Sign Language -- What Is It?
A Guide towards Legal Recognition of Sign Languages in Asia and the Pacific

Table of Contents

Foreword.......................................................................................................................... Error! Bookmark not defined.

Special Message.................................................................................................................. 4

Joint Congratulatory Messages.......................................................................................... 4

Introduction......................................................................................................................... 5

Chapter 1: Introduction to Sign Language ......................................................................... 6

Q1. What is sign language?.................................................................................................. 6

1.1 Definition of sign language......................................................................................... 6

1.2 What does the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities say about sign language?......................................................... 6

1.3 Ten common myths about sign language:................................................................. 9

Chapter Two: What is sign language, anyway?................................................................. 17

Q1. When in recorded history did sign language emerge?................................................. 17

Q2. Is sign language made up only of hand gestures?..................................................... 18

In ball games involving communication among team players and between players and their coach, hand signs for communication are worked out and used, as in baseball, cricket and kabbadi................................................................. 19

Q3. How are signed languages different from spoken languages?.................................. 19

Q4. Is sign language a universal code like Braille?.......................................................... 20

Q5. Do Deafblind people use sign language?.................................................................. 21

Q6. Are there dictionaries of sign languages?................................................................. 22

Q7. What research exists on sign languages in Asia-Pacific?.......................................... 25

Chapter Three: Deaf culture.............................................................................................. 29

Q1. What is Deaf culture?.................................................................................................. 29

Q2. Are Deaf persons disabled persons or members of a linguistic minority?.................. 30

Chapter Four: Early Deaf Childhood Language Acquisition.......................................... 34

Q1. Why is it important for Deaf persons to acquire sign language at the earliest stage of life? 34

Q2. What is the reality of sign language acquisition for Deaf children in Asia-Pacific?....... 35

Q3. Should Deaf children be taught spoken language?................................................. 37

Q4. What is a main language and what is a secondary language for Deaf persons?.......... 38

Chapter Five: Getting Started ......................................................................................... 41

Q1. What is the education situation of Deaf persons in Asia-Pacific?............................. 41
Q.2 What linguistic conditions support good learning outcomes for Deaf students? ..........42

Chapter Six: Sign Language Interpretation ..............................................................................47

Q1. How do communication and information barriers impact key areas of life for Deaf persons?..47
Q2. Who are sign language interpreters? ..................................................................................49
Q3. Why is it important to professionalize sign language interpreting? ..................................50
Q4. Who pay sign language interpreting? ................................................................................52
Q5: What is the difference between remote interpreting and telephone relay service? ..........53
Q6. Is sign language interpretation unnecessary when there is captioning for information, education and entertainment programmes in audio-visual format? .........................................................55

Chapter Seven: How Do We Promote Sign Languages through Laws? ...............................60

Q1. Why is it important for national governments to legally recognize sign languages?..........60
Q2. What has the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD Committee) recommended to national governments regarding sign language in the Asian and Pacific region? .................................................................61
Q3. What is the value of promoting sign languages in the framework of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)? .................................................................................................................62
Q4. What are key elements of laws and programmes to promote Sign Languages? .............66
Q5. What are noteworthy examples of legislation in the Asia-Pacific region? .....................66

Conclusion ................................................................................................................................68

Annex: Resources ......................................................................................................................69

References ...............................................................................................................................70
BOX ITEMS

Box 1A. Deaf Man in Business: “Deaf Can Do Investment,” Michael Noa Bete Din, Social Entrepreneur, Fiji ................................................................. 14

Box 1B. Deaf Woman in Business: Social Media + Artisanal Handicrafts Boosts Sales, Ms Ledua Lauti, Artisan-cum-Entrepreneur, Fiji ................................................................. 15

Box 2. The Asian SignBank, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China............... 25

Box 3A. Residential Home for Deaf Older Persons – a Deaf Community Initiative in Sumoto City, Hyogo Prefecture, Japan ................................................................. 26

Box 3B. Deaf Woman in Politics: Ms Atsuko Yanetani, City Council Member, City of Akashi, Hyogo Prefecture, Japan ................................................................................. 27

Box 4. Deaf Woman in Art: Expressing the Beauty of Sign Language through Art, Ms Jiayi Zhou, Artist, China ........................................................................................佩服 32

Box 5. Sign Language: A Tool for Inclusive Education ............................................................... 37

Box 6. Deaf Man in Education: Sign Language Immersion at the “Happy Hands School for the Deaf,” Mr. Sibaji Panda, Director, Happy Hands School for the Deaf, Orissa, India ...................... 39

Box 7. Deaf Woman in Sports: “Vitalizing Deaf Sports,” Ms Elvira Ligay, Tashkent, Uzbekistan 45

Box 8. Telephone Relay Service / Remote Interpreting in Thailand ......................................... 54

Box 9. Deaf Woman in Health Care and in Advocacy: A Deaf Woman Dentist-cum-Advocate for Indonesian Sign Language, Ms Juniati Effendi, Dentist, Indonesia ........................................ 58

Box 10. Deaf Man in Family Business: Managing a Family Pharmacy, Serving Community Needs for Medicines, Mr Mohamed Zahir Mohamed Amjeth, Matara, Sri Lanka ................. 66
Preface
by the United Nations ESCAP.

Special Message
by the Nippon Foundation.

Joint Congratulatory Messages
by the World Federation of the Deaf Regional Secretariat for Asia and World Federation of the Deaf Regional Secretariat for Oceania.
Introduction

According to the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) estimate, there are over 70 million Deaf people in the world. More than 80 per cent of them live in developing countries. Collectively, Deaf people use more than 300 different sign languages.

The new normal of the COVID-19 pandemic has wrought many changes. One of these is the greater reliance on online communication in place of face-to-face communication. Another is the importance of regular, at times daily, pandemic updates via social media, news agency apps/websites, online portals and TV broadcast. Breaking news and important press briefings on the pandemic broadcast on TV are often accompanied by one of these options: only captions, only sign language, or captioning and sign language interpretation. Which of these options meets the minimum requirement for keeping the majority of Deaf persons informed? Which is the optimal option?

Famously, in the universe of United Nations deliberations on human rights and persons with disabilities, sign language has been recognized as a valid language in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities¹ adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2006. That recognition was a “first” in the history of human rights conventions.

On 19 December 2017, the United Nations General Assembly, via its resolution 72/161, proclaimed 23 September as International Day of Sign Languages. We might have noticed Deaf communities marking with events this International Day. But, do we understand its significance? How does such recognition benefit Deaf people?

Moreover, some people use the word “deaf” with a lower case “d,” while others capitalize the first letter to “Deaf.” What is the difference between the two?

More fundamentally, is it only Deaf people who use sign language?

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that, by 2050, over 700 million people – or one in every 10 persons – will live with a disabling hearing loss, with the prevalence of hearing loss increasing with age. Among those older than 60 years, over 25 per cent are affected by disabling hearing loss.² That makes a practical case for learning sign language as part of life-long preparation for old age.

This guidebook attempts to provide clues, if not answers, to questions such as those raised above. Along with further details, this guidebook is intended to enable decision makers to initiate policy action that would facilitate the full participation and equality of Deaf persons. Civil society organizations and groups that are representative of the Deaf community may use this guidebook to enhance self-awareness and collective Deaf community identity, as well as to explore advocacy for deeper and more widespread societal understanding and acceptance of sign languages as valid languages for daily use.

Towards fulfilling the above-mentioned purpose, the structure of this guidebook departs somewhat from standard United Nations publications. The structure adopted seeks to reinforce the following: it debunks common myths and uses a Question and Answer format to cover questions that many Hearing people have regarding sign languages. The final chapter focuses on providing policy makers and legislators with reference materials to prepare for legal recognition of sign language at the national level, as well as at state / provincial and local levels.

² https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/deafness-and-hearing-loss
Chapter 1: Introduction to Sign Language

Q1. What is sign language?

1.1 Definition of sign language

Sign languages are natural languages used primarily by Deaf people. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities identifies language as “spoken language, signed language and other forms of non spoken languages.” Spoken languages are communicated by speaking and hearing, while signed languages are communicated through the use of hands, face and vision.

Out of the world's total population of about 7.8 billion people, how many are sign language users? The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) is an international civil society organization that acts as a peak body for 133 national associations of Deaf people who use sign languages. There are over 200 documented sign languages in the world.

The 70 million Deaf people worldwide represent 0.008 per cent of the world's population.

In the Asia-Pacific region, at least 27 sign languages are used in the same number of countries and territories that are affiliated with the WFD.

1.2 What does the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities say about sign language?

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) represents “a paradigm shift from a medical to a political and social focus in the work to secure the freedom and dignity of people with disabilities. Attitudinal and environmental barriers, not the physical impairment, prevent people with disabilities from enjoying full human rights; for Deaf people the major barrier is lack of recognition, acceptance and use of sign language in all areas of life, and lack of respect for Deaf people’s cultural and linguistic identity.”

The CRPD, with its human rights emphasis, makes seven specific references to sign language or some aspect of it. In that regard, States parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities can exercise their right to freedom of expression and opinion, including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas on an equal basis with others and through all forms of communication of their choice, including the use of sign languages. States parties must facilitate the learning of sign language and the promotion of the linguistic identity of Deaf Communities, including sign languages and Deaf culture. To realize these obligations in line with the Convention, the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has urged States parties to take appropriate measures to

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5 https://wfdeaf.org/our-work/

6 Afghanistan; Armenia; Australia; Azerbaijan; Bangladesh; China; Fiji; Georgia; Hong Kong, China; India; Indonesia; Iran (Islamic Republic of); Japan; Kazakhstan; Macao, China; Malaysia; Mongolia; Nepal; New Zealand; Pakistan; Philippines; Republic of Korea; Singapore; Sri Lanka; Tajikistan; Thailand, and Uzbekistan.

employ teachers, including teachers with disabilities, who are qualified in sign language and to train professionals and staff members who work at all levels of education.\(^8\)

Since its establishment on 23 February 2009, the Committee has consistently included the official recognition of sign languages and access to sign language interpretation in its constructive dialogues with States parties and in several concluding observations. In addition, the right to access sign language interpretation and services is particularly highlighted in the Committee’s General Comments\(^9\). No. 1 on equal recognition before the law; No. 2 on accessibility; No. 5 on inclusive education; No. 6 on equality and non-discrimination; and No. 7 on the participation of persons with disabilities, including children with disabilities, through their representative organizations, in the implementation and monitoring of the Convention.

