

## Young Ambassadors' Diary 2016: challenges facing deaf children in Kenya

by Jessica Hardy and Samina Begum, from Limehurst School in Loughborough

**Jessica Hardy** and **Samina Begum** are the 2016 Young Ambassadors for the Send My Friend to School campaign. They travelled to Kenya in February 2016 with Deaf Child Worldwide where they investigated the educational barriers for deaf children.

Worldwide 124 million children, aged 5-15 are out of school. Children with disabilities make up a large proportion of these children and they often find it hard to access the education that is their right.

In **Kenya**, it is estimated that **as few as 1 in 6 children with disabilities are in school**. However, the new Global Goals agreed last year now include a focus on 'inclusive and equitable education for all'.

Here are some extracts from the Young Ambassadors diaries where they explain the situation for some of the pupils they met and highlight the task ahead for the Kenyan government and world leaders...



Photo: in the classroom at Baba Dogo Primary School © Suzanne Lagan/Deaf Child Worldwide

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## Day 1: Arriving in Africa and meeting Kenya's Global Campaign for Education

**Jessica:** "After what felt like the longest flight ever (I couldn't wait to get there!) we finally arrived in Nairobi. I couldn't help but be amazed by how beautiful the country is... it took a while for me to take everything in; the massive groups of people and the loudness of the capital city was almost overwhelming."

**Samina:** "We went to meet Raynor, a very passionate advocate for the right to education. Raynor works for Elimu Yetu Coalition (EYC), Kenya's Global Campaign for Education and gave us an insight into the challenges children face, especially those that have a disability, like being deaf. Raynor explained that 50% of people in Kenya live below the poverty line and while basic education is free in Kenya, hidden costs like buying uniforms and other materials mean that 1.6 million children are still missing out on school!"



Photo: Raynor from Elimu Yetu Coalition © Axel Fassio/GCE UK

"I was shocked to hear about the class sizes – the ratio should be one pupil to 35 students but she said it's not uncommon to find one teacher for up to 100 students. The EYC are doing lots of interesting things to improve education in Kenya such as asking the government to get better at data – it's hard to quantify the issue because of a lack of statistics and that means it's hard for the government to know how to prioritise spending. I'm looking forward to hearing from government members their side of the story and am already feeling like we'll have lots to report when we return to the UK."

**Jessica:** "Our final task today was to learn from Richard Mativu, the Deaf Child Worldwide Technical Advisor, how to communicate effectively with people who are deaf and prepare ourselves for visiting primary schools throughout the week."

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## Day 2: Visiting schools and homes in Nairobi

**Samina:** “Today, we visited two schools and two children's homes to get a better understanding of the lives of children in and out of education. I felt extremely nervous but the children were so friendly and welcoming!

“The first school we visited was Baba Dogo Primary School, a mainstream school with a specialist deaf unit. We met children up to 18 because the way the education system works in Kenya is that regardless of your age - you must pass classes 1-8 before moving onto secondary school.

“The Headteacher Rosalyn told us about the challenges of deaf children having to travel long distances to get to a school with specialist support and the lack of teachers and resources. There are just 18 teachers but 1500 pupils! The government should be sending money to support children with special educational needs, but she said that hasn't happened in a while.”



Photo: Children learning sign language at Baba Dogo Primary School in Nairobi © Axel Fassio/GCE UK

“We observed a mainstream classroom where we met a deaf child called Agnes. She lost her hearing last year and was expecting to move up one class but missed most of the class when she became deaf, so she was forced to retake the class. I realised that hearing loss puts a real strain on peoples education. Children with this disability have to work extra hard to make sure they do not fall behind their classmates. They have to learn an entire new language



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(Kenyan Sign Language, KSL) to be able to communicate with others but to do this they have to be taken out of the mainstream classes to learn KSL, and all too easily they can fall behind 3 or 4 years.

“Could you imagine how isolating that would make you feel watching your friends every time they move up a class? Thankfully, Agnes is currently in the mainstream class accompanied by a second teacher who is able to help her so she doesn't fall behind. She also helps with her confidence, reminding her that she deserves to be in the classroom alongside her friends and classmates. I don't think I've ever seen anything more heartwarming.



Photo: Jess and Samina in the deaf unit at Baba Dogo Primary School in Nairobi © Axel Fassio/GCE UK

“Finally, we went to the school's deaf unit where there were about 17 pupils. The room was very colourful and bright and I could see all of the enthusiastic energy bursting out of all the little children, which showed the passion the teachers have for the pupils. Unfortunately, it wasn't all sunshine and rainbows as there were only 2 teachers, and they had to teach 3 different classes each as the ages of all pupils varied and they were at different stages.

“I can only imagine the stress of trying to teach like this. There is a staggering rise in the amount of children who wish to attend this school but cannot because there is no space to seat them and not enough teachers.”



