



Innovate Now
Unlocking Human Potential



Case study



**Lugha
Ishara**



IKT Norge



Norwegian Ministry
of Foreign Affairs



Founded by Nancy Maina, Lugha Ishara is a social enterprise that focuses on offering tools and methods to identify hearing loss and support language development in young deaf children. The name "Lugha Ishara" originates from Swahili, signifying "Sign Language."



34M

60%

According to the **World Health Organization (WHO)**, there are approximately **34 million children worldwide experiencing hearing loss, with 60% of cases being preventable.**

Early intervention and access to appropriate hearing technologies are crucial to help these children reach their full potential in education and social engagement. Unfortunately, many children in low- and middle-income countries lack access to such resources, leading to long-term exclusion and poverty.

Nancy, having worked in an organization that supported persons with disabilities, encountered a young deaf girl who displayed signs of withdrawal, lacked proficiency in sign language, and struggled to participate in activities like her peers. Concerned about her situation, Nancy made efforts to engage with her to understand the underlying issues. She discovered that the girl had not developed essential life skills due to being kept isolated

at home with minimal exposure to the outside world. This motivated Nancy to investigate further.

During her research on language development in deaf children, Nancy came across a study conducted by the World Federation for the Deaf. The study revealed that children with hearing loss lacked appropriate stimulation during their early years and faced challenges in developing language, leading to brain development issues in their early stages of life.

In response to this pressing problem, Nancy founded Lugha Ishara in August 2017. The organization aims to address the language deprivation and development for children with hearing loss through a comprehensive process that involves detection, intervention, and early language development using Kenyan sign language for children with hearing loss.

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Participation in the Innovate Now Program

The company joined Cohort 3 of Innovate Now, Africa's first Assistive Technology Accelerator, where it underwent a rigorous curriculum and Live Labs, enabling it to validate its product offerings with persons with disabilities. The valuable feedback received during the program allowed Lugha Ishara to refine its value further.



The company has also benefited from Venture building support to refine its technical offering as well as fundraising strategies.

Lugha Ishara follows a user-centric approach in developing its products, actively involving the users to identify their challenges and using these insights as the foundation for product development. Since its inception, the company has maintained an innovation committee comprising parents with hearing-impaired children, fostering a collaborative relationship with its users and capitalizing on its strengths to create relevant solutions.

Lugha Ishara has established a partnership with the largest children's hospital in East Africa to closely monitor, assess and support children with hearing loss and their parents. Lugha Ishara has been providing comprehensive information to parents whose children have been diagnosed with hearing loss. The company does this by guiding

parents and the deaf children through a chosen intervention ensuring a personalized approach to support and monitor each child's developmental milestones until they achieve language development.

To date, Lugha Ishara has successfully served 400 users, employing various methods to reach its customers. The company organizes quarterly and annual events to engage with its customers actively. Additionally, it has direct access to customers receiving treatment at Gertrude's Hospital, where Lugha Ishara operates a specialist audiology clinic, offering direct intervention. The intervention involves onboarding children in various ways, with a focus on language development through Kenyan sign language. The company provides age-appropriate lessons to cater to different children, parents, and families, and also extends psychosocial support services.

400 users



Fundraising

Lugha Ishara has obtained capital through the contributions of volunteer employees who are passionate about ending early language deprivation, currently valued at around 140,000 USD. In addition to this, the company has secured funding of 15,000 USD from Standard Chartered's Women in Tech initiative as well as from individual donations. These financial resources have played a crucial role in supporting Lugha Ishara's mission and enabling them to make a positive impact on the lives of hearing-impaired children and their families.

Lugha Ishara has achieved several accolades for their impactful work, including being named Top 15 out of 300 GSMA Assistive Technology Innovation Fund Global Award in 2021 and winners of the Africa Assistive Technology Progress Award in 2020. They have also been recognized for their educational content with the Distinguished Adjudicators Award and

Valued at
\$ 140K

Raised
\$ 15K

received another award from innovation challenge Tangaza University in 2019. These awards have validated the company's commitment to making a positive difference in the lives of children with hearing loss.

Key traits contributing to Lugha Ishara's success



User-centered design: From the onset, Lugha Ishara has prioritized user-centered design, involving an internal innovation committee of parents with hearing-impaired children. The committee supports research, testing and validation ensuring fit for purpose solutions.



Strategic Partnerships: Lugha Ishara collaborates with Gertrude Children's Hospital, gaining direct access to customers seeking hearing loss treatment and psychosocial support expanding their impact.



Collaborative Environment: Lugha Ishara prioritizes collaboration with stakeholders, including an inclusive advisory board. This approach ensures tailored solutions for children and parents, resulting in more effective outcomes.

Challenges experienced by Lugha Ishara



Ecosystem Barriers: In Kenya, the absence of mandatory hearing impairment testing leaves many parents unaware of their children's deafness, resulting in delayed awareness and heightened stigma upon discovery. This delay often leads to challenges in accepting the condition and seeking early intervention, as by then, the degree of deafness has typically advanced.



Team: Lugha Ishara has hitherto relied on the dedication of volunteers for its development. Although the support from these volunteers has been exceptional, the company now necessitates the fulfillment of crucial technical positions to facilitate its expansion. However, the limited resources available have posed a challenge to realizing this growth ambition.

Lugha Ishara's Next Steps

Lugha Ishara has a well-established approach and is propelled by an ambitious plan to broaden its reach to more counties in Kenya, thereby reaching a larger number of children with hearing impairments. The company is enthusiastic about cultivating partnerships with hospitals and strategic allies, aiming to contribute to the advancement of this initiative's expansion.