Below are the seven specific references that appear in four Articles of the Convention\(^11\), namely:

- Article (Art.) 9 on Accessibility, para. 2 (e);
- Article 21 on Freedom of expression and opinion, and access to information, paras. (b) and (e);
- Article 24 on Education, para. 3 (b) and para. 3 (c);
- Article 30 on Participation in cultural life, recreation, leisure and sport, para. 4.

**Article 9, Accessibility**

1. To enable persons with disabilities to live independently and participate fully in all aspects of life, States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure to persons with disabilities access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment, to transportation, to information and communications, including information and communications technologies and systems, and to other facilities and services open or provided to the public, both in urban and in rural areas. These measures, which shall include the identification and elimination of obstacles and barriers to accessibility, shall apply to, inter alia:

   …

2. States Parties shall also take appropriate measures:

**Article 9, para 2 (e)**

To provide forms of live assistance and intermediaries, including guides, readers and professional sign language interpreters, to facilitate accessibility to buildings and other facilities open to the public;

**Article 21 Freedom of expression and opinion, and access to information**

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities can exercise the right to freedom of expression and opinion, including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas on an equal basis with others and through all forms of communication of their choice, as defined in article 2 of the present Convention, including by:

…

**Article 21, para (b)**

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\(^8\) Statement by the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities on the International Day of Sign Languages, adopted during the Committee’s 19th session, held from 14 February to 9 March 2018 in Geneva, Switzerland.

\(^9\) Ibid.


Accepting and facilitating the use of sign languages, Braille, augmentative and alternative communication, and all other accessible means, modes and formats of communication of their choice by persons with disabilities in official interactions;

…

Article 21, para (e)
Recognizing and promoting the use of sign languages.

…

Article 24 Education

1. States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to education. With a view to realizing this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning directed to:

…

3. States Parties shall enable persons with disabilities to learn life and social development skills to facilitate their full and equal participation in education and as members of the community. To this end, States Parties shall take appropriate measures, including:

…

Article 24, para. 3 (b)
Facilitating the learning of sign language and the promotion of the linguistic identity of the deaf community;

Article 24, para. 3 (c)
Ensuring that the education of persons, and in particular children, who are blind, deaf or Deafblind, is delivered in the most appropriate languages and modes and means of communication for the individual, and in environments which maximize academic and social development.

…

Article 24, para. 4
In order to help ensure the realization of this right, States Parties shall take appropriate measures to employ teachers, including teachers with disabilities, who are qualified in sign language and/or Braille, and to train professionals and staff who work at all levels of education. Such training shall incorporate disability awareness and the use of appropriate augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication, educational techniques and materials to support persons with disabilities.

…

Article 30 Participation in cultural life, recreation, leisure and sport

…

Article 30, para 4
Persons with disabilities shall be entitled, on an equal basis with others, to recognition and support of their specific cultural and linguistic identity, including sign languages and deaf culture.

…

Thus, there is reference to sign language in all Articles of the CRPD that mention “communication” or “language.” The CRPD provides a powerful tool to enhance the human rights of people with disabilities
and the above-mentioned Articles highlight the basic parameters for protecting the human rights of Deaf people.  

1.3 Ten common myths about sign language:

(a) **Myth 1:** There is only one sign language; everyone around the world uses the same sign language.

Sign languages are not universal. As with spoken languages, different sign languages are used in different countries. For instance, compare signs meaning ‘name’ in Iranian Sign Language, Thai Sign Language, Japanese Sign Language, and New Zealand Sign Language. Examples of expression in International Sign (to be explained below) are also shown for reference.

![Illustration](image)

*I* has a common expression of pointing at one's body with a finger, while *NAME* has a different form in each language.

At international events, such as conferences and sports competitions, we often see Deaf people from different countries communicating effectively with each other. This scene may mislead Hearing people to believe that there is one universal sign language. In fact, they may be using a sign language that they both know, or adopting a means of communication called International Sign. The WFD describes International Sign “as a pidgin form of sign language, which is not as conventionalized or complex as natural sign languages and has a limited lexicon.”

(b) **Myth 2:** There is only one sign language for those who communicate in the English language.

If two countries have the same spoken language, it is often assumed that they have the same sign language. This is not always the case. For example, Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States use English, but the Deaf communities in these three countries use completely different sign languages.

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13 [https://wfdeaf.org/news/resources/faq-international-sign/]
Here are some examples of words that mean 'people' in each sign language used in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States.

<Illustrations: signs for “people” in each sign language>

(a) **Myth 3:** Sign language is inferior to spoken language and is not a “proper” language with grammar and syntax

Sign Language is not just a combination of hand gestures, but a language with a vocabulary and grammar that is highly developed from hand gestures. The details are contained in Chapter Two.

Many linguists have worked with sign languages and there is a common understanding that sign languages are in no way inferior to spoken languages.

(b) **Myth 4:** Finger spelling is sign language.

Fingerspelling is one of the components of sign language; it is a system in which the letters of a spoken language are represented by fingers. Fingerspelling is used in different ways in different sign languages. Normally, fingerspelling is used to spell people’s names. It is also used to borrow words from the spoken language and follows the original spelling of those borrowed words.

Not all sign languages have a manual alphabet, but each sign language that does, has its own manual alphabet, even where their surrounding cultures make use of the same written alphabet. For instance, American Sign Language (ASL) and British Sign Language (BSL) are used alongside the same written language, but use two totally different manual alphabets. ASL uses a one-handed alphabet, while BSL uses a two-handed alphabet. 14

Three Indian researchers, F. Amal Jude Ashwin, V. Srinivasa Chakravarthy and Sunil Kumar Kopparapu, have developed a novel and unified fingerspelling system known as Mudrabharati for 10 major Indic scripts. The gestures of Mudrabharati are constructed based on the phonetics of the Indian scripts and not the geometry of the glyphs that compose the individual characters. Unlike ASL that utilizes just one hand, Mudrabharati uses both hands - one for consonants and the other for vowels. *Swarayukta aksharas* (Consonant-Vowel combinations) are gestured by using both hands. An artificial intelligence (AI)-based recognition system has been developed that can convert a video of a signer using Mudrabharati into running text in Devanagari and Tamil scripts.15

It should be noted that fingerspelling is only a part of sign language and does not equal sign language.

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Some people draw a parallel between finger spelling for Deaf users with Braille for Blind users. For more information on the difference between fingerspelling and Braille, see Chapter Two.

(illustration of finger spelling)

(c) **Myth 5:** Sign language is a word-for-word direct interpretation of spoken language.

Many Hearing people assume that signed sentences follow the word order of spoken sentences. Sometimes this is true, but often the syntax differs. While spoken languages mainly use speech, sign languages make full use of not only the movement of the hands and arms, but also facial expression, head movement, body orientation and the space around the sign language user, to achieve a grammatical structure that is reliant on vision. Details are contained in Chapter Two.

(d) **Myth 6:** Sign language is too basic for conveying complex concepts.

This is a false statement. In communities where Deaf people who use sign language gather, they discuss in sign language the factors that prevent Deaf people from participating in society.

In universities, Deaf professors use sign language to teach classes and to present their research. The consultant for this publication, Mr. Yutaka Osugi, Professor, Tsukuba University, Japan, is a case in point. In developing countries of the ESCAP region, despite enormous challenges, a small number of Deaf persons have completed research and acquired Ph.Ds.

The global mecca of Deaf education is Gallaudet University, the only higher education institution in which all programmes and services are specifically designed to accommodate Deaf and Hard of Hearing students. Gallaudet University embraces bilingualism: it uses ASL and written English for instruction and on-campus communication. The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education has classified Gallaudet University in the category of “Doctoral Universities – High research activity.”

Furthermore, the fact that there are Deaf lawyers and legislators who work by talking through sign language interpreters adds force to debunking the notion that sign language is too basic for conveying complex concepts.

(e) **Myth 7:** A Deaf person can understand you, if you speak slowly and loudly.

This depends on various factors, the:

- Degree of hearing ability that exists in the ears (without hearing aids);
- Degree to which hearing is supported by hearing aids or cochlear implants;
- Extent to which training has enabled the hearing of speech.

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16 [https://www.gallaudet.edu/](https://www.gallaudet.edu/)


18 The **Carnegie Classification** is a framework for classifying colleges and universities in the United States. The framework primarily serves educational and research purposes for which it is often important to identify groups of roughly comparable institutions. The classification includes all accredited, degree-granting colleges and universities in the United States that are represented in the National Center for Education Statistics Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).

Even if a deaf person is agreeable to having vocal communication, it is not necessary to speak slowly and loudly. Instead, the speaker should simply vocalize speech in the same way as done with other Hearing persons. This means that it is important to speak at a speed that is neither artificially fast nor slow and to do so in an environment where there is minimum noise disturbance.

(f) **Myth 8**: Deaf persons must learn to speak and lip read.

Why is this a 'must'?
It is a transgression of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to attempt to force Deaf children young persons and adults to speak and lip read. It is the right of each Deaf person to choose whether or not to learn how to speak and lip read. Public awareness of this right is covered under Art. 8, Awareness-raising, in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Art. 8 recognizes the need to foster respect for the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities, including Deaf persons, as also the right to learn and use sign language, and to the services of sign language interpreters.  

(g) **Myth 9**: Writing is the best way to communicate with a Deaf person.

Signed languages do not have a conventional written form. Researchers have developed systems for writing and notation to document the details of signs. However, these are not generally used in the Deaf community because they are not easy to read and write.

Deaf persons tend to use the written form of the spoken language for their geographical area of residence, according to their respective levels of literacy. A very small number of people use SignWriting, a writing system developed by Valerie Sutton in the 1970s.

The present level of technology allows for sign language to be easily documented and shared via video format, including by using mobile phones. Sign languages will therefore most likely continue to be used for interpersonal and wider communication, without a print-based writing system.

(h) **Myth 10**: Only “deaf mutes” or the “deaf and dumb” use sign language.

The term “deaf mute” is a term with derogatory connotations that is commonly used by Hearing people to refer to Deaf persons. Similarly, “deaf and dumb” is in the same derogatory category of terms commonly used by Hearing people who do not understand that use of these terms seriously undermine the dignity and rights of the Deaf community and reinforce injustice against Deaf persons.

