

# Sound Seekers: audiology in the developing world

BY KAVITA PRASAD

**Kavita Prasad**, the current CEO of Soundseekers, is an inspirational woman in a leadership role within the audiology world. Here, she gives us an overview of the scope of the charity and the ways in which they improve the lives of those in five African countries.

Sound Seekers (The Commonwealth Society for the Deaf) is a UK registered charity dedicated to helping children and adults with hearing loss in Africa to realise their rights by enabling access to healthcare and education. We work in five countries in Africa, which include Cameroon, The Gambia, Malawi, Sierra Leone and Zambia.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that, of the 466 million people with disabling hearing loss worldwide (6.1% of the world's population), 49 million are in sub-Saharan Africa [1]. Most countries in sub-Saharan Africa have very few qualified audiology personnel. A 2015 survey among 22 sub-Saharan African countries, with a population of 720 million representing 75% of the population of sub-Saharan Africa, found that the 22 countries had 580 audiologists though, incredibly, 444 of these were in South Africa [2]. Sound Seekers exists to address this desperate need and partners with Ministries of Health and government hospitals in our countries of operation to support the advancement of audiology by establishing audiology services and training staff on audiology. Sound Seekers also delivers mobile audiology services to remote and rural areas, which



Mariama being fitted with hearing aids by Yaka at St John's School for the Deaf in The Gambia.

is often the only option to access hearing health services for most people living in these areas and for those who cannot afford to make the journey to hospitals and clinics.

The Commonwealth Society for the Deaf was established in 1959 by Lady Templer, the wife of the Governor of Malaya (now Malaysia). Her time there inspired her to assemble a group of ENT surgeons and educators of the deaf to travel back with her to Malaya to offer their help to children with hearing loss and ear disease. This year marks the remarkable milestone of our 60th anniversary - 60 years of some incredible achievements and successes. In all our countries of operation, we've been the first to support the establishment of audiology services in government hospitals, like in Malawi, Zambia and the Gambia. Our Malawi programme has been one of our biggest successes. With funding from the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and Jersey Overseas Aid (JOA), we set up clinic and outreach audiology services at Queen Elizabeth Central Hospital in Blantyre in 2016. We also trained two Malawian women to become the first audiologists in the country. Over the last three years, 15,228 people were screened for hearing loss in the Southern Region of Malawi through the services, of which 2929 (19%) were identified

with hearing loss and supported. These are people who would otherwise have not been able to access audiology services. We also trained 90 itinerant special needs teachers on awareness of hearing loss and effective inclusion of a child with hearing loss in a mainstream classroom to ensure that children identified with hearing loss get the necessary support in school.

I have seen first-hand the impact of our work on the lives of people with hearing loss. I met Mariama, a 17-year-old woman, on my visit to our programme in The Gambia last year. Mariama was attending the Thursday clinic at St John's School for the Deaf in Serrakunda with her mother, who explained that Mariama had meningitis as a baby and they later realised that she was finding it difficult to hear, which only got progressively worse as she grew older. Mariama's mother took her to doctors and hospitals but no one could really help at the time. In January 2018, Mariama's mother was given a referral to see Yaka Faal, a nurse and audiology technician, who was trained by Sound Seekers and leads the audiology services at Edward Francis Small Teaching Hospital in Banjul, the first audiology clinic in a government hospital in The Gambia established with our support. Yaka also holds a Thursday clinic at St John's School for the Deaf. Yaka



Sound Seekers mobile ear clinic delivering screening and hearing health services in rural areas.



Bhavisha with one-year old Monica (left) and Shine (right) in the Children's Hearing Clinic at University Teaching Hospital, Lusaka, Zambia.

assessed Mariama's hearing and found that she had moderate to severe hearing loss and, in February 2018, Mariama was fitted with hearing aids, which has had a marked change on her life. Mariama is thrilled that she is better able to communicate with her friends and follow lessons in school. Yaka has also been liaising with the itinerant special needs teachers in Mariama's school district to ensure they understand her hearing needs and support her well in the classroom. Mariama's mother is extremely happy that her daughter's hearing has improved with the hearing aids and hopes that she will now be able to complete her education.

