

“MAKING IT WORK!” Good Practice case study



How the diverse and localised Tibetan Sign Language was consolidated, standardised and promoted by the Tibet Deaf Association?

Title: Tibetan Sign Language Development and Promotion
Organization/project: Tibet Deaf Association
Location: Lhasa and Shigatse Prefectures, TAR - CHINA
Scope: Regional (Tibet Autonomous Region)

Related articles of the UNCRPD

This practice relates to **articles 21, 24, 30** concerning the freedom of expression and opinion, and access to information ; education; participation in cultural life, recreation, leisure and sport.

Related articles of the China National Law of the Protection of Persons with Disabilities (2008)

This practice relates to :

Article 29 “Government department concerned shall organize and support the research and application of (...) sign language.”

Article 47 (3) “ Offer TV programs in sign language, (...) add subtitles or narrations to more TV programs and movie.

Article 55 (...) “ in public services, information in sign language shall be made available to persons with disabilities”.



Promotion of the Tibetan Sign Language dictionary 4th Edition

LOCAL CULTURE
EDUCATION -EQUAL
OPPORTUNITY-
INNOVATION TIBETAN
SIGN
LANGUAGE
INCLUSION – ACCESSIBILITY

Key words

Background and context

Social and cultural settings strongly influence the development of all languages. This is a common rule, and especially relevant for sign language which is a visual language. Tibetans, as an ethnic group of China, have their own culture and lifestyle. Members of the deaf and hard-of-hearing community in TAR are influenced by native cultures, beliefs and traditions, developing individual vocabulary and grammar. Based on this principal, members of the Tibetan deaf and hard-of-hearing community developed a sign language on the region’s cultural and linguistic characteristics that differ from the standard Chinese Sign Language.

Description of the practice

In 2001, the TAR Disabled Persons' Federation and Handicap International have supported the Tibet Deaf community to develop a sign language research project. The Tibet Deaf Association was created and has therefore started collecting and standardizing signs used by the Tibetan deaf community. This was a very difficult exercise due to the variety of the types of signs and the fact that the same word may have different meaning according to the area and the community. With over 45,000 deaf and hard-of-hearing persons in TAR, this work was however essential to establish a common sign language and ensure inclusive communication and participation of all in the community dialogue. Working within local communities, members of the deaf community gathered, collected, and analysed signs used in various areas throughout the region. Information gathering encompassed both rural and urban areas. In Nachu, Shigatse, Lokha, Chamdo and Nyingchy prefectures, the Tibet Deaf Association established linkages with local deaf farmers and shepherds, allowing information gathering on sign language related to rural, nomad and countryside living. Urban sign language information was gathered by liaising with the deaf community in Lhasa. This strategy was successful in **capturing the real essence of sign language as used at grassroots level**. Over this period, more than 800 signs were collected and compiled in 3 dictionaries and related teaching materials in 2008. However, the grammatical structure remained weak. Consequently, in 2010, a technical mission was organized to strengthen the Tibetan Sign Language. The main outcome of this mission was the edition of the "*Standard Tibetan Sign Language Dictionary*" 4th edition compiling 1540 signs. From 2008 to now on, the Tibet Deaf Association has been **providing technical support for the teaching of TARan Sign Language in Lhasa and Shigatse Special Education Schools**. Today, Tibetan Sign Language is thought weekly to various deaf and hearing groups by the Tibet Deaf Association core group members. Moreover, the Tibet Deaf Association organize regular **public awareness event to promote the Tibetan Sign Language among the community**.

Process involved

1. A sign Language research and development project was launched in 2001, with a team of 14 Deaf persons in Lhasa.
2. From 2001 to 2007, the Tibetan Sign Language was standardized and a consistent number of teaching material were produced, including child friendly material. A finger spelling was created using the Tibetan alphabet system composed of 30 letters.
3. In 2008, Education Bureau recognized officially the Tibetan Sign Language and its teaching became compulsory in Special Schools.
4. In 2010, a 4 months support mission was conducted by a sign language expert from mainland China. The expert worked with the Tibet Deaf Association to edit "*The Standard Tibetan Sign Language Dictionary*" 4th Edition. An editorial committee gathering key actors (TAR Disabled Persons' Federation, Education bureau, Lhasa Special Education School, TAR Autonomous Region Language Committee) was formed to coordinate this work.
5. The "*The Standard Tibetan Sign Language Dictionary*" 4th Edition can be found in all public library and most the book shop in Lhasa.

