



## SECURING AND UTILISING THE SERVICES OF SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETERS FOR THE UNITED NATIONS

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Whenever planning international events, all efforts should be made to communicate with the delegates well in advance in order to arrange the most linguistically appropriate services.

These guidelines may also be applied to events which are not organised by the United Nations (UN) and where the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) representatives or deaf people using sign language interpretation are participating.

### **LANGUAGES DEAF PEOPLE USE**

Sign languages are the preferred languages of the majority of deaf people. Sign languages are languages in their own right and each country has its own national sign language, i.e., sign language is *not* universal. Many countries who share the same official spoken language still have different sign languages (e.g., each Spanish-speaking country has its own distinct sign language). Countries with more than one official language often have more than one sign language (e.g., Canada, Belgium, Switzerland). The Governments of many countries have either directly or indirectly recognised their national sign language, and training for interpreters may be available on the university level. However, in numerous countries, especially in the developing world, a corps of professional sign language interpreters does not yet exist.

International Sign is not a true language, in the sense that it does not always convey the richness of meaning that can be expressed in a full language, nor is it as efficient as a natural language. However, International Sign has evolved naturally over the past century to serve deaf people who have become more active in international cooperation. International Sign has certainly been used when there is no option of providing interpreting services in every national sign language represented at a meeting, and it has proven very effective when the participants from different countries meet in conferences where the vocabulary has become fairly conventionalised (like the WFD Congresses, meetings of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Human Rights Council, and the Conference of States Parties to the CRPD).

Deaf people who attend UN meetings often have a working knowledge of written English or other UN official language, though it may be their third, fourth, or fifth language.

The choice of whether a national sign language or International Sign should be provided for a given meeting should be decided in consultation with the deaf participants; the organiser should not decide alone which sign language is to be made available. Deaf participants should always be asked for their language preferences: some may prefer a national sign language, some International Sign, and some a written form such as CART (Computer Assisted Real Time) captioning services on the screen as a supplement to interpreting. *The great advantage of real time captioning is that all the delegates in*

the meeting, for many of whom English is also their third, fourth, or fifth language, *will benefit from the captioning*, whether they are hearing or deaf (as is often true, accommodations for disabled people often benefit their non-disabled colleagues).

## **SECURING INTERPRETERS**

There is a general shortage of sign language interpreters worldwide, especially sign language interpreters who are qualified and have the expertise to work at high level conferences and meetings. Which means that qualified interpreters are likely to be fully booked well in advance. It is advised to use at least eight weeks' notice; however the earlier the better.

When booking an interpreter you should provide the following details:

- Date and time of the event including start and finish times.
- Full address of where the event is to take place including directions/map.
- Contact name, telephone number and/or e-mail address of the person making the booking as well as the contact person at the event.
- The nature of the event.
- The number of deaf and hearing participants, their role (are they for example presenting or chairing) and their language preferences.
- Information on if the interpretation is going to be recorded or webcast.
- Logistic arrangements on how and when the interpreter should be registered for the event.
- Any other information that could be helpful, e.g. if there are gender preferences, if a person also has a visual impairment, or any specific needs.
- Considerations for fees and other costs (interpreters should be paid for preparation, per diem, travel time and expenses such as accommodation), invoicing and payment procedures, and travel costs to and within the country where the meeting is being held. (In some countries, interpreters or agencies might expect a “retainer”, an advanced deposit to reserve the service of an interpreter, which will be deducted from the total of the final invoice.)

In booking national sign language interpreters, if that is the preference of the deaf participant, the UN approved agency/vendor for spoken language interpreters may or may not have sign language interpreters in their interpreter data bank. If they do not, the national deaf association, national sign language interpreter association, the national registry of sign language interpreters (if available in that specific country) or World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI) may be contacted for interpreters who may be experienced in international conferences. Even if the approved vendor does have sign language interpreters, care must be taken that they be familiar with the jargon and environment of the UN.

In booking IS interpreters, if that is the preference of the deaf participant, it should be noted that few of the vendors will understand the qualifications necessary for an International Sign interpreter. It is highly recommended to use WFD-WASLI accredited International Sign interpreters. The list is available at [the WFD website](#).

[The WASLI website](#) contains a list of countries and their associations of sign language interpreters. You can also contact the WASLI regional representative on the “About us” section of the website and they can refer you to appropriate services in the country in which the event is being held, if services are available, or the country nearest if there are no qualified interpreters available in the host country.

It should be clear beforehand if the Section ordering interpreting services can engage them as independent contractors or if they can only be paid through an approved vendor. Most International Sign interpreters at this level work as independent contractors.

As the UN is signatory to at least one of the AIIIC agreements, the institution must comply and contract the interpreters according to the AIIIC agreement terms and conditions.