It is not only Deaf people who use sign language. Hard of Hearing people also use sign language. Below is the WHO definition of the two types of hearing loss:

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20 See in particular the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Art. 8; Art. 9, para. 2 (e); Art. 21, para (b); Art. 24, para 3(c); and Art. 30, para 4.

21 For pioneer work by William C. Stokoe Jr, see [http://gupress.gallaudet.edu/stokoe.html](http://gupress.gallaudet.edu/stokoe.html).

22 [https://www.signwriting.org/](https://www.signwriting.org/)

23 [https://www.ethnologue.com/enterprise-faq/how-many-languages-world-are-unwritten-0](https://www.ethnologue.com/enterprise-faq/how-many-languages-world-are-unwritten-0)

“Hard of hearing’ refers to people with hearing loss ranging from mild to severe. People who are hard of hearing usually communicate through spoken language and can benefit from hearing aids, cochlear implants, and other assistive devices as well as captioning.

‘Deaf’ people mostly have profound hearing loss, which implies very little or no hearing. They often use sign language for communication.”

The above WHO definition notwithstanding, in reality, there are many Hard of Hearing people who use sign language. Ultimately, each person has to make a personal decision whether to use sign language as the language of choice in daily life.

Factors that may lead to hearing loss include genetic factors, ageing-related factors, exposure to loud sound, infections, side effects of certain types of medication. The above article then notes the universal prevalence of hearing loss:

“Over 5 per cent of the world’s population – or 430 million people – require rehabilitation to address their ‘disabling’ hearing loss (432 million adults and 34 million children). It is estimated that by 2050 over 700 million people – or one in every ten people – will have disabling hearing loss.”

Furthermore, some Deafblind people have learned to use sign language as their main language.

Sign language interpreters, family members, teachers at schools where deaf children study, and staff members at facilities where Deaf people gather use sign language for interacting with Deaf people.
Box 1A. Deaf Man in Business: “Deaf Can Do Investment,“Michael Noa Bete Din, Social Entrepreneur, Fiji

Mr. Michael’s car service

Mr. Michael Noa Bete Din, popularly known as “Noa,” is a Deaf Fijian. Noa learned how to run a Deaf organization during his participation in a year-long (2009-2010) “Duskin Leadership Training in Japan” programme. Since returning to Fiji, Noa has been involved in the management of the Fiji Association of the Deaf, having also participated in Pacific disability leadership-related training. Now he is in charge of public relations and supports sports activities for the Association.

In 2019, Noa launched a new business, “Deaf Can Do Investment.” There are five employees, including Noa, three Deaf people, one speech-impaired person, and one Fijian Sign Language interpreter. They all share the workload and provide services to the residents of Suva. Initially, the services included car washing, lawn mowing and house cleaning. At the time of writing, the Deaf Can Do initiative focuses on providing a car wash service. The car wash service is open seven days a week. It is based in the Fiji Vocational Technical Training Centre for Persons with Disabilities in Suva. The Centre initially arranged for hot drinks and pastries to be sold from its canteen. However, this was discontinued with the second wave of COVID-19 lockdown and health restrictions.

There is a weekend arrangement with Deaf students who learn how to wash cars and work on a part-time basis to learn employment etiquette. The “Deaf Can Do Investment” is now incorporated as a business entity. It has been successfully sustained with the assistance of the National Council for


26 <https://www.globalnpo.org/FJ/Toorak/169240879804/Fiji-Association-of-the-Deaf>

27 Personal communication on 28 October 2021 from Mr Setareki Macanawai, CEO, Pacific Disability Forum.

28 Ibid..
Persons with Disabilities (NCPD), Fijian Disabled People’s Federation (FDPF) and Fiji Vocational Technical Training Centre for Persons with Disabilities (FVTTCPD).

The “Deaf Can Do Investment” is one successful example of a business venture that the Fiji Association of the Deaf has supported its members in establishing.

**Box 1B. Deaf Woman in Business: Social Media + Artisanal Handicrafts Boosts Sales, Ms Ledua Lauti, Artisan-cum-Entrepreneur, Fiji**

Ms. Ledua Lauti, an artisan and mother, is also a member of the Fiji Association of the Deaf. Ms Lauti works with Deaf peers to make and sell Fijian artisanal handicrafts. From coconut and pandanus leaves, they make fans, mats, bags, jewellery and neck ornaments (e.g., salusalu, a traditional lei made of natural fibres) for traditional Fijian costumes. Ms Lauti upcycles scrap fabric from a garment factory into hand-knotted door mats for sale. For making her craft items, Ms Lauti uses the raw material from 29

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29 The NCPD has 32 organizations affiliated with it. Its functions include, inter alia, the following: serve as a coordinating body for all organisations dealing with the care and rehabilitation of persons with disabilities; seek financial assistance from government and aid donors for itself and registered organisations providing service to persons with disabilities; assist in the training, education and rehabilitation of persons with disabilities; create public awareness of the problems and the aspirations of persons with disabilities regularly inform the Government of the problems and needs of persons with disabilities and seek solutions to such needs. [https://fncpd.org/](https://fncpd.org/)

30 The FDPF is a national cross disability organization which is led and managed by persons with disabilities. Its four major affiliates are: Fiji Association for the Deaf (FAD); Psychiatric Survivors Association (PSA); Spinal Injury Association (SIA); United Blind Persons of Fiji (UBP). FDPF is a founding member of the Pacific Disability Forum, a partnership of Pacific organizations of and for persons with disabilities, that is the voice for Disabled Peoples’ Organizations in the Pacific. The functioning and delivery of results of the FDPF are closely aligned with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. [https://www.devex.com/organizations/ftji-disabled-peoples-federation-fdpf-123472](https://www.devex.com/organizations/ftji-disabled-peoples-federation-fdpf-123472)

pandanus that she grows outside her home. In a typical week, Ms Lauti could make up to 40 baskets in a range of sizes.

Ms Lauti inherited the handicraft skills from her mother. In turn, Ms Lauti teaches them to Deaf peers and to students at the School for the Deaf. With the decline of the tourism business during the COVID-19 pandemic and reduces handicraft sales in the hotels, Ms Lauti and her Deaf peers are increasing their customer base through online sales.

Ms Lauti learned online marketing from two other members of the Fiji Association of the Deaf who used social media to sell homemade jam and clothes sewn at home. Ms Lauti now posts photos of her craft items on her Facebook account. Her clients include individuals and Suva Handicraft Market vendors. They send her their orders via Facebook Messenger.

Fiji's Constitution guarantees the right of people with disabilities to use sign language. Through campaigns in conjunction with the observance of International Deaf Week and International Sign Languages Day, the Fiji Association of the Deaf has been advocating with the Government and legislators for the enactment of a sign language law.
Chapter Two: What is sign language, anyway?

Q1. When in recorded history did sign language emerge?

Sign language is likely the first form of language that preceded all the spoken languages of ancient civilizations. Humans have been able to communicate using language for at least 50,000 years. According to the speculation of some anthropologists, the first language was “a series of gestures and pantomimes” which may be understood as the uninformed Hearing person’s perception of sign language.

The answer to this question draws thus far only from research of recent centuries. There does not, as yet, appear to have been research conducted into sign language in the ancient river valley civilizations of the Nile (Egypt), Tigris/Euphrates (Mesopotamia), Ghaggar and Indus (India and Pakistan), the Yellow River and the Yangtze (China), as well as the civilizations of the Iranian plateau, and of Central America (Mexico and Guatemala) and Latin America (Peru, Chile and Bolivia).

The earliest recorded literature available to us that mentions sign language can be traced back to ancient Greece. In Plato’s (427-347 BC) “Cratylus,” Socrates (470-399 BC) is reported to have said:

“If we had no faculty of speech, how should we communicate with one another? Should we not use signs, like the deaf and dumb? The elevation of our hands would mean lightness – heaviness would be expressed by letting them drop. The running of any animal would be described by a similar movement of our own frames…” This early literature suggests that there were Deaf people who used sign language or highly developed gestural systems in ancient times.

Most Deaf people, especially in urban or rapidly urbanizing parts of Asia-Pacific, are not born to Deaf parents or into a community of signers. In that context, the existence of groups of Deaf people is necessary for a sign language to develop and be transmitted from one generation to the next. Whenever Deaf people form a group and communicate on a regular basis, shared signs naturally emerge. Depending on the size and continuity of the group, this may remain a more rudimentary communication system or it may develop over time into a sign language with a full-fledged vocabulary and grammar. The most common environment for the formation of a larger and ongoing Deaf community is a school for Deaf persons and its graduates.

The first public school for Deaf children was founded in Paris in the 1750s. French Sign Language (now known as LSF) developed at this school and, with a history of about 270 years, is thought to be the oldest. From this French Sign Language, many other sign languages, such as American Sign Language, have been derived and developed in their own ways.

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34 Subramaniam, T.S., “Rakhigarhi, the biggest Harappan site,” in The Hindu, May 19, 2016, 12:00 IST. <https://www.thehindu.com/features/friday-review/history-and-culture/rakhigarhi-the-biggest-harappan-site/article5840414.ece>

35 https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1616/1616-h/1616-h.htm

In Asia and the Pacific, depending on when schools for Deaf persons were established and whether they were led by educators from other countries (often the colonial powers), the sign language that has evolved is either unique to a country or has been influenced by other sign languages. An example of the former is Deaf schools established by the Japanese Government during its rule of the Korean Peninsula and Taiwan, Province of China. An example of the latter is the involvement of British Deaf people in education in Australia and New Zealand.

In isolated villages on islands or in mountainous areas where hereditary deafness resulting from consanguineous marriage means that the population of Deaf people tends to increase, indigenous sign language unique to the remote geographical area has been observed. In the Asian and Pacific region, such observations have been made in India, Indonesia, Japan, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, Thailand and Turkey.37

Q2. Is sign language made up only of hand gestures?

No, sign language is not the gesture itself, but it is a language generated by the development of the gestural system. This parallels the fact that spoken language is not the voice itself, but the language generated by the development of the vocal system.

Most Hearing people tend to be unaware that they also use gestures when talking in spoken languages. In fact, from birth, infants use facial expressions, sounds, gaze and gestures to let caregivers know how they feel. In the first three months, babies use their whole bodies to express feelings, from wriggling with happiness to arching away when upset.38 Communication via simple gestures, facial expressions (including via eye contact in sighted babies), as well as body movement (moving the legs in excitement) and body orientation, are babies’ ways to demonstrate signs for feelings and desires -- wanting to be carried, wanting more of something, rejecting something, distress or joy. When babies shake their heads or turn away, they are indicating “No more.”

