



WORLD FEDERATION OF THE DEAF

Legal Seat – Helsinki, Finland

WORLD FEDERATION OF THE DEAF

An International Non-Governmental Organisation in official liaison with ECOSOC, UNESCO, ILO, WHO and the Council of Europe. WFD was established in Rome in 1951.

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Input for the Report on Human Rights and Cultural Diversity

The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) welcomes the call for input for the report of the United Nation Secretary General on human rights and cultural diversity.

General overview

As expressed in the WFD's [position paper on Deaf Communities as part of linguistic or disability identity](#), intersectionality as a language minority and a disability community lays within the Deaf Community. Deaf Community belongs both to the group of persons with disabilities and the group of linguistic and cultural minority. The diversity goes through their own deaf culture and language, namely sign language. The rights of deaf people around the world are largely assured through disability policies, legislation and international instruments, as well as legislation and cultural instruments recognising their linguistic and cultural status.

From a disability approach, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is the cornerstone of the rights of the deaf. The article 2 provides the definition of language by including sign languages while article 9 states that State Parties must ensure the provision of professional sign languages interpreters to safeguard the accessibility of deaf people in society. Article 21 recognises the rights of deaf people the right freedom of expression and opinion and access to information in sign language. The importance of providing bilingual education resides in article 24. Ultimately, the article 30 safeguards the rights for sign language and deaf culture to be recognized by State Parties.

Yet, from a cultural and linguistic approach, several instruments exist. Starting with article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights recognises the rights of minorities to use their own languages. Then, the article 30 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child states that a child belonging to a minority shall not be denied the right to enjoy his or her culture and to use his or her language. Finally, article 4(3) of the Minority Declaration states that people belonging to a minority may receive opportunities to learn their mother tongue or to have instruction in their mother tongue.

Sign language and deaf culture as part of a unique minority

Deaf communities worldwide have long taken pride of being part of linguistic and cultural groups as well as the disability movement. No other disability or language/cultural group can claim similar intersectionality of rights. Deaf people have their own identity which manifests from different perspectives, such as personal experiences of being deaf, their use of sign language or one's membership of a language community. However, deaf identity is mainly tied to sign languages and the social connection built on the shared experience with the use of sign language. The membership of the deaf community is not often defined by hearing loss but rather by identity with language. This specific factor highlights the fact that deaf people belong to a linguistic minority.

Yet, deaf people differ from other linguistic minorities in one important way: they are usually unable to fully access the spoken languages of their surrounding environment because of their auditory-oral transmission. Therefore, sign languages are not only culturally important; they are also the sole means of language development and accessible communication for deaf people. The lack of access to their surrounding environment through sign languages and other accessibility measures impacts and disables deaf people, including in the sphere of education. This is the nexus that connects the international Deaf Community with the international disability movement.

However, what distinguishes Deaf Community with the rest of the disability movement is the use of a specific language, the sign language. Sign languages are fully-fledged languages with linguistic properties, including grammatical features, such as morphology, phonology and syntax. They are the mother tongue and the natural languages of deaf people. They are the vector of the inclusion of deaf people both in deaf communities and in society. It is of paramount importance that deaf people are provided with professional sign language interpreters for ensuring social interactions with their surrounding environment that are not signing to achieve full inclusion in society.

Diversity in Education

The inclusion of deaf people in the Deaf Community and society starts with education. The provision of a quality bilingual education to deaf children at an early age is the first step to safeguard the cultural rights and diversity of deaf people. The actual state of play is as such that diversity in deaf children's education is not respected. They are often outplaced in mainstream school without opportunities to learn sign language and deaf culture.

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, in its article 24, recognises the right of deaf persons including deaf children to access education in sign languages. As expressed in [its position paper on inclusive education](#), the WFD believes that education to deaf children is better achieved through bilingual education in national sign languages and national written languages. Bilingual schools must follow the official national educational curriculum as well as teaching sign languages and deaf culture. Teachers must master sign language with native-level fluency and deaf children must be surrounded by their signing peers in inclusive settings.

Interpretations of article 24 thwarting the rights of deaf people to receive education through the medium of their mother tongue cannot be in compliance with broader human rights law and principles.

Recommendations to reach Diversity and Human Rights of the deaf

The World Federation of the Deaf would like to provide some recommendations on how to best reach diversity as part of the cultural and human rights spectrum of the deaf.

1. Formally and legally recognising national sign languages as equal to national spoken languages.
2. Providing opportunities to give and receive information and official communications in sign language.
Establishing bilingual schools in national sign language and written language to provide inclusive education to deaf children.
3. Providing qualified and professional sign language interpreters to safeguard equal access to all services.
4. Prioritisation of deaf persons and sign language to strengthen deaf leadership in international development programmes.
5. Regularly consult deaf leaders of organisations of the deaf on matters of policy formulation, designs of programs and development of new legislation that will benefit deaf persons at national, regional and international frameworks that affect them.

For more information, contact the WFD Human Rights Officer, Alexandre Bloxs at alexandre.bloxs@wfd.fi.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a series of loops and a long horizontal stroke.

Colin Allen AM
President

About the World Federation of the Deaf

The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) is an international non-governmental organisation representing and promoting approximately 70 million deaf people's human rights worldwide. The WFD is a federation of deaf organisations from 122 nations; its mission is to promote the human rights of deaf people and full, quality and equal access to all spheres of life, including self-determination, sign language, education, employment and community life. WFD has a consultative status in the United Nations and is a founding member of International Disability Alliance (IDA). (www.wfdeaf.org) Email: info@wfd.fi