

The Deaf of South Sudan The South Sudanese Sign Language Community



photo by DOOR International

South Sudan achieved its independence in 2011 from the Republic of Sudan to its north. Prior to that, Sudan suffered under two civil wars. The second, which began in 1976, pitted the Sudanese government against the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and lasted for over twenty years. These wars have led to significant suffering among the Sudanese and South Sudanese people, including major gaps in infrastructure development and significant displacement of various people groups.

All of this war has traumatized the people of Sudan, and the Deaf in particular. The country appears to have a very small middle class, while a vast majority of its citizens are either very wealthy or extremely poor. The Deaf in South Sudan tend to be the poorest of the poor. Some cannot afford food and must stay at home with families (even though the home environment often means that no one can communicate with them).

There are currently no Deaf schools in South Sudan. Deaf schools are typically the center of language and cultural development for the Deaf of a country. A lack of Deaf schools means that there is a need for a central cultural organization among the Deaf. Deaf churches could function in this role if they were well-established. There is currently only one Deaf church in South Sudan. This church meets in Juba, and has fewer than 50 members.

Because of the linguistic barriers between the Deaf and hearing the Deaf often remain culturally isolated from the hearing. Ninety percent of deaf individuals are born into hearing households, and thereby are involved in hearing culture. Some view them as cursed or not as fully capable of the same things that hearing people are. Thus, for example, Deaf people only earned the legal right to vote in 2010.

- Primary Religion:**
Non-religious

- Disciples (Matt 28:19):**
Less than 1%

- Churches:**
None specially for Deaf

- Scripture Status (Matt 28:20):**
No Scripture

- Population (date):**
Potentially 83,000 (2015)



South Sudanese Sign Language Community

Have They Heard the Gospel?

Response to the Gospel

There is one Deaf church in South Sudan, located in the capital of Juba. Some Deaf attend hearing churches, but there is no interpretation of services, and the Deaf struggle with access to written resources. The percentage of Christians is less than 1%.

The Christian faith has very little influence in their daily lives because even the few Deaf who are Christians have very little understanding of the written Bible or access to discipleship training in sign language.

Are Cross-Cultural Missionaries Needed?

Expertise is needed for the development of materials/media for the Deaf. Education is an area that could use a lot of help. Teachers are unaware of how to teach "literacy" in sign language, and the general lack of awareness regarding the Deaf makes education particularly difficult. Evangelists or other religious workers who know how to communicate well with deaf people could definitely be put to good use.

Number of Christian Congregations Serving Group

There is only one Deaf church in South Sudan. While it is estimated that approximately 60% of South Sudanese identify themselves as Christian, among the Deaf the percentage is much, much lower (less than 2%). This is due to a lack of access to Scripture or other resources in sign language, as well as the language barriers inherit in hearing church settings. The Deaf church in Juba is housed in Juba Christian Centre, a local Pentecostal denominational church.

Do They Have the Word of God Translated?

No, no part of the Bible has been video-recorded in South Sudanese Sign Language.

What Other Forms of Gospel Presentations are Available?

Recordings
Literature
Films/videos
Radio

At this point there are absolutely no resources.
None available
Only in English, but the deaf cannot read
No
None available

South Sudanese Sign Language Community

Group Description

Population

Comment

When we speak about Deaf people as opposed to deaf people, we're making the distinction of, among other things, their language of preference. Simply stated, Deaf people identify with the Deaf culture and use that signed language; deaf people do not and prefer to use the spoken language. Estimating the population of a Deaf community is difficult. Quite honestly, no one knows how many Deaf there are in a given country. However, some generalities seem to hold true. In 1st world nations (like the US) 1-2 people in 1000 are Deaf; in those nations that are considered "2nd world", 3-4 people per 1000 are Deaf; in 3rd world nations, the numbers are much higher: 6-8 people per 1000 are Deaf. Again, this is an estimation only. There is absolutely no quantifiable documentation to support these numbers. But, they are the best we know.

As implied, the estimated number of deaf is always larger than the number of those who learn sign language and become part of the Deaf community. Some become deaf late in life. Some children's parents do not have the funds to send their child to a deaf school and some of these children never encounter others with whom to communicate. Almost all deaf children are born to hearing parents. Instead these children grow and work at home where they use gestures and sounds but do not have a true language. The number of these is unknown.

Geography & Environment

Location

South Sudan is a land-locked country in Africa, having achieved its independence from the Republic of Sudan in 2011. Its geography ranges from grasslands, floodplains, and wetlands to high-altitude plateaus. The country has several very large national parks, and boasts the second-largest wildlife migration in the world.