Babies seek communication and, if it is not reciprocated, they will stop seeking it. The complex back-and-forth between caregiver and baby, where a caregiver responds to a baby’s individual body language and mood and gives the infant the opportunity to communicate back, is known as the ‘dance of reciprocity.’ It is a vital part of an infant’s development, laying the foundations for communication as a whole, as well as helping a child feel safe and secure. If children feel safe, they are more ready to explore the world. If they are anxious they are less likely to engage in exploration and learning.39 Non-verbal interactions are very important in early development, when brain growth is rapidly occurring and connections are being made. All this has profound implications for Deaf children and what enables Deaf children to grow and thrive --- or prevents them from fulfilling their true potential.


In ball games involving communication among team players and between players and their coach, hand signs for communication are worked out and used, as in baseball, cricket and kabbadi.\(^{40}\)

Arm and hand signals, gestures and touch signs have become a standard part of communication in the military, especially in combat or operational conditions requiring silence and stealth. When sight lines are clear, visual signals (military arm and hand signals) can be used over short distances to share basic messages. Dozens of different visual signals are used; they are complex but do not amount to a complete language. They can quickly convey critical information: e.g., directional commands for tactical manoeuvres, troop readiness or details about the locations of other parties.\(^{41}\)

So, is it possible to stop vocalizing and talk just by gesturing?

Let’s imagine it. When you are diving underwater with your friends, you can exchange some important information by using gestures that are mutually understood, such as pointing towards the right direction to go, gesturing the need to be careful about something, or signaling that the air in the cylinder is low. You may be able to point to things, to describe the shapes and movements of things. But, can you tell your friends about philosophy by using gestures underwater? Deaf people can do so by using sign language, even underwater. Conversely, it would be difficult to convey the past, the future and abstract thoughts only by gesturing.

<Illustrations: voicing, gesturing, signing underwater>

This is because gestures can work at the word or phrase level, but not to produce new sentences. Signed language is a language that is equipped with rules for word formation and sentence composition based on the gesture system.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spoken languages</th>
<th>Signed languages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vocal system</td>
<td>Gestural system</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<Illustration showing complex factors constituting sign languages as compared to gesture>

For example, the direction of pointing or movement of signs has a function corresponding to the information about people as the subject or object of spoken language. The sentence types, such as affirmative sentence, negative sentence, and interrogative sentence, are shown by adjusting the facial expression and head movement. Therefore, sign language is not the gesture itself; instead, it is a language equipped with structure and system, just as spoken language is not the voice itself.

Q3. **How are signed languages different from spoken languages?**

The most obvious difference is the sensory modality of spoken and signed communication: spoken languages rely on voice, sound and hearing. Sign languages are expressed on the hands and face, and

\(^{40}\) A fast-paced, highly energetic combative contact sport with its origin in ancient South Indian sports history that became an Asian Games event from 1992: [https://www.yogems.com/yopedia/the-pulsating-game-of-kabaddi](https://www.yogems.com/yopedia/the-pulsating-game-of-kabaddi).

are received through the eyes. This means that signers need to see the people they are interacting with. Online video applications enable Deaf people to have virtual face-to-face communication regardless of physical distance, just as Hearing people take speaking on the phone for granted. On a video phone call, a Deaf person can maintain eye contact and see the hands, face and body of another signer.

<Illustrations: Hearing people talking on the phone, Deaf people talking on a video phone (not hands only, face to face)>

Sign language grammar differs from that of spoken languages. People may assume that signed sentences follow the word order of a spoken sentence. Sometimes this is true, but often the syntax is different. For example, the English sentence "I flew from Singapore to Tokyo" is expressed in New Zealand Sign Language as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>SINGAPORE</th>
<th>TOKYO</th>
<th>FLY-TO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I          flew           from Singapore       to Tokyo

Sign languages use space and movement to convey grammatical meaning. In addition, specific facial expressions and head movements are used to indicate sentence types such as a question, or a negated statement. For example, the English sentence "Do you like apples?" is expressed in New Zealand Sign Language by raising the eyebrows as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>APPLE</th>
<th>YOU</th>
<th>LIKE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

(Illustration to be inserted)

Q4. Is sign language a universal code like Braille?

Sign language is often erroneously likened to a system like Braille. Blind people can hear and acquire a spoken language, but cannot access written text. Braille is a system devised to represent the written script of a spoken language with 63 symbols made by combining six raised dots. Some countries have organizations or committees that determine Braille notation rules, and the notation rules are revised regularly to correspond to changes in spoken language, such as new technical terms. Since Braille codes written letters and words, it is considered to be one of the writing systems of spoken language, rather than a system that is independent from spoken language.
Signed languages, in contrast, do not ‘code’ a spoken language with universal symbols, but they develop independently and locally within Deaf communities and serve as primary languages. The CRPD distinguishes Braille as a means of communication from signed language as a distinct language. (Illustration of Braille)

CRPD Article 2, Definitions:

“Communication” includes languages, display of text, Braille, tactile communication, large print, accessible multimedia as well as written, audio, plain-language, human-reader and augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication, including accessible information and communication technology;

“Language” includes spoken and signed languages and other forms of non-spoken languages;

Many sign languages do include a fingerspelling or sign system that represents the letters or characters of a written language. Just as spoken languages often borrow words from foreign languages, signers can use them to represent written words on the hands as needed, but it is usually a small part of the overall language.

Q5. Do Deafblind people use sign language?

As described in Chapter One, it is not only Deaf people who use sign language. Sign language interpreters, family members of Deaf persons, teachers at schools where Deaf children study, and staff members at facilities where Deaf people gather – all use sign language to interact with Deaf people.

Deafblind people, like Deaf people, can use sign language as their main language. A Deafblind person is a person who has both visual and hearing impairments. A simple classification of the degree of disability includes: a Deaf person with low vision, a Deaf person with blindness, a Hard of Hearing person with low vision, a Hard of Hearing person with blindness, with the disabilities varying in degree.

Deafblind people may differ from each other in the onset of their disabilities, i.e., whether they were Deafblind at birth or the Deafblindness developed later in life. The time of onset at the stage of the individual’s life affects the preferred choice of language and communication methods. In general, people who were visually impaired first and later developed hearing impairment (blind-based Deafblind person) have acquired a spoken language in childhood and continue to use Braille. Some among such Deafblind individuals use “finger Braille” -- tapping their fingers in the pattern of typing Braille.42

On the other hand, people who are deaf first and then become visually impaired later in life (Deaf-based Deafblind persons) are likely to know sign language and to become tactile sign language users. To compensate for restricted vision, they place their own hands over the hands of a conversation partner who is signing to them, and ‘read’ the signs through feeling the movement of the hands. This is called tactile sign language, and is generally regarded as a variant of the national sign language. Since they cannot see the facial expressions, head movements, body orientation, and spatial reference (e.g., pointing) of a conversation partner, tactile signers may instead convey ‘tone’ and grammatical information by adding additional signs, refrain from pointing, and add strength to their hand

42 <https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/document/4304074>
movements. 43 For example, in some sign languages, a question is indicated by adding facial expressions. Instead of facial expressions, tactile signers add a question word to the end of the sentence to seek the conversation partner's response.

In addition, Deaf people with low vision or tunnel vision may pay attention to the amount of light and positioning so that the conversation partner’s face and signs can be seen.

<illustrations: Deafblind people using tactile sign language, Deafblind person using sign language in a room without dazzling light>

In order for Deafblind people who use tactile sign language to participate in society, services that assist with mobility and services that interpret spoken language are provided in several countries. Sighted Deaf people are often involved in providing accessibility services to Deafblind individuals.

There are no global statistics on the number of Deafblind people. This is because the definition of the term "Deafblind" varies from country to country and some countries have no definition of the term at all, making it difficult to conduct surveys. An example of a rare country that does keep statistics is Japan. According to Japanese Government statistics (2012), there are at least 14,000 Deafblind people in Japan. This constitutes about 0.0001% of the Japanese population. Given the higher incidence, in developing countries, of visual impairment due to nutritional deficiencies, the incidence of Deafblindness is likely to be higher too.

Q6. Are there dictionaries of sign languages?

Yes, dictionaries have been published for numerous sign languages. Some dictionaries are available online free of charge.

Indian Sign Language Dictionary – Government Initiative

The Indian Sign Language Research and Training Centre (ISLRTC), Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India, has issued three editions of the Indian Sign Language (ISL) Dictionary. 44 The first ISLRTC edition, containing 3,000 Hindi and English terms and their corresponding graphic representation of signs used in daily life, 45 was launched in March 2018. That was followed by the February 2019 launch of the second ISLRTC edition with 6,000 terms. In February 2021, the third ISLRTC edition of the Indian Sign Language Dictionary was released. The third edition contains 10,000 terms for everyday use; they range from the names of banks, political parties, websites and apps to types of relationships and Indian fast food dishes, as well as academic, legal, administrative, medical, technical and agricultural terms. 46


44 <http://www.islrtc.nic.in/isl-dictionary-launch>


Available free as a Google document and via YouTube videos, the ISLRTC Dictionary includes for each sign, the equivalent in English and pictures wherever relevant. The Dictionary also includes terms used in different parts of India.

Indian Deaf experts provided the signs for the Dictionary. H.E. Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the third edition of the ISL Dictionary on 7 September 2021.

**Indian Sign Language Dictionary – Civil Society initiative in partnership with Government**

The first Indian Sign Language Dictionary, released in November 2001, was the outcome of collaboration between two renowned civil society organizations: Ramakrishna Mission, India, and CBM International, headquartered in Germany. Building on years of research, it documented over 2,500 signs from 42 cities in 12 States. A year later (November 2002), an instructional video was produced.

In addition, Ramakrishna Mission has released a technical sign language dictionary in English to enable Deaf students to pursue a polytechnic education, with signs for physics subjects taught in school. Ramakrishna Mission is developing signs for mathematics, chemistry and zoology. Furthermore, in collaboration with the All-India Deaf Bank Employees Association, Ramakrishna Mission has produced an Indian Sign Language Dictionary on Banking Terminology that is thus far available only in English.

