South Sudan: First Official Basic Sign Language and Dictionary Developed

South Sudan’s first basic sign language and sign language dictionary will be officially launched and presented in the capital city Juba on Thursday. The dictionary contains 200 signs recorded by the development organization Light for the World in close collaboration with the Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare of the Republic of South Sudan as well as local disabled people’s organizations and experts from the Universities of Addis Ababa and Leiden.

"The sign language dictionary is a historic milestone for people in South Sudan who are deaf and hearing impaired. For the first time, signs have been recorded that can be used for communication across the country and to address key educational challenges of the deaf community”, explains Klaas Aikes, program coordinator of South Sudan at Light for the World. Until now, the world’s youngest nation did not have an official and basic sign language. While deaf and hearing impaired people used a variety of local and regional signs, they had to use a mixture of Ugandan, Sudanese and American signs for official situations and for cross-regional communication. However, these were not widely known and did not cover much of the signing practiced. The new sign language is comprised of signs that are used in all regions of South Sudan. "The first 200 signs recorded in the dictionary are mainly about everyday topics such as family, education, food and drinks but also cities and state names", says Klaas Aikes, adding: “The goal is to expand this collection of signs and codification continuously and to capture other areas of life”.

Process of Sign Language Recording
Over the past three years, Light for the World designed and coordinated the process of recording the new official sign language of South Sudan together with local and international actors – among them members of the South Sudanese deaf communities and two sign language experts from the Universities of Leiden and Addis Ababa. In cooperation with local disability organizations, data-collectors were trained across the country to systematically identify and record regional signs. The recordings were analyzed with the support of sign language experts, selected together with local organizations and edited for the dictionary. “Representatives of the Deaf Communities in South Sudan were at the heart of the sign language development process, as they are the experts of sign language practice and represent the local communities”, explains Klaas Aikes, adding that, “the development of their own sign language also gave them more self-confidence and encouraged them to stand up for their rights and inclusion in society”. Among the main contributors from the deaf communities were the Equatoria Association of the Deaf, the National Association of the Deaf, the Association of Deaf Concern as well as members from the Women Disability Network. The sign language project was strongly supported by the Ministry of Education’s department for Inclusive Education as well as the Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare in South Sudan, which will officially launch the new dictionary together with Light for the World and disability organizations on December 1st in Juba on the occasion of the International Day of Persons with Disabilities (3rd Dec.). The government will also present their new disability policy.

Advancement of Sign Language Planned
"The new official basic sign language and the dictionary will be further developed during the coming years”, explains Klaas Aikes. Light for the World is working on an advanced edition with new signs representing further areas of life. In addition, master trainers for the new sign language will be trained in order to make the language known throughout the country and to facilitate the use of the language, especially in official situations, such as in education or for translation.

Resources:

- Copy of Sign Language Dictionary (Details on process of developing the dictionary, see p. 1 - 4)
- Sample signs cities South Sudan
Interviews and attendance of the event (8:30 A.M., Juba Grand Hotel, 1st December) are possible, please contact:

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**Light for the World in South Sudan**
Light for the World has been active in South Sudan since 2005. The organization for inclusive development has a country office in the capital city Juba. In the midst of humanitarian crisis in South Sudan, the organization for inclusive development supports tens of thousands of people with visual impairments and other disabilities in the areas of health, education, livelihood, human rights and empowerment. An estimated 15 percent of the population of South Sudan, approximately more than 1.8 million people, is living with a disability according to estimates of the World Health Organization. In crises and conflict situations, however, this figure is significantly increased through injuries, extreme poverty and the lack of medical services. Light for the World facilitates basic health care, rehabilitation and education for persons with disabilities – also for internally displaced people with disabilities, who are excluded from many emergency programs. In 2015, Light for the World provided services and support to over 11.500 people with disabilities in South Sudan.

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