



**WORLD FEDERATION  
OF THE DEAF**

## **PRESS RELEASE**

**Recognition by UNESCO Memory of the World**

**of the 1880 Milan Congress and the historical suppression of sign languages and deaf communities**

[Video in International Sign](#)

27 March 2024

The 2nd International Congress on the Education of the Deaf, convened in Milan, Italy, in 1880, marked a pivotal moment amidst a backdrop of significant cultural and scientific change. The Congress is most remembered for two resolutions emphasising the primacy of oral education for deaf children, with one notable decree asserting, "That the Oral method ought to be preferred to that of signs for the education and instruction of the deaf and dumb". This shift towards oralism, leading to a rapid decline in the use of sign languages in education, and the social stigmatisation of the use of national sign languages, had disastrous consequences on the human rights of deaf persons, and their inclusion in their societies.

Reflecting on this historical context, Dr. Joseph Murray, President of the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD), remarked, "The Milan Congress resolutions have come to symbolise an era when deaf people's use of sign languages faced social stigma. This stigma had long-lasting consequences, with the disappearance of sign languages in education and generations of deaf children being forced to learn without access to natural language input. The result has been generations of language deprivation that we are still working to overcome today." Noting the WFD's work, he added "National sign languages should be recognized and promoted by all governments as a part of the linguistic ecology of each country."

In recognition of the enduring impact of the 1880 Milan Congress, the WFD has collected three reports from this congress, as well as the 2010 Vancouver Resolution released at the 21st ICED Congress in Vancouver, Canada. This Resolution, through its Statement Principle, known as "The New Era Principles and Accord" explicitly rejects the 1880 Milan Congress Resolutions" and "calls upon all nations of the world to remember history and ensure that educational programmes accept and respect all languages, including national sign languages, among other principles".



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These four documents were submitted to the UNESCO Memory of the World Program with the support of The Nippon Foundation. UNESCO recognised them as documentary heritage and inscribed them on the Memory of the World International Register. There have been only less than 500 Memory of the World entries since its creation in 1995 and this inscription is the first about the history of deaf people. The WFD is delighted that the history of the deaf community's struggle to gain recognition of their language and the impact of the Milan Congress are now being recognised by an official international body, UNESCO.

This recognition is a powerful tool for the advocacy of the right to sign language, especially in promoting and strengthening actions towards the early acquisition of national sign language by deaf children and their right to quality multilingual inclusive education in sign language.

Through our ongoing efforts, WFD continues our work toward our vision: "A World Where Anywhere Deaf People Can Sign Everywhere".

For further inquiries, please contact Audrey Sangla, WFD Media & Communications Manager at [audrey.sangla@wfdeaf.org](mailto:audrey.sangla@wfdeaf.org).

### References

Read more: <https://wfdeaf.org/unesco/>

About the Key documents:

<https://www.unesco.org/en/memory-world/key-documents-deaf-communities-milan-congress-1880>

About the live event of our official launch: <https://fb.watch/qQ7kwApgJd/>

### 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. Founded in 1951, the WFD is a federation of deaf organisations from 136 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 member of International Disability Alliance (IDA).

WFD Website: [www.wfdeaf.org](http://www.wfdeaf.org)



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### **About the UNESCO Memory of the World**

UNESCO uses education, science, culture, communication and information to foster mutual understanding and respect for our planet. UNESCO's Memory of the World program aims to preserve and promote documentary heritage of universal value.

UNESCO Memory of the World Website: <https://www.unesco.org/en>