The Sign Language Unit, Department of Hearing Impairment, Faculty of Disability Management and Special Education (FDMSE) of Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda University (RKMVU), Coimbatore, India, works on the promotion and development of sign language. The Unit offers many long- and short-term courses for developing capability in education and rehabilitation. In addition to its academic functions, the Unit is actively involved in research and development of various aspects of sign language. The Unit has conducted a series of workshops whose participants were representatives of the Deaf community, and Deaf stakeholders across India. The outcome was the issuance of the above-mentioned General Indian Sign Language Dictionary that has words used in daily life for communication. The Dictionary is available via an online portal and in print and CD format. To promote the universalization of the Indian Sign Language for Deaf persons and Hard of Hearing persons, the Dictionary has been translated into 11 languages widely used in India, including English, with the financial support of CBM India Trust, Bangalore.

FD MSE, in collaboration with the Centre for Development of Advanced Computing (C-DAC) Hyderabad, under the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, Government of India, has

47 [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC3AcGIIqVI4nJWCwHgHFXtg/videos]

48 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=su7PLuQaM8Bg]

49 [https://indiansignlanguage.org/history/]

50 Renamed Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda Educational and Research Institute (RKMVERI), the university places special emphasis on areas of study and research (termed “thrust areas”) that are of immense importance and social relevance, but are nevertheless under-represented in the Indian educational framework, such as fundamental sciences, rural and tribal development, disability management, and disaster management. Established in 2005, RKMVERI is an institution deemed-to-be university, as declared by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India [http://rkmvu.ac.in/overview/].

51 [https://indiansignlanguage.org/?_cf_chl_jschl_tk__=pmd_gzCoTY1QCoNVvQdHHRqSb2Zh9YCP16v8iPMDpvE1WbA-1635318401-0-gqNiZGzNahCjcBsQ9]

52 (1) English; (2) Hindi; (3) Tamil; (4) Telugu; (5) Kannada; (6) Bengali; (7) Malayalam; (8) Marathi; (9) Gujarati; (10) Oriya; (11) Punjabi.

53 The Centre for Development of Advanced Computing (C-DAC) is India’s premier organization for carrying out research and development in information technology, electronics and associated areas of the Ministry of
created an Android App for its General Sign Language Dictionary. For this, videos of the Dictionary entries have been produced. The app has been released for public download as part of the Digital India Initiative by C-DAC Hyderabad. The videos will be further upgraded and the vocabulary entries improved.

Electronic versions have the great advantage of showing sign language expressions in video format. In addition to the above-mentioned initiatives regarding Indian Sign Language dictionaries, the electronic dictionaries of Australian Sign Language and New Zealand Sign Language are also available online. Both were produced by universities in cooperation with the respective Deaf communities and with financial support from Government and private organizations. The making of the New Zealand Sign Language Dictionary contributed to the legal recognition of sign language in New Zealand.

Electronic versions have the great advantage of showing sign language expressions in video format. In addition to the above-mentioned initiatives regarding Indian Sign Language dictionaries, the electronic dictionaries of Australian Sign Language and New Zealand Sign Language are also available online. Both were produced by universities in cooperation with the respective Deaf communities and with financial support from Government and private organizations. The making of the New Zealand Sign Language Dictionary contributed to the legal recognition of sign language in New Zealand.

<To insert photos of these www sites, with photos of some pages of dictionaries>

Hard copy paper dictionaries have been published for many sign languages, and they are still widely used today. In these dictionaries, sign vocabulary is listed in various formats, such as illustrations, symbols, still images, and text descriptions.

< To insert photo of a page in a paper sign language dictionary>

Dictionaries of sign languages are of great significance in that they are evidence of the existence of the sign languages. They can be used to support the learning of sign languages and build sign language capability, especially in the training of sign language interpreters.

As with the compilation of a dictionary for a spoken language, the creation of a sign language dictionary requires not only human resources such as native informants, language researchers, and experts in editing and database techniques, but also funding to support a project for several years.

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54 <https://apps.mgov.gov.in/details;jsessionid=572E597C1952C08B1D2F499CB82032BDC?appid=1441>

55 For more information on the app and other details: <https://indiansignlanguage.org/>; <https://vucbe.org/>.

56 <https://www.auslan.org.au/>;

57 https://www.nzsl.nz/

58 The first full-fledged dictionary providing information about components of sign words was A Dictionary of American Sign Language on Linguistic Principles co-authored by William C. Stokoe, Jr. Carl Croneberg and Dorothy Casterline. In this dictionary, each sign word is described as a combination of four categories of symbols: TAB (location), DEZ (handshape), SIG (movement) and palm orientation. These categories constitute the Stokoe Notation system. Sign words are then listed in systematic order so that one can find a sign word in the dictionary.
Box 2. The Asian SignBank, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China

The Asian SignBank is a searchable online database developed for sign language research, to facilitate component analysis and storage of sign entries. It allows users to look up the sign words of Chinese Sign Languages, including of Hong Kong, China; Indonesia; Japan; Sri Lanka and Viet Nam, and on a word-by-word basis.59

Teams of Deaf and Hearing researchers in the participating countries collect, film, analyze, document and archive signs, along with information that facilitates searching. Users can search by entering a word or phrase or by clicking on a hand shape. The database then shows all meanings of the hand signal, lists in which country and region the sign is used, and provides a video of the sign and a description in both English and the native language.60

Initiated by the Centre for Sign Linguistics and Deaf Studies, Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), in Hong Kong, China, the Asian SignBank is built on the philosophical foundation of Sign Linguistics, with the technical implementation of Systems Engineering via joint efforts with two other CUHK partners: the Department of Linguistics and Modern Languages, and the Department of Systems Engineering and Engineering Management. The Asian SignBank receives financial support from the Nippon Foundation.

<To insert photo of the www site>

Q7. What research exists on sign languages in Asia-Pacific?

William C. Stokoe Jr. (1919-2000),61 was an American linguist and Professor Emeritus at Gallaudet University when he passed away. His research on ASL revolutionized understanding of ASL in the US. Before his groundbreaking work, sign language was viewed in the US as a collection of meaningless gestures or pantomime. In 1957, two years after joining Gallaudet College (before it became a University), Stokoe and two assistants (Carl Croneberg and Dorothy Casterline) began to film people using sign language. Studying the filmed sign language, Stokoe and his team identified the elements of a real language being used. The results of their research were published in a 1960 research monograph, *Sign Language Structure*. Although *Sign Language Structure* was published first, it is the team’s 1965 publication *A Dictionary of American Sign Language on Linguistic Principles* that sparked interest in ASL linguistics.62 Since his pioneering work, documentation of signed languages around the world has increased. This research has expanded understandings of human language in the field of linguistics, by exploring what is common or unique to the structures of spoken and manual modes of language.

In Asia and the Pacific, as well as in other regions of the world, it may be said that research on sign languages and their use in Deaf people’s lives has contributed to reducing common misunderstanding and prejudice towards sign languages, and has facilitated social and legal recognition of sign languages.


60 [https://zeroproject.org/practice/pra181424chn-factsheet/](https://zeroproject.org/practice/pra181424chn-factsheet/)

61 [http://gupress.gallaudet.edu/stokoe.html](http://gupress.gallaudet.edu/stokoe.html)

Research on sign languages began mainly in universities and research institutes in the United States and Europe. In recent decades, Asia-Pacific research on and documentation of sign languages have grown with the participation of representative organizations of Deaf persons, universities and research institutes.

As for universities and research institutes, special mention should be made of the ‘Asia Pacific Sign Linguistics Research and Training Programme’ (APSL Programme) of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, with funding from the Nippon Foundation. The Programme is training Deaf people from various parts of the Asian and Pacific region as sign language researchers, creators of sign language learning materials and teachers.

As an example of a Deaf organization, the National Association of the Deaf in Thailand is developing a sign language database, with the aim of raising the status of sign language and promoting its use by Deaf Thais.

**Box 3A. Residential Home for Deaf Older Persons – a Deaf Community Initiative in Sumoto City, Hyogo Prefecture, Japan**

High quality residential care facilities for older persons are much in demand, with the rapid ageing of the population of the Asia-Pacific region. In Sumoto City, Hyogo Prefecture, Japan, there is a residential facility for Deaf older persons. The facility, *Awaji Fukurou no Sato*, is managed by the Hyogo Welfare Association for the Deaf.

The facility has customized design features, including a Deaf person-friendly open-plan layout: there are no visual barriers such as walls and pillars and no bends in corridors, as Deaf people cannot hear each other’s approaching footsteps. Instead, mirrors have been installed. Those are accessibility and safety feature to minimize the risk of Deaf residents colliding into each other, as Deaf people cannot hear approaching footsteps. The building design allows residents to see each other and talk with each other in sign language from the dining room to the living room. Accessibility and safety at the facility also include a flashing light alarm system for emergency situations.

There are private bedrooms for all residents who are divided into blocks for living together in small group units. Each room is equipped with the following: a TV monitor that displays information disseminated from the Administration Office, a flashing light system that indicates someone is at the door to the room and a decoder for closed captioning to support viewing TV programmes.

The *Awaji Fukurou no Sato*’s careful design caters to Deaf people’s primary need for visual information at all times. The building design was the creation of a firm, *Rui Sekkei*, led by three Deaf persons: Mr

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63 [http://www.cslds.org/apsl/about.php]

64 [http://www.cslds.org/apsl/index.php]

65 [https://www.th-si.com/?openExternalBrowser=1]

66 In Japanese culture, “owl” is often used to refer to the Deaf community. Thus, *Awaji Fukurou no Sato* in English could read as House of Owl or Happy Deaf Village: Special Care Home for Deaf Older Persons.

67 “New Nursing Care Facilities to Ensure a Happy Future for Aged Deaf.” Posted on 1 April 2006 in *Japanese Deaf News* <https://www.jfd.or.jp/en/2006/04/01/pid426>
Nobuyuki Mitani, Architect; Mr Hiroshi Komatsu, former leader of a local Deaf organization; and Mr Susumu Ohya, former Director of the House of Owl. They participated in weekly building design meetings to discuss needs, especially from the perspective of Deaf users.

