



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

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Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
Day of General Discussion on "Accessibility"
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World Federation of the Deaf

Dear Chair,
co-chair,
distinguished panellists,
representatives of states and NGOs,
ladies and gentlemen.

First of all, let me thank you for allowing me to speak at this discussion, I am delighted and indeed honoured to be representing the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD). WFD feels the subject we are engaging in this panel is of utmost importance to the global Deaf community and I am pleased to be representing this community here today.

We live in the age of information and communication. Do I, right here and now, through my actions, allow all people to take part, do I open up for accessibility and let other people have the chance to make up their own opinion? If I can answer “yes”, my communication is an inclusive one, an action that brings the world moving forward. If so, we secure the right to access on an equal basis with others to virtual and material information and communications. We need more actions leading the world forward, to reach the common goals shared in the CRPD, - make a society where all people act as independent thinking and responsible citizens.

Imagine you had no idea who you were, which person you was, if you were a man or a woman, deaf, blind or unable to walk, how would you then create the society? The American philosopher John Rawls claims that the “most reasonable principles of justice are those everyone would accept and agree to from a fair position”. He introduces “the veil of ignorance” to help us determine what constitutes a fair agreement in which “everyone is impartially situated as equals”. If we sat behind this veil of ignorance and made up a new society, this would have been a society without obstacles or barriers to information, communication, physical environment or transportation.

We would probably have made a world on the basis of universal design. The concept of universal design is a democratic one, where all people make use of the same devices and systems, and no one has any need for special treatment, because all information platforms can be used by everyone. We are of different height, weight, colors and abilities. This creates a diversity of high value, because it encourages designers to make products that suit all. If all and everyone can use the same devices, we make the world moving forward.

For some people, like deaf, this accessibility can only be secured by so called service, i.e. interpreters. Because this is the only way to accessibility, we need to clarify how use of interpreters, which is a service, can be connected to the “universal design” concept.

How to ensure accessibility to information and communication for Deaf people? Within this context, the key issue in understanding accessibility is the respect and recognition for national sign language(s) which are natural languages just as spoken languages are. Sign language makes accessibility for Deaf people possible; without accessibility, Deaf people will be and stay isolated. Thus, the full enjoyment of human rights for Deaf people is based on the recognition and respect for Deaf culture and identity.

For us, accessibility comes very close to a very basic human right, freedom of speech, which includes both the right to give and to receive information. This principle is further strengthened in CRPD, e.g. **Article 21 Freedom of expression and opinion, and access to information and Article 9 on Accessibility**, which protect the use of sign languages in official interaction and elsewhere. If I prefer to give and receive information in (Norwegian) sign language, I have a basic right to use this language. Unfortunately, this right is often not respected in our everyday life.

For Deaf people obstacles to access are rarely about physical obstacles but more often the obstacles lie in the lack of accessible information – whether the information comes from direct communication with other people who do not know sign language, or from other sources such as mass media, documents etc. Yet in most countries governments do not provide any special services for Deaf people. It is obvious then that Deaf people stay easily in the margins of the society with regard to all aspects of life, due to the inaccessibility to information and non existence of services provided in sign language or through a sign language interpreting. Deaf people’s right to obtain information in sign language should be extended into official documents (sign language translations), mass media (sign language news and programmes), internet, awareness-campaigns and many other issues. As a political scientist, I have been investigated deaf people’s participation in elections in Norway. I find that deaf people more seldom make use of their right to vote, and an explanation is lack of information. This is a clear example how acting as a responsible citizen is undermined according to lack of information in sign language.

Interpretation

In many real life situations for Deaf people accessibility depends often on the availability of sign language interpreters. According to a WFD survey from 2009, 13 countries out of 93 do not have any sign language interpreters and in many of those countries where there are interpreters, there are serious problems with the interpreters – for instance, the interpreters available are not professionally qualified, often booking system for interpreters is not clear, there is no national code of ethics for interpreters and so on and so on. A situation where a Deaf person has difficulties in finding a qualified sign language interpreter affects directly the accessibility to other services, information and education.

Documents in sign language

Another way to ensure accessibility for Deaf people is to produce information and materials in sign language. Written text is often not accessible to Deaf people as due to lack of education, around 90 % of Deaf people are illiterate according to WFD. In addition, government documents especially information on health and education should be available in sign language. According to the information received by the WFD, there are only a few countries, such as Thailand, that provide governmental documents in the country’s sign language. For instance, handbooks and guidelines in sign language are needed to educate and inform Deaf people about the CRPD, yet thus far most often handbooks in written format are available.

Media

The results for Deaf people’s access to information through different media are worrying. Seeing that radio is per definition inaccessible to Deaf people and as most Deaf people are illiterate, sign language

on public television is the most effective way to provide information and news to Deaf people. According to the WFD report from 2009, over 40% of the countries do not provide sign language services for news and current affairs programmes on television. Thus in many countries and most of the time the Deaf do not get any current information in their first language. Providing captioning for news and current affairs programmes would help to include the literate Deaf people, yet only some 22% of countries do provide this service.

Emergency situations

It is evident then that lack of information affects Deaf people's opportunities to make free and informed decisions. In addition, it can be dangerous and even cost lives in situations where information on security is not passed in accessible form. For instance with the earthquakes in Haiti and Chile, the Deaf communities were having difficulties getting information. There is also a great need across the world for HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns and for information in sign language(s) about HIV/AIDS to be directed at both associations of the Deaf and Deaf people as individuals.

New technology

Deaf community has been very quick to adopt the latest technology developments from text messages and camera phones to videophone calls in sign language. New technologies most often lead the world moving forward, but may also create new obstacles. Some examples: use of web TV is often a valuable additional channel, but this channel is seldom captioned, nor interpreted making it difficult for Deaf people to follow. Also a lot of public information is given through such channels in many countries therefore it is crucial that Deaf people's access to new technologies is ensured. When the bus makes all announcements on a monitor, this is perfect for deaf people, but absolutely not for blind persons.

What should be the contents of an inclusive policy? It is up to us whether or not we make use of the new technology. We should ensure by legislation that by using new technology we are not creating new barriers, instead, new technology should be used to open new paths to a more accessible and inclusive society.