The quality of the interpreting service can be improved by providing the interpreters with adequate preparation. The interpreter should be provided with the following:

- Copies of any relevant paperwork – including minutes, agendas and speeches (power-point presentations/illustrations, etc).
- Prior to any deaf participant's presentation, an appropriate amount of time for the deaf presenter to meet with the sign language interpreters to prepare.
- In larger and demanding events, adequate time for the deaf presenter/deaf chair to meet with the person responsible for interpreting arrangements, technical staff and interpreters to go through the process, such as seating arrangements, lighting, screens, cameras and general visibility.
- If there are to be any presentations or other media forwarding the slides or CD/DVD in advance or allow time for the interpreters to watch them before they are presented to the audience. *It is strongly recommended that CD/DVDs to be subtitled in English to ensure that it is accessible to a wider audience, which includes deaf people who do not use a signed language and hearing delegates for whom English is a third or fourth language.*
- The name of the person in charge of the event on arrival.
- Contact details of co-workers (interpreters), if any.
- Any other information that is relevant to the event.

## **INTERPRETER QUALIFICATIONS**

For national sign language interpreters, the interpreter should have certification/accreditation from the country of the sign language, if available. Some countries have not yet instituted certification procedures. In any case, it is preferable that the deaf participant should be consulted as to which interpreters would be qualified for the assignment.

For International Sign interpreters, the interpreter must be WFD-WASLI accredited. In regional UN events, such as UN ESCAP, sign language interpreters from the region should be considered where there are interpreters with international experience. Again, the deaf participant, WFD, and WASLI will be of invaluable assistance in finding the appropriate interpreters.

## **INTERPRETER TEAMS**

As with spoken language interpreters, national sign language and International Sign interpreters work in teams so as to ensure a quality interpretation and to avoid mental or physical fatigue.

A unique feature of International Sign teams is that a team might consist of more than two interpreters. Interpreters who are themselves deaf are often more adept at International Sign than interpreters who can hear, so deaf interpreters are integrated into the team. Working with a hearing partner as a feeder who relays the information from spoken language into their national sign language, the deaf interpreter works from the national sign language into International Sign for the

audience. Working in teams of deaf-hearing interpreters provides a level of service not possible with a hearing interpreter alone.

## **INTERPRETER FEES**

Interpreter fees depend on a number of factors, including:

- The nature of the assignment.
- The times and duration of the assignment.
- The qualifications and experience of the interpreter.
- And, in some cases, the number of deaf participants (if there are deaf panellists or chairs of sessions, they may need a separate team in a different location from the deaf delegates or observers).

For UN events [the AIIC-United Nations Agreement](#) must be complied.

## **TYPICAL WORK PRACTICES**

For any event a minimum of two interpreters should be booked. Depending on the duration, complexity and participants of the event, the team strength should be expanded. Like spoken language interpreters, sign language interpreters typically work in teams, each interpreter working for 15-20 minute periods of time in order to maximise the accuracy and the effectiveness of the interpretation.

Interpreters need regular breaks during the event. For full day conferences, the interpreting team should include interpreters who can work during the conference breaks so that deaf delegates and participants may network and conduct short meetings outside of the conference proceedings. This will sometimes mean teams of 3 or 4 interpreters working a single conference in a day to cover not only the formal conference, but also networking during breaks and covering side events before and after the agenda of the conference.

Previously prepared or Computer Assisted Real Time (CART), if provided for hard-of-hearing audiences, should also be visible to the sign language interpreters as a support. Despite the possibilities provided by technology, WASLI and WFD caution against sign language interpreting that relies exclusively on captioning. When information is conveyed from a spoken format to captioning, a reduction of information may occur which would have a significant impact on the quality of sign language interpretation. It is essential to consider how deaf participants would be able to be fully involved if there is no one present to interpret their signed utterances into a spoken language. In any case, a hearing member of the deaf/hearing interpreting team must be available to interpret from sign language into spoken English or other UN official language for comments or questions from deaf participants in the audience.

All the material received will be treated with confidentiality and will be returned to the conference organisers at the end of the events. Should the event be recorded (audio and/or video) please inform the interpreters beforehand in order to discuss relevant acknowledgements and copyright of their work product.

Ethical practices of interpreters. WASLI and WFD are international organisations with national members. The national members monitor the profession and support the ethical practice of interpreters. National associations of sign language interpreters have codes of ethics and dispute resolution processes. In addition to this, national deaf organisations and/or interpreter service providers may have policies that guide interpreting services.

Problems between interpreters and event organisers are best resolved through direct communication at the event. Should there be a need to lodge a formal complaint about the service, contact the agency or organisation through which the interpreter was booked when applicable. In case of WFD and WASLI accredited IS interpreters, complaints should be addressed to the WFD and WASLI.

WASLI and WFD recommend that interpreters booked for conferences be members of the national association of their country, if one exists. If no national interpreting association exists in the country, seek recommendations from the national deaf organisation(s).

