues in lobbying their local government for a space for a workshop, which they soon granted. Now, Harron is earning \$200 – \$400/month and is completely self-sufficient. He is confident and outspoken about Deaf people being just as capable as the rest of society.

Demelash Tsegaye
Deaf Teacher, Yekatit 23 School

Hired in January 2014, Demelash joined another Deaf teacher, Mr. Abel Wudu, at Yekatit 23 School in providing academic support, mentorship, and formal Ethiopian Sign Language training to Deaf youth and young adults. The presence of Demelash and Abel has made a tremendous impact on the lives of these young people who are now able to communicate, express themselves, and follow along academically. Whereas before there was isolation, now there is a strong sense of community and hope for the future.

Demelash himself is no stranger to hardship. As a child, he lost both of his parents and was taken in by a local church. After awhile, he ended up on the streets doing day labor. Being Deaf added an extra layer of hardship and left him largely excluded from society. Today, he is thriving in his new position and is a source of inspiration to all with his infectious positive outlook on life, fierce work ethic, and firm belief in the transformative power of education.





Aynalem Ayalew Local Project Coordinator

Without the support, guidance, and leadership of local partners, thoughtful and sustainable development work is simply not possible. By investing in the capacity and the ongoing efforts of locally-rooted, innovative thinkers like Aynalem, the previously unthinkable becomes entirely possible.

Aynalem joined us as a volunteer during our first group volunteer service learning trip in 2012. Her enthusiasm, commitment, and visionary leadership have enabled incredible progress since then. With a background in Special Needs Education and fluency in Ethiopian Sign Language, Aynalem is a regular lecturer at Bahir Dar University and is Visions' Local Project Coordinator in Bahir Dar. Aynalem is the embodiment of our "allies" approach—she is forward-thinking and passionate, and harnesses her seemingly boundless energy into serving Deaf youth and communities. Together, we know we will continue to move mountains.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Looking to the future, big plans are already in the works for Visions' efforts in Ethiopia. Having already piloted several development initiatives over the past few years, Visions has observed the impact of these undertakings and has taken away many crucial lessons. Now with a proven track record of demonstrated success and strong understanding of how to do this work, we are eager to invest our time and resources heavily into the expansion of ongoing efforts in Ethiopia on behalf of the Deaf community. Visions' planned 2015 efforts in Ethiopia include the following:

- Continue the **employment of Deaf teachers** at Yekatit 23 School who offer regular instruction and support in formal Ethiopian Sign Language (EthSL) and other subjects to Deaf students, teachers, parents, and community members
- Continue to grow existing **Livelihoods Development and Vocational Training Program** designed to build crucial vocational and life skills amongst Deaf adolescents and young adults toward promoting independent living and income-generation
- Develop a **Deaf Teachers Resource Manual** to be translated, e-archived/printed, and disseminated nationally to Sister Schools and Deaf service organizations
- Establish a **Virtual Ethiopia National Deaf Portal** through website development and e-archiving of information and resources
- Set up an **Audiometric Assessment Center** and commence hearing screenings and community health education efforts
- Establish a **Model Regional Deafness Center—Bahir Dar**
- Construct **toilets** at Yekatit 23 School in Bahir Dar
- Conduct annual **service learning trips** to Ethiopia, including officially sanctioned/accredited trips with reputable universities (including Nazareth College and SUNY New Paltz)

With the support of thoughtful donors and committed volunteers, we can continue to change the lives and future prospects of this highly under-served demographic. Please join us in this endeavor.

Help us Invest in Tomorrow's Leaders...Make a Contribution Today!

*Donate online or become a monthly contributor at www.VisionsGlobalEmpowerment/donate
...or send a check made out to "Visions" to:

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A receipt will be issued promptly for your tax-exempt donation (federal tax ID#26-3386678). Thank you!

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