**Jessica:** “For me, the next place we visited really emphasized the significance of the Send My Friend to School Campaign and the work of Deaf Child Worldwide. This was Shadow Mountain Children's home, which was in a slum area. I had only seen poverty like this through a screen before, so it took a long time for me to understand it all.

“The home had 73 pupils living there - the majority were orphans - and we saw 4 teachers and 1 caretaker / cook. Being shown around was upsetting as I saw how the home was so small and the conditions were poor.

Photo: Jess and Samina at the Shadow Mountain Childrens Home © Axel Fassio/GCE UK

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There were around 3/4 bedrooms which doubled as classrooms in the day-time, and an outdoor classroom was extremely under-resourced; they only had a quarter of a broken chalk board. Surprisingly, all the students still wore a school uniform, which underlined their pride and the importance of education to them.



Photo: Parents at the Thawbu School parents support group © Axel Fassio/GCE UK

“Next we attended a support group at Thawabu Primary School for parents of deaf children. I loved hearing from mothers, like Anne and Beatrice, about how having this support group has improved their lives; it made them happier, and helped them learn KSL for free so they can communicate with their children more easily. Also, it was interesting to hear about the stigma surrounding deafness and disabilities. The headteacher Mwangi said that for some people “the deaf are seen as a curse, as a bad omen.” I think things are improving but there’s definitely still some prejudice towards deaf children, which is really sad. However, the fact that the parents and teachers are standing up to this really inspired me.

“Our final visit of our long but enjoyable day was to visit an out of school deaf child living in the slums. As soon as we arrived, we could immediately see and feel the difference in mood between here and the previous places we visited. The girl we visited, Fadhiri, was very shy and hid her face behind her mother.. Whereas the children we had met who did go to school, were much happier and quite confident to approach us.

“We went into Fadhiri’s home and spoke to her mum and dad and they told us how she used to go to school, but now the family can’t afford it. It was heartbreaking to find out that Fadhiri doesn’t know sign language and it is difficult for her to communicate with anyone. I found this so unfair, but her parents had big hopes for her future. Towards the end of our visit she seemed more confident and even came outside with us along with her brother, where we gave her some gifts. We had fun blowing bubbles with her outside and I could see that she was just as playful and intelligent as any other child.”



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Photo: Jess and Samina with Fadhiri © Axel Fassio/GCE UK

## Day 3: Learning more from politicians and meeting teachers making a difference

**Jessica:** “We started with an early meeting at the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. They began by explaining how they have ‘a vision for an inclusive school system which doesn’t discriminate’, but we were told that the biggest challenge is a lack of resources. The huge lack of funding for assistive devices for those with disabilities, such as hearing aids, means that many children can’t go to school, as it’s more difficult for them to learn.



Photo: Meeting with Darius Mogaka Ogutu, Director of Policy, at the Ministry © Axel Fassio/GCE UK

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“This meeting reinforced also what we had learnt back at home; that everyone has the right to go to school, but it is the government's responsibility to provide a quality education for them.”

**Samina:** “ We then visited a Tusome School, Njathani Primary School. Tusome means "Let's Read" in Kiswahili. It is a nationwide program that will improve the lives of 5.4 million children in class 1&2 in about 22,000 Kenyan primary schools by providing textbooks and many other fundamental resources. There are roughly around 1050 pupils, 900 of the pupils attend the mainstream classes.



Photo: Jessica in class at Njathani Primary School © Axel Fassio/GCE UK

“Finally, we had a meeting with the Kenyan Union of Teachers (KNUT) to find out why the ratio between teachers and pupils is so shockingly high and more about the welfare of teachers throughout Kenya. We learnt that many teachers are training to teach children with disabilities but are unable to find secure jobs with a decent salary due to the lack of government funding for schools to hire more teachers.

**Jessica:** “As well as discussing challenges faced by those with disabilities and other learning barriers, we talked for a bit about challenges faced by girls. We found out that sometimes culture means that girls are more discriminated against. For example, if there was a boy and a girl in a family, the parents are often more likely to favour the son and send him to school and leave the girl without an education. They also talked about how Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and child marriage can result in girls not finishing school. The KNUT wish to set up a gender programme with other teaching unions and make sure every girl child gets an education.”

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Photo: Discussing challenges facing teachers with KNUT © Axel Fassio/GCE UK

## Day 4: Rural Diani and visiting a residential deaf school

**Samina:** “We had to wake up at 4:30 today - probably the earliest I've ever had to wake up! But it was so worth it because we travelled to Diani. Red sand and greenery – a big contrast to industrialised Nairobi – and after some time taking it in we were off to a project which empowers communities to support deaf children and youth.

The Education Assessment and Research Centre (EARC) in Kwale creates awareness on special needs education and has a really important role in assessing children with disabilities and working to support them. For example, when they identify a child as being deaf they work with Deaf Child Worldwide and VSO to make sure the child gets help to enrol in school and to suggest the child and family attend the free sign language classes the project offers.”

**Jessica:** “We met with the Kwale County Director for Education who talked about some of the challenges in this rural area facing children in getting an education. Just like in Nairobi, hidden costs are a big barrier.

