



Legal Seat – Helsinki, Finland

WORLD FEDERATION OF THE DEAF

WORLD FEDERATION OF THE DEAF YOUTH SECTION

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 from the World Federation of the Deaf and WFD Youth Section to the OHCHR Report on Child Rights & SDGs

The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) and the World Federation of the Deaf Youth Section (WFDYS) welcomes the call for input for the report on Child Rights and the Sustainable Development Goals made by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

On 25 September 2015, the UN General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Goals. This new Agenda aims to bring a fundamental change for all people worldwide and the planet. It promotes universal respect for human rights, human dignity, justice, equality and non-discrimination. Its motto is to “leave no one behind”, with the pledge to recognise the dignity of every person and to reach the further behind first, including deaf children.

The WFD is an international non-governmental organisation representing and promoting the human rights of approximately 70 million deaf people worldwide. The WFD is a federation of deaf organisations from 122 nations with the mission of promoting 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.

The WFDYS is a section of the WFD. Its main aim is to advocate for the human rights of deaf youth to ensure a full access to bilingual education, to have strong cultural and linguistic identity, and to be empowered.

In this document, the WFD and the WFDYS will highlight the risks and challenges deaf children are facing to the full realisation of their rights (I.) and how the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can overcome those barriers (II.).

I. Risks and challenges to deaf children's rights

The main challenge faced by deaf children is accessing a quality inclusive education. Globally, deaf children face many barriers to education¹. Even when schools exist, many families in developing countries may not be able to afford to send a deaf child to school, may not have schools which accept a deaf child and/or may not have the means of transportation to bring their child to school.

Even when deaf children have access to education, various barriers such as the lack of natural language inputs exist. Meaning, the education level attained is by deaf children often low and illiteracy is common. Other barriers to the effective education of deaf children include a lack of trained teachers – including deaf teachers as role models, a lack of teachers who are fluent in sign language and lack of a learning environment and pedagogy that is conducive to deaf students' effective learning. Ultimately, since most deaf children are born to hearing parents who lack sign language skills, there is a lack of comprehensive policy and programming support for sign language learning by families with deaf children².

Education is crucial to bring awareness and empower deaf children to achieving the 2030 Agenda and its motto. [Goal 4 – Quality Education](#) – is the key goal to leave no deaf child behind. Both Goal 4 and the [Article 24](#) of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) give the right and recognise the importance of the provision of inclusive education to children with disabilities, including deaf children. It recognises the need to provide lifelong education which includes deaf people and which facilitates the full development of human potential and sense of dignity and self-worth. Education fosters the development by deaf people of their personality, talents and creativity, as well as their mental and physical abilities, to their fullest potential. It enables deaf people to participate effectively and equally in a free society.

However, the interpretation of the inclusive education concept and what it should be is quite controversial among the disability movement. It differs from a disability constituency to another. On 26 August, the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities released its [General Comment N°4 on education](#) highlighting its perspective on inclusive education. The general interpretation is to include all children with disabilities, including deaf children, in mainstream school with the provision of individualised reasonable accommodation. In the context of deaf children, this would mean their placement in mainstream schools with the provision of sign language interpretation.

Yet, what distinguishes deaf children from other children, including children with disabilities, is their use of a specific language: their national sign languages. National 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 children. They are the vector of the inclusion of deaf children both in deaf communities and in society³. It is the component that builds their own identities and communities. Most of all, national sign languages is the only language for deaf children that can be accessed without barriers and can be used without additional help or supports⁴.

¹ See, e.g. World Federation of the Deaf [Submission for the OHCHR study on the right to education of persons with disabilities](#) (18 September 2013); [WFD & EUD Submission to the Day of General Discussion on the right to education for persons with disabilities](#) (20 March 2015)

² See, [WFD Position Paper on the language rights of deaf children](#) – 7 September 2016

³ M. WHEATLEY ; A. PABSCH, Sign language legislation in the European Union, *European Union of the Deaf*, Brussels, 2012, p. 13

⁴ Boudreault P., *Grammatical processing in American Sign Language: Effects of age of acquisition and syntactic complexity*. Unpublished Masters thesis, McGill University, 1999.

