



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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Inputs from the World Federation of the Deaf to the Human Rights Council's report on "New and emerging digital technologies and human rights".

The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) welcomes the Resolution 41/11 of the Human Rights Council entitled "New and emerging digital technologies and human rights".

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 125 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 the International Disability Alliance.

This submission seeks to give the perspective of the WFD on what constitute the human rights of the deaf and how emerging digital technologies can constitute an asset but also a threat to the full realisation of human rights. This paper will first outline the importance of legal recognition of national sign languages and the provision of quality bilingual education to deaf children (I.). It will then present the asset and threats of emerging technologies (II.) before reaching to the conclusion (III.).

I. Legal recognition of national sign languages and bilingual education

The core of the human rights of the deaf people and one of the leading work of WFD is the use, promotion and official recognition of national sign languages by national governments, as outlined in article 21 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). 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 society¹ and are 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 supports².

The legal recognition of the national sign language is the first step toward achieving human rights of deaf people. The second step is safeguarding the provision of inclusive education to deaf children and deaf people through the model of bilingual education. As Article 24 CRPD states, all persons with disabilities have the right

¹ M. WHEATLEY ; A. PABSCH, Sign language legislation in the European Union, *European Union of the Deaf*, Brussels, 2012, p. 13

² Boudreault P., *Grammatical processing in American Sign Language: Effects of age of acquisition and syntactic complexity*. Unpublished Masters thesis, McGill University, 1999.

to receive education in an inclusive environment. The World Federation of the Deaf, [in its position paper on inclusive education](#), believe that education for deaf children is better achieved through bilingual education in the national sign language and national written language. In addition, teachers must master the national sign language with a native-level fluency, the bilingual school must follow the official governmental curriculum and deaf children must be surrounded by their deaf peers and deaf adult role models.

The WFD does not believe the outplacement of deaf children alone in mainstream school with the provision of sign language interpreters to constitute a successful model of inclusive education. Indeed, in this situation, deaf children will totally rely on the sign language interpreter without receiving a direct education from the teacher. There is a high risk of missing crucial information caused by omissions of the interpreter. Besides, deaf children will not be able to interact with their direct environment in a spontaneously, as the sign language interpreter will be the only possibility to fully communicate with their hearing counterparts.

II. Assets and threats of emerging digital technologies to the achievement of human rights of the deaf

As we are entering into a new era of technologies and digitalisation, those emerging tools are means 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, preferably with native signer, or with products developed specifically in national sign languages for deaf users.

However, as much the WFD supports emerging technologies, specific attention must be brought to the use of signing avatars as replacement of professional and qualified human sign language interpreters. As explained by the World Federation of the Deaf and the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI) in their [statement on the use of signing avatars](#), Sign languages have their own complex structures and grammar that are distinct from spoken language. Thus, a word-to-word translation is not possible, as any translation needs to take into account the context and the cultural norms. Signing avatars and the current state of technology do not surpass the natural quality and skill provided by appropriately trained and qualified sign language interpreters³ and these are in turn surpassed by direct communication in sign language between fluent users of national sign languages.

Yet, the WFD and WASLI recognise that avatars might be used for pre-recorded static customer information, for example, in hotels or train stations where instructions might be given about where to check-in or queue up. This is acceptable as long as deaf people have been involved in advising on the appropriateness of the signed sentences, and that there is no interaction or 'live' signing required.

III. Conclusion

In conclusion, emerging and digital technologies should serve as a momentum to make human rights of all deaf people a reality, and not be an additional barrier. The existence of emerging technologies and digitalisation cannot be an excuse to impede the provision of qualified professional human sign language interpreters to deaf people as a mean of participation in society. However, emerging digital technologies are valuable assets to underpin the provision of a quality bilingual education to deaf children.

³ See also [WFD Position Paper on Accessibility: Sign Language Interpreting and translation and technological developments](#)

For more information, please contact the Human Rights Officer of the World Federation of the Deaf, Mr. Alexandre Bloxs at alexandre.bloxs@wfd.fi.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Joe Murray', with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

Joseph J. Murray
President

About the World Federation of the Deaf

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