“There are huge distances between some of the schools in this sparsely populated area and that’s why the government have created more boarding schools. The children only see their families over the holidays between terms but sometimes the heavy rainfall means children can’t travel back to school on time.



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Photo: Kwale Residential School for the Deaf © Axel Fassio/GCE UK

“We spent the afternoon visiting Kwale Residential School for the Deaf - very different to the other schools we visited throughout the week. This was definitely the toughest day for all of us! As soon as we got to the school and got out the car, it was smokey and the overall atmosphere was dull.”

**Samina:** “What struck us as soon as we got to Kwale Residential School was the smell of burning in the atmosphere. But what scared me was when the head teacher told us that the smoke is constant and the school is polluted was because farmland owners were setting hundreds of trees on fire to clear their land.

“To get a better understanding we went to the back of the school to see more. There, I could see burnt leaves, branches and twigs surrounding the floor and so much more dead and decaying matter. One of the students told us how everyday he and his classmates have to take it in turns to rush down to the fire, grab as much wood as they can to put out the fire then rush back to make sure they are not falling behind their lessons.

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Photo: Pupils at Kwale School talk to Jessica and Samina about the problems caused by smoke and fire nearby © Axel Fassio/GCE UK

“The pupils are using WOOD to put out TREES that have been set on fire. They are literally risking their lives for their education. My eyes started to get red and sore from all the smoke, but some of these students have been tolerating this for years.

“Why are these children suffering as a result of having a disability? There is no other school in the area that they can attend to get the proper education they need. I was so angry and I am still so furious thinking about it. But for them, we will be their voice. We will do our best to make sure these pupils are in a safe learning environment because absolutely NOBODY in this world should be made to feel that they must put their lives at risk, just so they can get an education.”



Photo: Play at Kwale School © Axel Fassio/GCE UK

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## Day 5: Kinango School for the deaf

**Jessica:** “Sadly, Friday was our last day. We travelled to Kinango School for the Deaf (a boarding school), which was in a very remote and rural area. I remember thinking how quiet the school was but when we visited the classrooms, we realised a lot of conversation was going on, just that it was in sign language.

“My favourite part was having a one to one conversation with a girl called Salome. The first thing I noticed about her was the big, contagious smile on her face and how confident and friendly she was. I introduced myself to her in sign language and told her my sign name as well as finger spelling my name. I'm happy that she was patient as I'm very inexperienced with Kenyan Sign Language and I probably made a few mistakes! I asked her about the school and her family and she told me that she wants to become a hairdresser in the future and she loves school.



Photo: Jess communicates with Salome using sign language, at Kinango Residential School © Axel Fassio/GCE UK

“Then she wanted to know more about my life, so I showed her the scrapbook I brought from home. Salome was very interested seeing the pictures of me, my family and my town. We were sat in one of the dormitories and I found out that up to 3 girls can share 1 bed and some have no mattresses. I can't imagine how uncomfortable it would be to live like that.”

**Samina:** “I met a girl roughly the same age as me, who told me everything this boarding school has done for her; how amazing her friends are and how welcome she felt when she arrived. And I told her about my life. She made me really laugh and smile, until I asked her when was the last time she saw her family.



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Photo: Samina swaps stories with her new friend at Kinango Residential School © Axel Fassio/GCE UK

“She told me how her family has neglected her for years because of being deaf and that she had to bring herself to this boarding school to get an education because her parents believed she wasn't worthy of one. Her parents don't provide anything for her and on top of that, they won't even come to visit her! Can you imagine how it must feel that your parents don't want you because you're deaf?

“But one thing that made me smile was that although this is happening to her, she wants to be a role model for children in the same situation. She wants them to realise that they still deserve to be respected and well educated. I was so happy to hear that she wanted to be a role model that I gave her a Send My Friend to School t-shirt. I told her whenever she wears it to remember that I am and will always be her friend. That she is loved by so many people because this campaign is all about sending our friends to school and getting them an education, in a safe environment, regardless of whether they have a disability or not.”

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Photo: Jessica and Samina with their new friends at Kinango Residential School © Axel Fassio/GCE UK

## Day 6: Back in the UK ...

**Jessica:** “Everything that we have seen and found out this week has really opened my eyes to the reality of the education systems in another country. Instead of sitting back and watching through a screen, it felt amazing talking to so many people about the Send My Friend to School campaign, and to see how much hope we gave them. I am so proud to be a part of this campaign and I know that we can continue to work hard and make a difference!”

**Samina:** “It has been a pleasure working alongside Deaf Child Worldwide. I am so truly grateful for this opportunity and it will be something that I will treasure for the rest of my life. Now that our trip is over, I can only hope to make all the people I've met this week proud by lobbying for this issue and spreading awareness so that people know as much as I do and we can ultimately send all our friends to school!”



Photo: Pupils at Njaithari Primary give a thumbs up for Send My Friend © Axel Fassio/GCE UK