Awaji Fukurou no Sato has a total floor space of about 4000 m² built on a ground space of 10,000 m². It can accommodate up to 60 Deaf older persons, with a total of 54 staff members who are able to communicate in Japanese sign language. It was opened in 2006 after concerted efforts by three civil society organizations in Hyogo Prefecture: the Hyogo Association for the Deaf; Hyogo Sign Language Interpreter Association and the Hyogo Sign Language Circle Liaison Association. Together, they and Hearing supporters raised over 500 million yen (equivalent to approximately US$5 million) for the establishment of the facility. Dr Liisa Kauppinen, the then President of the World Federation of the Deaf, was a strong supporter of the initiative.

Some Awaji Fukurou no Sato residents had, prior moving to the facility, spent 50 years in psychiatric hospitals because they had been misdiagnosed as having psychiatric symptoms by doctors who did not understand Deafness. There had been a general lack of understanding of sign language and the experience of being Deaf. Others had undergone forced sterilization without prior informed consent.

Awaji Fukurou no Sato provides a place of comfort and safety for Deaf older persons, addressing anxieties that are common among them. Residents need not be fearful of how other people treat them or of being socially isolated. They have the assurance that they will be taken care of, in case they fall ill. Here, Deaf older residents are able to chat with each other in a relaxed manner in sign language.

**Box 3B. Deaf Woman in Politics: Ms Atsuko Yanetani, City Council Member, City of Akashi, Hyogo Prefecture, Japan**

In addition to Awaji Fukurou no Sato, Hyogo Prefecture is also known for having a Deaf member serve in its Council of the City of Akashi. Ms Atsuko Yanetani was elected as its member in 2015, and since then she has focused on improving the City’s welfare policies. Ms Yanetani participates in Council
discussions and question-and-answer sessions, using the Japanese sign language via professional sign language interpreters.

Ms Yanetani’s vision is that all citizens, including those with disabilities, receive correct information and are able to take action in the event of a disaster. As people in the City were affected by the 1995 Great Hanshin Earthquake, Hyogo Prefecture, her vision reflects that of the people of Hyogo. In addition to Council activities, Ms Yanetani broadcasts a weekly video in Japanese Sign Language over the Internet, introducing sign language, the life of Deaf people and the town of Akashi.  

68 <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCnrxrIWyKbP5gSWpt494INa>
Chapter Three: Deaf culture

Q1. What is Deaf culture?

In general, culture refers to the behavioral patterns common to a group of people and the values that they believe in. In this section, "a group" is replaced by "a group of Deaf people," to give context to the phrase ‘Deaf culture.’

Deaf persons are people who are visually oriented to their environment and who are in contact with other Deaf people, they are the Deaf community. Through regular interaction, common patterns of behavior, values and visually-based communication traits are formed. Together, these constitute Deaf Culture.

The following are specific features of Deaf culture:

Language: Deaf persons learn sign language in Deaf families and at schools or gatherings of Deaf persons, have conversations in sign language, and pass it on to others and the next generation. In addition, poems and narratives in sign language may be recorded on film or video and valued as literary works to be shared mainly but not only within the Deaf community. For example, Malaysian Deaf poet, Anthony Chong, participates in mainstream literary events and has mobilized resources for the training and empowerment of Deaf women through feminist poetry.

Values and beliefs: Deaf persons also have distinct values and beliefs, a key one being that being ‘Deaf’ is a high-value identity rather than a deficit that requires a remedy. This is linked to attitudes towards cochlear implant surgery, perceptions of one's hearing loss, and a common feeling that Hearing persons hold greater power than Deaf people. Belief in the importance of sign language and shared experience of discrimination create a strong sense of collective solidarity within Deaf communities.

Behavioral patterns: One of the well-known behaviors of Deaf persons is to raise and flutter the hands as ‘visual’ applause. To gain another person’s attention to communicate, a Deaf person might tap the shoulder of that person, wave a hand, or blink a light in the room to attract the person’s eye-gaze, before signing. Speaking loudly in someone’s ear, throwing objects or touching the head or hands are generally considered impolite ways to establish eye- contact. Face-to-face communication with eye contact is a hallmark of Deaf culture and communication.

Illustration: hand-waving instead of clapping, sitting face-to-face in a restaurant

Tradition: In many Deaf communities, Deaf schools play a central role in historical intergenerational links and in narratives about Deaf identity. Local Deaf clubs and national organizations have a long history of convening community events in many countries. International organizations, such as the World Federation of the Deaf and the International Committee of Sports for the Deaf (ICSD), host traditional events at international and regional levels.

Lifestyle: the lifestyle of Deaf individuals has changed greatly over time, especially with the development of technology. For example, in the days before technology became part of daily life, Deaf

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70 ‘Walls’ is a poem film created in Malaysian Sign Language (BIM) by BIM poet, Anthony Vee Yee Chong and translated into English and film by multimedia poet, Sheena Baharudin: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CQmiEC19VNU>.

71 ICSD hosts Deaflympics at which Deaf athletes compete at an elite level: <http://www.deaflympics.com/>.
people used various methods to wake up in the morning, such as leaving the curtains open for daylight to stream in, or drinking extra water before going to bed to be wakened by a full bladder. Nowadays, vibrating alarm clocks are widely used. Deaf people also tend to prefer a visually calm environment with good sightlines, such as an open-plan layout between the living room and the kitchen in a home. The employment options of Deaf people have widened. In the past, the traditional focus was on manual occupations. Today, there is more access to higher education, with training and interpreting within workplaces becoming better supported in many countries.

<Illustration: Deaf-oriented kitchen and living room>

The aspects of Deaf culture shown in the above examples are generally common to Deaf communities around the world, with local diversity according to other parameters such as country/region, ethnicity, gender and religion.

Like any culture, Deaf culture is acquired within a Deaf community and passed on through sign language. For this reason, Deaf organizations advocate the importance of congregated schools as specifically designed safe spaces where Deaf children can freely use sign language to learn, to thrive, as well as to develop Deaf identity and a sense of Deaf community by socializing with Deaf peers and absorbing Deaf culture from older role models in the community.72

Deaf persons’ entitlement, on an equal basis with others, to recognition and support of Deaf culture, is specifically cited in Article 30 on Participation in Cultural Life, Recreation, Leisure and Sports, CRPD:

"Persons with disabilities shall be entitled, on an equal basis with others, to recognition and support of their specific cultural and linguistic identity, including sign languages and deaf culture."73

Q2. Are Deaf persons disabled persons or members of a linguistic minority?

This question poses the two aspects as opposing concepts when, in fact, Deaf persons are both disabled persons and members of linguistic minorities. Deaf persons are often at risk in social life because they cannot hear sounds in the environment. For example, Deaf persons who wear hearing aids generally take them off when they go to bed. If a fire breaks out while they are asleep, they cannot hear the sound of an alarm and would be in danger. At home, they might be alerted by Hearing family members, co-residents or neighbors. However, in accommodation facilities such as hotels or inns that do not have emergency systems suited to Deaf occupants, they would not be able to receive emergency warnings in their rooms. Therefore, at the time of checking into a hotel, Deaf guests must inform reception of their Deafness so that staff arrangements can be made to ensure their safety in an emergency. The preferred option is to provide Deaf hotel guests with alarm devices that work by vibration or flashing light.

<Illustration: an alarm device that works by vibration or flashing light>

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72 Moores and Martin 2006.

The above example focuses on deafness as a sensory disability. The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) of the World Health Organization integrates the medical and social perspectives on disability as follows:74

“Two major conceptual models of disability have been proposed. The medical model views disability as a feature of the person, directly caused by disease, trauma or other health condition, which requires medical care provided in the form of individual treatment by professionals. Disability, on this model, calls for medical or other treatment or intervention, to 'correct' the problem with the individual.

The social model of disability, on the other hand, sees disability as a socially-created problem and not at all an attribute of an individual. On the social model, disability demands a political response, since the problem is created by an unaccommodating physical environment brought about by attitudes and other features of the social environment.

On their own, neither model is adequate, although both are partially valid…

A better model of disability, in short, is one that synthesizes what is true in the medical and social models, without making the mistake each makes in reducing the whole, complex notion of disability to one of its aspects….”

Deaf persons are also members of a linguistic minority and are vulnerable to linguistic oppression in societies in which spoken language is the norm. Linguistic oppression includes facing practical barriers to using the language of personal choice for everyday purposes, and experiencing negative attitudes towards the language. In order for Deaf people to be free to use sign language, Government and society need to recognize it as a valid language.

Article 2 on Definitions in the CRPD states that there are “spoken and signed languages and other forms of non spoken languages.” Furthermore, as explained in Chapter One, the term ”sign language” appears in six more places in four Articles of the CRPD:

- Article 9: Accessibility;
- Article 21: Freedom of expression and opinion, and access to information;
- Article 24: Education;
- Article 30: Participation in cultural life, recreation, leisure and sport

The above underscores the central importance of access to sign languages, as distinct from spoken languages, to realization of the human rights of Deaf people.75

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 states:

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“Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.”

It is thus incumbent on all States Parties to ensure and promote Deaf peoples’ access to sign languages.

### Box 4. Deaf Woman in Art: Expressing the Beauty of Sign Language through Art, Ms Jiayi Zhou, Artist, China

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on health care providers around the world. The Shanghai East International Medical Center (SEIMC) in China has not been spared either. SEIMC is a joint-venture general hospital in Shanghai that provides 24-hour medical care to the international and local communities in Shanghai and its neighboring provinces.

Ms Jiayi Zhou is a Deaf artist in charge of SEIMC graphic design for public health-related information. Ms Zhou was educated in art and design and trained in graphic design and painting skills at the Shanghai Institute of Technology in China and Gallaudet University in the US.

In addition to her work at the hospital, Ms Zhou mostly works during her free time as a visual artist. She has created a portfolio of artworks focusing on expressing Deaf experiences, especially the experiences of Deaf women. The artistic medium of her art works range from oil, to acrylic, pastel, woodprint, and linoleum print. They are used to express her aspiration to eradicate discrimination against Deaf people, as well as to celebrate the joy of using sign language, and the beauty of sign languages, as shown in the photos of her artworks.

The COVID-19 pandemic crisis shook Ms. Zhou to the core. While many people, including Deaf people, were frightened by possible COVID-19 infection, M. Zhou harnessed her fear to create art that depicted good practices by Government, and the responses of civil society and Deaf people in particular.

Below is an example of Ms Zhou’s artwork, with Ms Zhou’s comment on it. It is entitled, “It Starts with me: We Can Stop the Virus Spreading.”