Resources required

The development and promotion of the Tibetan Sign Language require a certain number of resources (mainly human) :

- At least 2 full time staff for the collection of signs, development of teaching and promotion material, sign language training and teaching.
- Regular support from in sign language expert to guide and supervise the process.
- Support for coordination staff from the TAR Disabled Persons' Federation.

Financial support was provided to the Tibet Deaf Association to run the research and development project by Handicap International (Belgium Cooperation-DGD and Canada Funds). The TAR Disabled Persons' Federation had covered printing costs of the dictionaries.

The factors that made this practice possible

- **Government support** : The President of the TAR Disabled Persons' Federation has been a strong advocate for the research and development for Tibetan Sign Language project. The Tibet Deaf Association also received useful guidance from the Language Committee of the Tibet Autonomous Region Education Bureau as well as from renowned sign language and design experts. Lhasa Special School participated and provided valuable inputs to the work.

- **Technical support** : Technical support from sign language expert made the Tibetan Sign Language development possible, and gave considerable inputs in term of linguistic, sign language development, production of dictionary and teaching material.
- **Public recognition**: the sign language expert, being the Vice President of China Deaf Association, has supported the process of public and national recognition of the Tibetan Sign Language.

Some of the difficulties encountered

- **Low literacy** of most of the Tibet Deaf Association members is a barrier for the further development of the Tibetan Sign Language. External support for Chinese or foreign sign language experts is necessary.
- **Lack of well trained and committed Tibetan Sign Language interpreter** maintains the Deaf community excluded from information, training, and debate. The Tibet Disabled Persons' Federation has agreed to employ a Tibetan Sign Interpreter to support the Deaf community.
- **Lack of interest in the Tibetan Sign Language**, with a focus on the use of Chinese Sign Language.

The effects / impact of the practice

- ✓ The Tibetan Sign Language has proven to be very usefully for the early learning of Deaf students. In Special Schools, students are taught in Chinese Sign Language, and the teachers have only a very basic knowledge of the Tibetan Sign Language. Most of the students come from remote rural areas and do not understand the Chinese Sign Language, which is based on *pin yin* (transcription of Chinese sound using the Latin alphabet). The Tibetan Sign Language is a natural sign language, using iconic signs and gestures and is more adapted for the students to understand the concept of sign language.
- ✓ More globally, **the Tibetan Local Sign Language promotion is a positive development towards equal inclusion and full participation in mainstream society for members of the deaf and hard-of-hearing community.**
- ✓ It is expected that the standardised Tibetan Sign Language will facilitate the successful inclusion of deaf and hard of hearing persons in the **education system as well as in the employment market, fostering personal, economic empowerment and autonomy.**

Possible improvement

- The Tibetan Sign Language, as any other language, will continuously evolve within the changing social context. Dictionary and teaching material will therefore need to be updated on a regular basis.
- If more funds were allocated to further Tibetan Sign Language development, the grammatical structure and vocabulary could be further develop. Increase promotion activities would be necessary for a broader recognition of the Tibetan Sign Language.

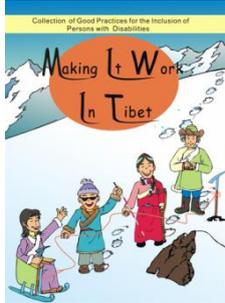
Recommendations for the replication of this practice

- The involvement and commitment of local and central Government is essential for the development of any local sign language.
- Teaching in Tibetan Sign Language should be enhanced in all Special Schools in the Tibet Autonomous Region. The Tibet Deaf Association can provide technical support: teaching Tibetan Sign Language to teachers, children, and guidance to use active teaching methods.
- Tibetan Sign Language teaching should be promoted in Chinese Tibetan areas outside the Tibet Autonomous Region.
- Subtitle using Tibetan Sign Language should be provided for key local TV programmes.
- Regular exchanges with other sign language research projects in China and abroad is valuable to broader understanding on the Deaf culture and promote the Tibetan Sign Language.
- The Tibet Disabled Persons' Federation should gradually put a system in place to provide sign language transcript in Chinese and Tibetan during official meetings to ensure that Deaf participants can fully participate in the debate.

More information

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Full project report: [Collection of good practices for the inclusion of people with disabilities](#)

Criteria for the good practices: see page 8 (Part 1 of the report)

Recommendations from the good practices: Part 3 of the report