

# A sign language for Nigeria

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Over 10 million Nigerians are deaf or hard of hearing. As adults, they suffer discrimination and social exclusion because of difficulties communicating; as children, 90 per cent are excluded from school for the same reason. American Sign Language (ASL), used in Nigerian schools for the deaf, fails to meet the local language needs of the deaf. Local signs are widely in use and more reflective of Nigerian society, but these are routinely ignored.

The Nigerian Sign Language Project seeks to nurture the emergence of a Nigerian Sign Language (NSL) out of the signs and gestures used by deaf Nigerians themselves. As well as offering new educational practices in schools, training and support will also be provided to families with deaf children.

## Phase 1: Building the dictionary

One hundred and twenty profoundly deaf Nigerians aged 5–60 (90 adults and 30 school age children) from different ethnic, cultural and regional groups in Nigeria were recruited for the project. The adults had no knowledge of a conventional sign language, and used local signing to communicate. The aim was to gather these signs for compilation into a dictionary.

Four hundred signs were gathered under the following headings: Pronouns, Home, Family, Verbs, Parts of the Body, Food, Animals and Time. A manual alphabet for deaf school beginners and signs for numbers 1–1000 were also created. This was followed by gradual incorporation of the signs into classroom instruction. Results of the evaluation indicated higher achievement levels in children in the group using these signs compared with those using ASL.

## Phase 2: International collaboration

Phase 2 will bring together specialists and resources from Nigeria, the West African subregion and the UK to expand the scope of the Nigerian Sign Language Project and promote collaboration with interest groups, end users of the language and schools. The Nigerian National Association of the Deaf has a key role in data collection and dissemination. Other partners include the Foundation for Special Needs Education and Welfare in Nigeria, The University of Calabar, The Nigerian Federal Ministry of Education, and the Deafness, Cognition & Language Research Centre (DCAL), University College London.

With the Principal Investigator based in Nigeria, the project is managed locally to ensure direct benefit for the deaf community and for deaf children, youth and adults, as well as for their families. A system of self-evaluation is built into the project. The project will also seek to support similar initiatives in West Africa.

*For more information, please contact [aadajavon@gmail.com](mailto:aadajavon@gmail.com) or the Foundation for Special Needs Education and Welfare, Ganaka International College, Jos, Nigeria. Alternatively, visit [www.peterlang.de](http://www.peterlang.de)*

**Paulina Ajavon** is a Special Needs Educator/Research Fellow with much experience of working and researching in both Africa and Europe. She has done extensive research on local signing for the deaf and the first dictionary of Nigerian signs is among her numerous publications. She sees international research collaboration as a means of strengthening the globalisation of education. She has successfully forged international research collaboration between researchers in Europe and Africa, and is looking to expand on this.