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76 [https://www.seimc.com.cn/about/company.htm](https://www.seimc.com.cn/about/company.htm)
“During the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries and cities disseminated in different languages, including local sign languages, information on how to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and tackle its related issues. We Deaf people can and must remain aware of the latest COVID-19 information and protect ourselves from possible infection. In this artwork (woodblock print), the sign for "COVID-19" is based on the shape of the virus.”

<To insert photos of art work in a 4-page “gallery”>

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77 Jiayi Zhou, 19 October 2021, personal communication.
Chapter Four: Early Deaf Childhood Language Acquisition

Q1. Why is it important for Deaf persons to acquire sign language at the earliest stage of life?

Most infants naturally acquire the language of their family as a mother tongue. Infants with impaired hearing face barriers to natural language acquisition, depending on the family’s use of language. A child born to Deaf parents who use sign language in their home and community is in an ideal situation to acquire that sign language as a native language. Research shows that a deaf infant acquiring sign language in a Deaf family follows a similar sequence of development to a Hearing child acquiring a native spoken language. Native language signing Deaf children go on to learn, through education and environmental exposure, the language of the wider society as a second language.

For at least 90 per cent of Deaf children, the more common situation is to have Hearing parents who communicate in spoken language and have no sign language skills. In this situation, the Deaf child may not have sufficient access either to vocal communication or exposure to sign language. This situation offers poor conditions for acquiring a complete first language (spoken or signed) which, in turn, could cause delays in developmental milestones and learning that require a foundation of language skills.

Deaf children who do not acquire sign language at home often learn it through interacting with Deaf peers and teachers in an education setting. However, this opportunity may come only after the critical period for language acquisition during the earliest pre-school years. To ensure ‘on time’ language and cognitive development, families need to receive professional and community support to use sign language with their Deaf children from the time that deafness is first identified.

Acquiring sign language in the earliest years brings the following benefits:

1. The Deaf child has a fully accessible mode of communication through which s/he can develop social relationships with family and friends that are essential for healthy psychological development.

2. Language competence enables brain development, including memory and other cognitive skills that are essential for learning.

3. By socializing with other sign language users, the Deaf child develops, through role-modelling and social inclusion, a positive sense of identity and confidence.

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78 Native language is a first language, native tongue, native language, or mother/father/parent tongue, is a language that a person has been exposed to from birth or within the critical period for language acquisition in a linguistically rich environment: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_language>.


4. Visual (signed) language offers Deaf people of all ages communication without the stress and uncertainty associated with lip-reading\(^81\) or exclusion from conversation.

5. Deaf children and adults can use the services of sign language interpreters to access education and other mainstream life activities.

These benefits cannot be obtained through oral or written communication alone, since these forms of communication require knowledge of a spoken (heard) language which is inaccessible to children who are deaf from an early age.

Q2. **What is the reality of sign language acquisition for Deaf children in Asia-Pacific?**

Deaf children everywhere face challenges to language acquisition. For the 90 per cent of Deaf children who are in non-deaf families, opportunities for sign language acquisition are dependent on planned interventions via family and school (rather than occurring naturally at home). Thus, institutional policies, practices and resources have a major impact on Deaf children’s opportunities to acquire sign language.

In developing and least developed countries of the Asian and Pacific region, a high proportion of Deaf children and children with disabilities in general lack access to formal education. There are wide disparities in access according to geographical location, gender, socio-economic status, and cultural beliefs about deaf people.\(^82\) These factors also apply regarding early intervention that supports acquisition of sign language.

There are national and individual variations in the approaches that families and educators adopt towards Deaf children’s language development. Overall, educational and medical interventions tend to promote an ideology of hearing and speaking as a first priority, with sign language as a remedial or excluded mode of communication. This ‘oralist’ ideology is present in much of the region. In many cases, this approach has roots in deaf education practices that were planted in the colonies, modelling the deaf education pedagogy that prevailed in western societies from the late nineteenth century.

There are promising signs that the tide might be turning with India initiating the inclusion of Indian Sign Language in its curriculum based on the universal design of learning – as announced by H.E. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, also on 7 September 2021.\(^83\)

The Government of Malaysia, through the Minister of National Unity, H.E. Datuk Halimah Mohamed Sadique, announced on 16 October 2021 that the teaching and learning of Malaysian Sign Language would be introduced from 2022 in all 1,781 Government-operated Unity kindergartens involving 38,000 pre-schoolers nationwide under the Ministry of National Unity.\(^84\) This would be introduced as a third

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\(^{81}\) Lip-reading is a skill of understanding speech by watching the speaker’s face, often taught alongside speech training for Deaf children. Lip-reading is most effective with prior knowledge of the vocabulary and grammar of a spoken language, and familiarity with the speaker and the topic.


language, in addition to Mandarin, Tamil, Kadazan and Iban for the teaching of communication language under the Perpaduan (Unity) Kindergarten Early Childhood Education Plan 2021-2030. This initiative arose in response to a proposal made by the Senator representing the disability community of Malaysia during a recent debate in Parliament.

In recent decades, however, various countries in the region have initiated programmes to promote early sign language acquisition for deaf children. Often, these are localized, experimental programmes that are not available to all Deaf children nationally, nor are they fully supported by the state. A distinctive feature of such sign language acquisition initiatives is the role of Deaf people as programme leaders and educators. These are different from conventional programmes that generally exclude or marginalize Deaf people as experts and role-models.85

Underlining the importance of early sign language acquisition, the CRPD, Article 24 (3b), directs States Parties to promote full and equal participation in education, by: “facilitating the learning of sign language and the promotion of the linguistic identity of the deaf community.” At the regional level, the Incheon Strategy to “Make the Right Real” for Persons with Disabilities in Asia and the Pacific86 includes as an indicator of progress:

“5.5 Proportion of children who are deaf that receive instruction in sign language.”

The following description87 of a family-centered early intervention programme in Vietnam illustrates how the CRPD and Incheon principles can be put into practice, through collaboration between professionals and Deaf community members, and with institutional support:

In 2014, Deaf children at the Centre for Supporting and Developing Inclusive Education for People with Disabilities (CSDIEPD), Ho Chi Minh City, were not just learning sign language. They were being taught how to understand the world around them and how to express themselves so they could be understood.

CSDIEPD, along with five other centres in Ho Chi Minh City, Thai Nguyen, Quang Binh and Hanoi, is testing an innovative method to improve the early development of Deaf children. A “family support team” composed of a Deaf mentor, a sign language interpreter and a Hearing teacher, work with young children and their families in their homes. “This model offers a new way to help the children,” said Nguyen Thanh Tam, Director of the Ho Chi Minh City CSPIEIPD. “We used to provide support at the centre, but our facilities are limited. Now, we help 150 children in the centre and another 170 children in their homes.

Supported by the Intergenerational Deaf Education Outreach (IDEO) Project, which is financed by the Japan Social Development Fund, administered by the World Bank and implemented by World Concern, the model has three key features:


• Use sign language as the primary mode of communication, enabling Deaf children to connect with their families and with the outside world;
• Have Deaf mentors as role models, advocates and sign language teachers --- because they understand “from the inside” the realities of growing up deaf;
• Involve the family in the Deaf child’s learning and development.

< To insert photo of intervention in the home of a Deaf child>

Box 5. Sign Language: A Tool for Inclusive Education

Learning a language is very important in children’s development and in preparing them for primary school. The 2006 Viet Nam Household Living Standards Survey, which included a special section on disability, found that 18 out of every 10,000 children found it “very difficult” or “impossible” to hear. By this estimate, some 15,500 Vietnamese children between the ages of 0 and 5 are in this category. Most of these children lack access to early education, while their parents lack professional support.

The Government of Viet Nam has accepted sign language as a tool for inclusive education, but the nation’s expert resource -- its signing Deaf adults who possess the unique empathy and ability to use sign language for a full range of purposes -- has not been systematically mobilized, trained and employed in childhood education. The project is helping change this by training Deaf mentors, sign language interpreters and Hearing teachers to ensure that Deaf pre-schoolers get quality education.

Hoang Kim Phuc, a sign language teacher at the Hy Vong School for Children with Disabilities:

“I am a person with hearing impairment. When I was young, I could only learn by spoken language so I advanced very slowly. Now, with the combination of both sign language and spoken language, Deaf children can learn quickly and understand what’s happening around them.”

Photo of this person

Not all Deaf Vietnamese children go to school. A pre-school education will improve their prospects of getting into school. A recent evaluation noted that, even after just three months of participating in the IDEO project, feedback has been very positive. The parents in particular report strong learning and improved behavior in their children.”

Q3. Should Deaf children be taught spoken language?

When a child’s hearing impairment is discovered, parents receive initial advice from medical professionals about language development. Very often, this advice aligns with Hearing parents’ common desire for their child to acquire the spoken language of the family as their first language. Therefore, with the aim of augmenting the child’s capacity to hear and learn to speak, assistive technology may be offered.

Cochlear implantation surgery may be conducted, often within the first year of an infant’s life (depending on the country’s healthcare policies and resources). A cochlear implant converts sound into
an electrical signal and transmits it to the auditory nerve, making this information available to the brain to process into meaning. Digital hearing aids are another technology which transmit sound to the eardrum by amplifying sound and filtering background noise.

Regardless of which type of device children use, intensive training is required to identify the meaning of sounds and the structure of language. These technologies and therapies now enable many Deaf children to acquire and use spoken language more effectively than was possible in the past. However, sophisticated technology is not equally available to all Deaf children due to economic, political, and geographical disparities. Even with well-supported conditions, there is a range of outcomes in spoken language skills among Deaf children who use these technologies. Assistive technology can boost spoken language acquisition, but does not eliminate all the effects of being Deaf in a Hearing world.

Illustration or a photo of cochlear implant with a deaf person

Many children who use cochlear implants or hearing aids do benefit from using sign language as an alternate language mode, and as a source of connection with other Deaf people. For this reason, WFD emphasizes that deaf children must have visual language access in order to fully achieve their human potential. Sign language is the only language that is completely visually accessible (i.e., it is not reliant on technologically-assisted hearing) and WFD advocates for “deaf children to have full access to a quality education in their native sign language(s), regardless of any technological devices they may use.”

Q4 What is a main language and what is a secondary language for Deaf persons?