## **LOGISTICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

There are a number of things that will enable the sign language interpreter to provide effective service:

- The environment needs to be conducive to effective communication. This means sufficient lighting and sound systems (i.e. provision of wireless microphones and portable headsets if necessary), as well as an appropriate background against which the interpreter will work that is free of visual distractions. If the interpreter will be onscreen, it would be useful to inform the interpreter in advance of the colour of the background, so that interpreters may wear appropriately coloured contrasting clothing for enhanced visibility. It would be helpful to also have risers for interpreters to stand on to be visible, especially if it is one level seating and/or there is no projection on big screen.
- Effective communication requires that deaf people and interpreters are able to see each other. In smaller meetings sign language interpreters should be placed in the meeting room and easily seen by deaf people. When sign language interpreters are working remotely in the same building, from a booth or TV studio, the projection in the hall should be large enough for the deaf participants to clearly see the interpreter. When deaf participants are actively participating in the proceedings (presenting, asking a question, or commenting), the organisers should either have additional interpreters in the hall, or the remote interpreters must be able to see them and interpret into a spoken language from the remote location. Considering possible failures with technology or other circumstances, it is vital to ensure that interpreters are in the same building to be able to interpret in the meeting room if necessary.
- If the proceedings are projected on a screen, the interpreter should be included somewhere on the screen large enough to be seen by the entire room. On the screen, the speaker, the sign language interpreter, and the Computer Assisted Real Time (CART) captions should all be visible. Especially at the UN, where protocol often determines where Chairs, Panellists, Delegates, and observers may sit, a screen with all three images will be necessary for any Deaf participant to follow the proceedings. Power-point or DVD presentations should also allow for the interpreter and captions to appear on the screen simultaneously. (This may necessitate a review of the audio-visual procedures and software available in large conference rooms, as well as ensuring that the microphones of each delegate be flexible enough to be available to the sign language interpreter (interpreting from sign language to English) for the delegate signing at his or her seat. Hand held microphones are particularly useful for this purpose.)
- Deaf delegates should be consulted about whether they prefer to stand in front of their audience, as deaf signers are accustomed to visual contact with their interlocutors in their culture. This could have ramifications for the cameras tracking speakers for the screen.

As with spoken language interpreters, there will be a short lag time when a sign language interpreter is working between a [sign language](#) and a spoken language. Allowing time for this process is important during questions and answer session or during discussions to ensure that all participants are included.

## **THE RESPONSIBILITY TO PROVIDE SL INTERPRETERS**

Although there are many rules at national level that regulate the service provision of sign language interpreters, ultimately it is the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in [Article 9 paragraph 2\(e\)](#), that mandates this service: Provide forms of live assistance and intermediaries, including guides, readers and professional sign language interpreters, to facilitate accessibility to buildings and facilities open to the public. In addition, [Article 21 \(b\)](#): Freedom of expression and opinion states: Accepting and facilitating the use of sign languages, braille, augmentative and alternative communication, and all other accessible means, modes, and formats of communication of their choice by persons with disabilities in official interactions.

As the organisation behind the CRPD, the Secretariat and Agencies of the UN are in a position to lead the way in modelling proper provision of interpreting services at all levels of the UN system.

### **Interpreter Check list**

When the UN or its special Agencies send an invitation to the WFD or another deaf organisation or when deaf participants attend an event the organiser should pay attention to the following sign language interpreting arrangements:

1. Event organiser will book sign language interpreters after having consulted with the deaf participant(s) (if necessary also with WFD or WASLI) about the participant's language choice and whether s/he has a preference for a particular sign language interpreter.
2. Fees and other expenses, salary, accommodation and travel arrangements shall be agreed between the sign language interpreters and the organiser prior to the event.
3. All meeting materials and practical information that are sent to the participants need also to be delivered to the sign language interpreter(s).
4. If the event is meant for a large audience the seating arrangements for sign language interpreters have to be checked prior to the event: they should be seated opposite to the deaf participant so that the deaf person has accessible visual contact to the sign language interpreters, the presenters and the screen. The sign language interpreters need to have chairs without armrests. Sign language interpreters have to be able to use a microphone and they will be provided with over the head headphones as opposed to the 'in the ear' variety.
5. Sign language interpreters should be given the opportunity to have their notes and meeting papers on display while they interpret. All materials distributed to the participants in the meeting will be circulated also to the sign language interpreters. Provision of water or other refreshments should be guaranteed during the meeting.
6. In small scale events and workshops the deaf participant and the sign language interpreters should be able to be seated opposite to each other.
7. In a case where a deaf person chairs or presents at an event all practical arrangements should be coordinated well in advance between the organiser, deaf person and sign language interpreters.

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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 134 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](http://www.wfdeaf.org)) Email: [info@wfd.fi](mailto:info@wfd.fi)*

**About the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters**

*WASLI's goal is to promote and support the development of interpreters around the world. For example, some countries do not yet have interpreter associations or interpreter training, so WASLI works to encourage those countries to create national interpreter associations. WASLI also work to promote strong working ties between national interpreter associations and national Deaf associations, in the same way that WASLI and the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) work together. (<http://wasli.org/>)*