

# **World Federation of the Deaf Side Event at the 10<sup>th</sup> United Nations Forum on Minority Issues**

**30 November 2017**

**WFD Statement  
WFD Vice President Joseph J. Murray**

Good afternoon distinguished guests, delegates and representatives.

My name is Joseph Murray and I am Vice President of the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD), an international NGO that has worked since 1951 to advance the human rights of deaf people who use sign language. Welcome to the World Federation of the Deaf Side Event on Inclusive Education and Sign Language. With us today are panelists Mark Berry, President of the WFD Youth Section from New Zealand, Marco Elias Olsen, a young Norwegian who grew up in a signing family but was denied access to sign language in his schooling, and Esther Viñas Olivero, a young deaf Catalan who experienced differential access to her four languages at home and in the school.

Some in the audience may be wondering why the WFD is participating in the United Nations Forum on Minority Issues. However, those who know our work, and know the lives of deaf people, will understand the relevance of the human rights of linguistic minorities to the lives of deaf people. Linguistic rights are central to the achievement of deaf people's human rights, as minorities who use a minority language within their national communities. Advocacy for language rights is a major part of the WFD's work of our member organisations, which are made up of national associations of deaf people across 135 countries. In 2014, an overwhelming majority of respondents to a survey of our members listed linguistic rights as a key organisational priority, particularly the rights of deaf children to be educated in sign language with direct communication with teachers and peers in sign language.

There exists many misconceptions about sign languages today. For example, sign languages are not universal. Many people simply assume this is true. And in making this assumption, they are implicitly denigrating the status of sign languages as languages. The equal status between spoken and signed languages is recognised by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Article 2. For all languages- spoken and sign languages alike- emerge within a community of users. Each Member State of the UN has one or more national sign languages. Since sign languages usually emerge among people who are predominantly (but not solely) deaf, sign languages are inherently minority languages, and thus fall under the provenance of the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities. The WFD applauds the statement of the Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues, Dr. Fernand de Varennes, at the close of yesterday's morning's Welcome Briefing that sign languages are minority languages.

Article 1 of the Declaration states "States shall adopt appropriate legislative and other measures" to "protect the existence and promote the identity of linguistic minorities". As of today, the WFD notes only 45 of the UN's 193 Member States have officially recognised their national sign language via legislation. The first country to do so was Uganda, in 1995, with Constitutional recognition. The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has been proactive in encouraging Member States to implement Article 21 of the CRPD, which recognises sign languages as languages, in national legislation. The WFD wish to see our member organisations able to work alongside organisations of language minorities in their countries to achieve full recognition of and support for their national sign languages. This collaboration with other minorities should be supported and encouraged by State Parties, as per Article 6 of the

Declaration, wherein minorities are able to exchange “information and experiences, in order to promote mutual understanding and confidence”. Indeed, this is one of the reasons the WFD is here today at this Forum, to publicly state that deaf people who use sign language are fully deserving of all human rights and protections accorded to linguistic and cultural minorities.

Article 4.3 and 4.4 of the Minority Declaration make clear the imperative for governments to promote the use of sign languages in educational settings. An education in sign language which takes place alongside sign language using peers should be seen as an example of inclusive education. The WFD notes with dismay that, within the ongoing trend of implementing the concept of “inclusive education,” the linguistic and cultural minority perspective of deaf children is often overlooked or not understood. As a result many deaf children do not have access to sign language. This is a grave, and unprecedented, human rights violation with long-lasting effects on deaf people’s academic, social, economic and emotional experiences.

Deaf children are the only people in the world who are born at risk for no language exposure whatsoever. All human beings are born into language communities but deaf children born into non-signing families, in countries where sign languages are denigrated or simply not promoted, risk losing access to any language whatsoever. Still today, around the world, families are misleadingly advised to avoid using sign language out of a mistaken fear that doing so would affect negatively their spoken language development. This prejudice against is familiar to many language minorities. However, for deaf children, this prejudice can lead to the very real danger of language deprivation. Research shows that language deprivation – not having access to sign language from early age - has a profound impact on deaf children’s cognitive development and their ability to function independently and gain the same work and social privileges of their peers. Article 4(1) of the Declaration states, “persons belonging to minorities may exercise fully and effectively all their human rights and fundamental freedoms without any discrimination.” In addition, Article 29c of the Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasises the importance of providing education in child’s own language and culture. Moreover, Article 24(3) of the CRPD recognises the importance of deaf children’s linguistic identity and quality education being available in sign language. For deaf children, access to sign language from birth is a precondition to the enjoyment of full human rights.

An inclusive education for deaf youth means, as Article 4 (3) of the Declaration states, governments should take measures to ensure “persons belonging to minorities may have adequate opportunities to learn their mother tongue or to have instruction in their mother tongue.” At our WFD Conference in Budapest two weeks ago, our member organisations around the world- from Latin America to Asia to Europe to Africa, all have reported that a misguided definition of inclusion as the placement of deaf children in local schools, without access to sign language using peers or teachers, has resulted in a decline in opportunities for deaf children to be educated alongside other members of their linguistic minority.

A quality education in sign language would ensure that this minority language is accorded full status alongside the majority spoken languages of a country. This would mean ensuring a holistic view of the entire educational system, in that schools for sign language using children are seen as specialist schools for that language minority. Current policies which refuse to acknowledge such language rich learning environments should be seen as discrimination against a linguistic and cultural minority. This is supported by Recommendations 10 and 27 of the 1<sup>st</sup> Minority Forum in 2008, which states education in minority languages should not be seen as impermissible segregation, when such education is open to all who share that language.

The WFD supports make sign language education accessible to all who use sign language, including members of families which use both spoken and signed languages. In addition, sign languages should be incorporated into the standard curriculum for all learners. This is taking

place in some countries, with national sign languages being taught in public schools. Such increased knowledge of sign language is an effective measure to the inclusion of this linguistic minority into larger society. The WFD calls on all signatories to implement Article 4(4) of the Declaration, which states “knowledge of the history, traditions, language and culture of the minorities” in these Member States should be encouraged. Sign languages are an important part of the linguistic and cultural heritage of all UN Member States.

In today’s Side Event, the WFD wants to bring forth different perspectives on sign language as a minority language. Before I turn the floor over to the next presenter, I would like to end by encouraging you all to learn a sign in my native language, American Sign Language, which is appropriate to this year’s Forum’s theme. That sign is “Youth.” Please watch each presenter to learn how to sign this word in four different sign languages today.