Climate

Positioned just above the Equator, it shares characteristics with surrounding countries, including a high-humidity season with large amounts of rainfall as well as a dry season. Average temperatures are still moderate, with the coolest temperatures in July (average of 77°F or 25°C) and the hottest weather in March (average of 85°F or 30°C). The rainy season extends from May to October.

South Sudanese Sign Language Community

Language/Linguistic/Literacy

Primary Language	South Sudanese Sign Language
Attitude towards mother tongue	Very receptive
Monolingual	Unknown, but probably most. Ability to lip read or read English is extremely limited.
Second Languages	Ugandan or Kenyan Sign Language
Linguistically related	There is a good possibility that South Sudanese Sign Language would be accessible not just to the estimated 82,600 South Sudanese Deaf, but also to many of the 310,000 Sudanese Deaf. The social barriers that divide Sudanese and South Sudanese populations are not as prevalent among the Deaf.
Adult Literacy	Percentage unknown, but almost none can read
Literacy Attitude	It is especially difficult for the Deaf to learn to read and write, but in many cases it is their most viable method of communication with the hearing world and therefore a necessity.

Economics

South Sudan has been war-torn for a number of years leading it to be classified as one of the world's most underdeveloped. Much of this is due to a lack of infrastructure to support industry. The economy is heavily dependent upon agriculture. South Sudan possesses the third-largest oil reserves in Sub-Saharan Africa, and oil revenues account for more than 98% of South Sudan's budget, yielding billions in revenues. However, because of major clan disputes, as well as disputes over the profit taken by refineries in northern Sudan, this revenue source has not been quite as reliable as the people would like.

In general, because of the war-torn nature of the country's recent history, as well as the influx of NGOs to help in the country, there appears to be very few middle-class citizens. The vast majority of South Sudanese are either extremely wealthy or very, very poor. The high cost of living makes obtaining shelter and food very difficult for the poor.

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Occupation:

As among the poorest of the poor in South Sudan, the South Sudanese Deaf typically are unemployed or under-employed. This forces them into one of four situations:

- Remaining with (hearing) family who have regular income
- Moving to a city to try to find employment there
- Emigrating to Uganda or Kenya for better employment opportunities
- Joining a local Deaf gang

Society

Neighbor Relations

South Sudanese Deaf view the Ugandan and Kenyan Deaf with some reluctance, as both Ugandan and Kenyan Deaf have immigrated to the region and, from the perspective of the South Sudanese Deaf, “taken away the jobs that are there.” They also have issues with trusting the hearing people they live among. This is one reason that, even though both a Kenyan and a Ugandan Sign Language translation are currently in process, this translation would not be well-viewed by the South Sudanese Deaf. Their languages are similar, so these translations would give the translation teams a large boost in their translation work, but the signing must be South Sudanese. The Deaf often view hearing people as withholding information (given their experiences growing up as children).

Social Habits/Groupings

There are currently no Deaf schools in South Sudan. Deaf schools are typically the center of language and cultural development for the Deaf of a country.

Religion

Demographics are difficult to determine in South Sudan. The last census in 2008 (done by the Sudanese government, not the South Sudanese government) estimated the population of South Sudan at 8.26 million. However, the last census to mention religions in the south was conducted in 1956. In that census, a majority of the people were classified as Christian, while 18% were considered Muslim. Other sources believe that a majority of the South Sudanese practice traditional indigenous (animist) religion.

The vast majority of the South Sudanese Deaf have no religion at all. Most have very little access to the information that would help them understand what religion is about. This is very common among Deaf populations globally. Most Deaf live for “today.” Many fall into sexual immorality as well as drugs, alcohol, gangs, and stealing to survive.

South Sudanese Sign Language Community

Status of Christianity

Church Growth

Reached Classification

Unreached

Total Believers

The percentage of Christians is less than 1%.

Pastors

No Deaf pastors

Churches

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History of Christianity in Group

Year Began

Christianity was first introduced into the region only a few centuries after Christ.

By Whom

In the 19th century, Christianity was reintroduced to the country by British missionaries.

Significant Events

In the 16th century, Christianity was introduced to the country by Dominican missionaries. The Dominicans, Jesuits, and Augustinians actively worked in the country for several centuries. Then in the 19th century, Anglican missionaries set up a permanent mission station in the country. Other denominations have subsequently established churches. However, these efforts have only very peripherally intersected with the Deaf due to the language barriers involved.

Scripture

Translation Status

Translation is just beginning. With very few South Sudanese Deaf Christians, their primary desire is to gain access to Scripture and to training in how to reach others for Christ. This would allow them to have a large impact on other Deaf around them.

Available Scripture:

None in sign language

Missions/Churches Working Among

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The two largest churches of influence in South Sudan are the Catholic Church and the Anglican Church. However, these efforts have only very peripherally intersected with the Deaf due to the language barriers involved.