



*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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### **Full Accessibility to Deaf Education through Sign Language**

**Opening Statement - WFD President Colin Allen**

**22nd International Congress on the Education of the Deaf**

**6 July 2015**

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Distinguished participants of the Congress,

On behalf of the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) I would like to thank you for inviting me to be one of presenters at this historic event. For many years, the WFD has advocated for improvements in deaf education at the United Nations level and working together with the International Disability Alliance (IDA). Simultaneously, the WFD has supported 134 national associations of the deaf from all over the world (our ordinary members) in their efforts to lobby for their governments to implement their obligations under Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

A few years have passed since the adoption of the CRPD (in 2006) where the right to education in sign language is secured. It is the obligation of national governments to ensure that deaf children are educated in sign language and that teachers are fluent in sign language. However, the WFD has noticed with concern that the implementation has not been successful as envisaged because national governments do not have an understanding of how education should be provided in a sign language environment. The WFD launched a report on deaf people and human rights in 2009 that reflects a poor quality of education for deaf people and scarce opportunities for them to receive education in sign language. Oral methods and total communication are dominant in educational systems. Earlier this year, the WFD requested updated information on deaf education and received responses from 46 countries. I would like to show you a [video message](#) from our member organisation in Iran.

As you could see from the video, the right of deaf children to receive sign language is not secured. According to our findings from the latest collection of information, the situation in both developed and developing countries has not improved over the years. In some countries, governments' understanding of inclusive education has actually worsened deaf children's educational opportunities because deaf children are being placed in schools near their homes without any consideration of how to provide education in sign language and access to their environment. During the past years, the WFD has been seeking funding for a deaf education survey project because more much comprehensive information and research is needed in this field.

The International Disability Alliance (IDA), comprised of seven global and four regional organisations of persons with disabilities, is currently drafting a policy paper on inclusive education. The WFD has contributed in this work together with other member organisations to ensure that deaf and sign language issues are addressed in the forthcoming policy paper. Previously, the WFD was heavily involved in IDA's efforts during the negotiations that led to the adoption of the CRPD. Currently, other organisations of persons with disabilities have their concerns about the implementation of Article 24 of the CRPD. Therefore it is important for us to continue collaborating with them in our advocacy work to improve the availability and quality of education. Once finalised, the IDA policy paper will be an asset for Deaf Communities in lobbying their national governments and educational stakeholders.

The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD Committee) is preparing a draft general comment on Article 24 to clarify governments' obligations and what measures need to be taken to ensure qualified education for all persons with disabilities. The WFD welcomes this initiative and has taken several actions to influence the context of the upcoming document. Upon request of the CRPD Committee for input from civil society, the WFD made a submission together with our regional co-operation partner, the European Union of the Deaf, on deaf education. In April 2015, the WFD hosted a side-event on deaf education during the 13<sup>th</sup> session of the CRPD Committee explaining how sign language learning environments could be achieved and what measures need to be taken into account. Two deaf representatives from developing countries (the Dominican Republic and Mongolia) were involved in the panel along with deaf educational and legal experts. On the Day of General Discussion on the Right to Education for Persons with Disabilities, organised by the CRPD Committee, WFD Honorary President Dr Markku Jokinen was invited to be one of the panellists. He clarified before the CRPD Committee that the WFD never advocated for special or segregated education but views education in sign language as part of an inclusive education system. The CRPD Committee will publish a draft general comment on Article 24 to which civil society has the opportunity to give comments before a final version is adopted.

From WFD's perspective a sign language learning environment is part of an inclusive education system. The system means a barrier-free learning environment that would mean the provision of sign language learning environments in the case of deaf students. Several factors need to be taken simultaneously into account before an education system can be considered inclusive for deaf students: accessibility, universal design, non-discriminatory practices, meeting students' needs, reasonable accommodation and individual support. For instance, the provision of professional sign language interpretation as the only measure is insufficient because a deaf student wouldn't be able to communicate with teachers and peers without barriers.

In order to ensure that a learning environment is linguistically and culturally accessible, the following aspects need to be covered:

- All communication is accessible
- The learning process and teaching are both culture and language-sensitive
- The curriculum includes elements of deaf community, deaf culture and sign language with aims to nurture the linguistic identity and development of the deaf community (Article 24.3(b)), as mentioned in the CRPD
- The learning environment is visually and tactually accessible
- The learning materials are culture- and language-sensitive

Inclusive education is about respecting diversity based on deaf culture, and the linguistic and cultural identity of deaf children. A truly inclusive education is based on the needs of these children and is one that paves the way that will enable them to grow into individuals and citizens with full potential.

There is lots of work to be done to improve the situation of deaf education to make Article 24 of the CRPD a reality. The WFD is more than happy to cooperate with teachers, researchers and professionals working within deaf education to ensure that deaf children receive quality education in sign language. The global deaf community needs to work with various stakeholders including parents of deaf children and their organisations.

Finally, I would like to ask you for your support by signing the New Era Document that was originally presented in the 21<sup>st</sup> Congress on the Education of the Deaf in 2010 in Vancouver, Canada, to reject the resolutions of the Milan 1880 Congress that banned the use of sign language from educational programmes for deaf children. We need to unify our efforts to train national governments to respect and understand what a sign language learning environment means and to work with national deaf communities to improve deaf education.

Thank you.

#### **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 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 member of International Disability Alliance (IDA). ([www.wfdeaf.org](http://www.wfdeaf.org)) Email: [info@wfdeaf.org](mailto:info@wfdeaf.org)*