Mariama is just one of the many thousands of people with hearing loss who have benefited from Sound Seekers' work, which can have life-changing impact. To learn more about our work, please watch our 5-minute video ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1L\\_fcgSpstc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1L_fcgSpstc)) of our Malawi programme.

It's a privilege to lead such a small but impactful organisation, which punches way above its weight. Before I was appointed CEO over a year ago, I was the Head of Programmes at Sound Seekers – the in-depth knowledge I had gained of our work and the strong relationships I had built with our people and partners on the ground has held me in good stead and prepared me immensely for this daunting but exciting role. As CEO, I believe in strong and compassionate leadership, building trust and understanding within the team and inspiring greater commitment to the organisation. I am particularly proud to lead my team of four amazing women, who make our work possible. As a woman leader, I am deeply committed to supporting and championing women in the workplace, as indeed I have been lucky enough to be supported and encouraged by some incredible women throughout my working life. As the saying goes, "If I have seen any further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants."

Besides our small team of four, Sound Seekers is also fortunate to have committed volunteers who support us in our small office in London and the incredible volunteers who go overseas to support our projects. One such volunteer was Bhavisha Parmar, a British Audiologist, who volunteered with us in Zambia for a year and spearheaded the establishment of the Children's Hearing Clinic at University Teaching Hospital in Lusaka, the first such clinic in a government hospital in Zambia, an incredible achievement for Sound Seekers. Bhavisha said of her year in Zambia:

*"When I arrived no one was thinking about audiology. With persistence, motivation, collaboration, hard work and weekly meetings at the Ministry of Health, the year has ended with the Minister of Health committing to developing audiology services! Thank you, Sound Seekers for this amazing opportunity, I will never forget it."*

Since returning from Zambia, Bhavisha continues to support Sound Seekers as our Special Advisor on Audiology and provides remote technical support to all our projects. Our volunteering assignments offer audiologists the opportunity to bring about meaningful change in the countries we work in and to have real impact on the lives of children and adults with hearing loss. We are currently looking for audiologists willing to volunteer in our Zambia programme for at least six months. We would be very interested to hear from anyone who might be interested.

Despite the many successes, it is a challenging time to lead a small organisation like Sound Seekers, what with small charities across the sector having seen a 20% decrease in their overall income over the last decade while income has increased by 30% for major and super-major organisations (annual income over €10 million and €100 million respectively) [3]. In this tough climate, charities such as ours have to be even more efficient, more resourceful and more creative to ensure our fantastic work keeps going. Mariama is a shining example of how it only

takes a little to make a huge impact, and why it's vital that our hearing health services continue to reach more people and change lives of people with hearing loss in Africa.

**References**

1. World Health Organisation (2018), WHO Global estimates on prevalence of hearing loss [www.who.int/deafness/estimates/en/](http://www.who.int/deafness/estimates/en/) Last accessed August 2019.
2. Mulwafu W, Ensink R, Kuper H, Fagan J. Survey of ENT services in sub-Saharan Africa: little progress between 2009 and 2015. Global Health Action, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/16549716.2017.1289736> Last accessed August 2019.
3. National Council for Voluntary Organisations (2019), Small Charities: Key Findings from our Data, <https://blogs.ncvo.org.uk/2019/01/21/small-charities-key-findings-from-our-data/> Last accessed August 2019.

Visit [www.sound-seekers.org.uk](http://www.sound-seekers.org.uk) to find out how you can get involved and help our life-changing work.

*Sound Seekers is the trading name of 'The Commonwealth Society for the Deaf', Charity No. 1013870 and a private limited company registered in England with company number 02739343. Our registered office is at The Green House, 244-254 Cambridge Heath Road, London E2 9DA*



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