Thus, deaf children have a unique need for instruction in sign language, opportunities to study sign language and deaf culture, and opportunities to participate with their peers in congregated settings that allow for linguistic and cultural development. Due to shared ontologies and experiences, deaf children also have a need for instruction from deaf teachers who can advocate for their students and transmit social and cultural capital⁵.

The education through the medium of sign language interpreters to deaf children constitute a form of indirect education: all education is mediated through the interpreter and the deaf children is never taught directly by the teacher. Whatever is being said and no matter who says it, the deaf child needs to look at the interpreter to access that information. This so-called interpreted education affects the student's learning⁶. The deaf child who is mainstreamed individually is still at risk of being highly dependent on the sign language interpreter in the classroom for communication access when there are no deaf peers around⁷.

II. Solutions or good practices towards leaving no child behind

The SDG Goal 4 combined with Article 24 CRPD makes clear that no mainstream may exclude a deaf child from attending if this is his or her choice. However, SDG Goal 4 and Article 24 and should not be misread as mandating mainstream school as the only modality of education for deaf children.

As expressed in its [position paper on inclusive education](#), the WFD and the WFDYS believe 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. Teachers must master sign language with native-level fluency and deaf children must be surrounded by their signing peers in inclusive settings. Those criteria are fundamental to ensure the full realisation of the SDG Goal 4.

Moreover, SDG Goal 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities – through technologies and digitalisation is a mean to foster the realisation of inclusive education for deaf children. Digitalisation is growingly used as a resource to underpin teachers in their educational work. Pedagogical videos and other materials are more and more used in classes to foster debates and interactive participation of students. Those are also tools to achieve other means of education such as non-formal education programs. The WFD and WFDYS support the use of digitalisation in education as a mean to achieve inclusive education for deaf children. Yet, those materials must be accessible not only through captioning but with sign languages translation.

In addition, the WFD and WFDYS strongly encourage governments to implement programs to support the teaching of sign language to family member and carers of deaf children, in co-operation with deaf communities and deaf sign languages teachers.

Early exposure to sign language and multilingualism, strong family support for sign languages, combined with the provision of quality bilingual education best prepare deaf children for their future effective participation in society. Education provided to deaf children in sign language is based on the importance of language, culture and community, not on disability. It provides a unique inclusive education system that is appreciated by many deaf student worldwide⁸.

⁵ Kusters, M. "Intergenerational Responsibility in Deaf Pedagogies." In *Innovations in Deaf Studies: The Role of Deaf Scholars* edited by A. Kusters, M. De Meulder, and D. O'Brien, 241-262. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017

⁶ Schick, B., A model of learning iwithin an interpreted K-12 educational setting. In M. Marschark & P. C. Hauser (Eds.). *Deaf Cognition: Founders and Outcomes*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 351-386, 2008

⁷ De Wit, M., Sign language interpreter use in inclusive education. In Reuters, K., *UNCRPD Implementation in Europe – A deaf perspective. Article 24: Education*. European Union of the Deaf (EUD), Brussels, 2017, p. 110

⁸ World Federation of the Deaf (WFD), European Union of the Deaf (EUD), World Federation of the Deaf Youth Section (WFDYS), European Union of the Deaf Youth (EUDY), [Submission on the Draft General Comment No. 4 on Article 24](#), at 5

III. Conclusion

The global commitment of achieving the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda is the perfect momentum to make the implementation of the CRPD a reality. However, to reach deaf children first, the provision of a quality and inclusive education is capital. Authorities and families must understand the importance sign language represents for deaf children. In that regard, deaf children must receive the opportunity to attend a quality bilingual education in national sign language and national written language and family members must support sign language.

The provision of quality education is the first step to reach the full realisation of human rights of deaf children and to leave no one behind.

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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

About the World Federation of the Deaf Youth Section (WFDYS)

The World Federation of the Deaf Youth Section (WFDYS) was established in 1995 in Vienna, Austria and WFDYS is a section of the World Federation of the Deaf. The WFDYS has its internal rules that are based on the WFD Statutes. It has 47 Youth Ordinary Members over the world. The main aim of the WFDYS is to advocate for the human rights of deaf youth includes having a full access to bilingual education, to have strong cultural and linguistic identity, and be empowered. Its website is www.wfdys.org