Deaf individuals often use a signed language as their main, preferred form of communication, but will also have knowledge of the major spoken/written language in their country, depending on their educational background. Knowledge of language(s) used in wider society (through lip-reading, literacy, speech) is useful to Deaf people for employment, everyday interaction in the local community, and access to information. In many contexts around the world, Deaf individuals may know more than one national sign language (e.g., those who have travelled, studied or married across national borders), or they may know different dialects of signing within their country (e.g., as in Indonesia, India, Thailand and Vietnam). In this sense, Deaf people are typically bilingual or plurilingual.

Some Deaf people who benefit from cochlear implant or hearing aid technology may alternate between communicating in spoken language and in signed language, according to the situation. Such bilingual-bimodal Deaf individuals might choose to use spoken language in a one-to-one or familiar situation (such as a family gathering, a small workplace, at a shop), but prefer to use sign language socially in the Deaf community and to access information in a larger, more complex situation such as a meeting, a classroom, or a public event by using a sign language interpreter.

Like people everywhere, Deaf individuals’ language skills, choices and strategies vary according to their personal language background, the communication norms of their particular society, and the situations in which they need to communicate.

The Happy Hands School for the Deaf (HHSD) was established in July 2016 in Subarnapur District, state of Odisha, South-eastern India. As of October 2021, 32 deaf children between the ages of 3 and 12 years old are studying at this boarding school. Around 10 new pupils enroll in the School every year.

Mr. Sibaji Panda is the Deaf Director of HHSD. Being a boarder at the school is a required condition for admission. Mr Panda explains this condition: "Being away from their families who are not able to communicate well with them, living with other Deaf children and with Deaf staff members, the children immerse in sign language from the time they wake up to the time they go to bed. This is the kind of sign language environment that Deaf children need for language and cognitive development. They also learn life skills and job skills through sign language communication activities."

HHSD has one Hearing teacher and seven Deaf teachers. The Hearing teacher is a licensed teacher and is responsible for communication with the students' parents, as well as managing the finances of the school. The Deaf teachers are studying for their Government accredited teaching qualifications.

The families of many of the students live in areas without electricity. They are poor and HHSD does not collect school fees from the families. Instead, HHSD relies on voluntary donations to cover its costs and welcomes Deaf volunteers who might like to help the School. Mr Panda, with the cooperation of the Deaf teachers, is tackling the challenge of increasing the number of licensed teachers in order to apply for government funding.

The School was born from Mr Panda's concern about the many problems linked with the education of deaf children – from the schools to teachers and oral-based education. After 100 years of insufficient development, Mr Panda saw that deaf people were still suffering from disparities in education. In response, Mr Panda, with his Deaf brother and a Hearing brother, set up HHSD in their home village - - Shikha Eco Learning Village. HHSD is a fully bilingual school where signing develops alongside writing. At HHSD, sign language is deemed of paramount importance.

89 <http://hhsd.rurallifeline.in/>
HHSD is in line with the thrust of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on leaving no one behind.

The following convey the vision and mission of HHSD:

Non-discrimination.

All can learn provided the right environment and access to curriculum and learning are guaranteed by giving equal importance to Indian Sign Language and written English/local language; and the individual needs of students.

Visual education plans lead to better outcome. The education of deaf children is the collective responsibility of teachers, students, families and of society at large.

Inclusion in its real sense is where we feel we belong and are accepted.

Mr. Panda is striving to realize the HHSD vision and mission. He hopes to develop a model for the whole of India of what a school for Deaf children should be like.

90 <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

91 <http://hhsd.rurallifeline.in/about/>
Chapter Five: Getting Started

Q1. What is the education situation of Deaf persons in Asia-Pacific?

In a submission to the United Nations in 2015 regarding Deaf people’s access to education, the World Federation of the Deaf noted the lack of data on deaf education in many countries, and made the following general observation:

“Even though situations vary significantly between countries, the WFD and the EUD are concerned about the lack of implementation of the CRPD Article 24 and the lack of opportunities for Deaf leaders and Deaf people to have a say in educational options. The WFD Deaf People and Human Rights Report\(^\text{92}\) revealed that education for most Deaf people is provided in oral or total communication (simultaneous use of speech and signs) instead of a sign language approach. Since the report was launched in 2009, the situation has not improved. This was clearly noted in the information received from national deaf communities for this submission.

The lack of comprehensive data on deaf education is a problem. The available information is confined only to quantitative data such as statistics on the number of schools for the deaf and enrolment number of deaf students in schools. Qualitative data would be important as it reflects the success of educational approaches and learning outcomes.”\(^\text{93}\)

In 2009, the WFD reported on the human rights of Deaf people based on survey data received from 93 countries (no Pacific nations responded).\(^\text{94}\) The report notes that an estimated 80 percent of the world’s Deaf population live in developing countries, where deafness is more prevalent due to disease, accidents and environmental factors. Survey results indicate that across the 93 responding countries, 17 per cent of Deaf children attend school, and only 3 per cent have access to education in sign language using a bilingual approach. Deaf children’s exclusion from communication and education results in lifelong limitations on opportunities for employment and social, cultural and political participation.

A 2019 situation analysis of Deaf people in 14 Pacific Island countries\(^\text{95}\) concludes that:

- Quality education is inaccessible for most deaf children;
- Teachers lack training in sign language;


• Early intervention supporting family and child sign language acquisition is scarce;
• There are few interpreters working with Deaf students in school settings.

In some Pacific countries, especially those composed of multiple islands, (e.g., Vanuatu, Solomons), there is no nationally shared sign language because Deaf individuals live in isolated locations and do not attend schools together. In these situations, Deaf individuals rely on basic ‘home signs’ shared with family or village members and they have limited opportunities for social participation or education.

A 2006 study of deaf education in China\(^\text{96}\) noted a change from paternalistic treatment of sign language users (including oralist pedagogy) towards a more ‘Deaf-led’ approach, but noted significant gaps in the training and sign language competence of teachers and interpreters working with Deaf children, and limited curriculum options for and expectations of Deaf students at all levels of education.

A more recent 2021 study\(^\text{97}\) reports slow progress on the educational rights and opportunities of sign language users in China, describing “a fragile trust between deaf and Hearing professionals, a need for continued investigation on sign language standardization and preservation, and a desire for worldwide collaboration and inclusion of deaf and Hearing scholars in establishing a deaf university in China.” (p 179). The 2021 study also highlights the important link between supporting sign language documentation, developing institutional partnership with Deaf organizations, and strengthening sign language use in education in Asia-Pacific countries:

“Sign language standardization and dictionary work are ongoing challenges faced by other Asian countries (e.g., Indonesia, India, Cambodia, Nepal). In these contexts, sign language work must benefit deaf communities by protecting and preserving regional sign languages.\(^\text{98}\) Article 21 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities refers to involving organizations of Deaf people who are actively consulted in issues concerning their lives, including their native languages. Each country has unique challenges, and therefore it is wise to evaluate language ideologies on a case by case basis. Recommendations to improve training and qualifications for teachers and interpreters can be met by training deaf instructors of sign linguistics and pedagogy, and by including deaf Chinese scholars in the planning and development of research and education for deaf individuals.” (p.196)

**Q.2 What linguistic conditions support good learning outcomes for Deaf students?**

In terms of language practices, there are three main approaches to deaf education:

(1) Teaching in the medium of spoken/ written language only (known as the oral-aural approach).
(2) Teaching through speaking simultaneously with an artificial system of signs that ‘match’ each spoken word (known as the combined method, for example, ‘Signed Putonghua’- see Lytle et al 2006).

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Teaching in a native signed language with instruction in the written and/or spoken language of society (known as a bilingual-bimodal approach).

< To insert illustration of each method>

Until the mid- to late-20th century, deaf education in many countries favored the oral-aural approach. The oral-aural approach prohibited the use of sign language and aimed to “normalize” Deaf children towards speaking and behaving like Hearing people. Unsurprisingly, this produced high rates of failure among children who could not hear. Under these educational conditions, generations of students used and passed on sign language privately among themselves during breaks and in their boarding residences. It is strongly held in Deaf cultural lore that oralist education delivered poor educational and psychological outcomes for most Deaf children.  

The combined method is not generally favored by Deaf people either because the style of signing conflicts with the visual grammar and lexical variation of natural signed languages as used by Deaf communities. It is also reliant on knowing the structure of spoken language and is often executed poorly by teachers, making the signs difficult to follow without hearing speech. Artificially standardized sign systems which suppress dialectal variation are often imposed by educational authorities and resisted by Deaf communities.

The CRPD and the WFD Position Paper on the Language Rights of Deaf children are mutually reinforcing in underscoring the importance of bilingual-bimodal education which uses the sign language of the national Deaf community. However, WFD points out that:

“Other barriers to the effective education of deaf children include a lack of trained teachers (including deaf teachers as role models), a lack of teachers who are fluent in sign language and lack of a learning environment and pedagogy that is conducive to deaf students’ effective learning. Bilingual or multilingual education does not itself guarantee educational outcomes - it must be quality education.”

An international trend towards inclusive education policy, including in the Asia-Pacific region, is of great concern to WFD, due to widespread problems with the definition of ‘inclusive’ and practical implementation for Deaf children. Chiefly, these are the assumption that inclusion equates with

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mainstream placement, a lack of specialist teaching (teachers proficient in sign language and skilled in teaching bilingually) and lack of a shared signing environment and peers in regular schools:102, 103, 104

“Schools in which the majority of students are Hearing may present barriers to deaf students, in that they lack the supportive and inclusive signing environments that deaf students require to thrive and to acquire a strong sense of linguistic and cultural identity.”105

The WFD asserts that mainstream school placement may be the opposite of ‘inclusive’. The 2018 WFD Position Paper on Inclusive Education stresses that specialized schools and spaces in which Deaf children learn together in sign language may be a better realization of the intent of the CRPD:

“Deaf learners have a unique need for instruction in sign language, opportunities to study sign language and deaf culture, and opportunities to participate with their peers in congregated settings that allow for linguistic and cultural development. (…) These rights are outlined in Article 24(3[c]) of the CRPD, which states: “the education of persons, and in particular children, who are blind, deaf, or deafblind, is delivered in the most appropriate languages and modes and means of communication for the individual, and in environments which maximize academic and social development.” (…) Moreover, Article 24(4) calls for States Parties to “take appropriate measures to employ teachers, including teachers with disabilities, who are qualified in sign language.” This means that the right of Deaf learners to have Deaf teachers is supported by the CRPD.

Regardless of the education model followed, WFD deems it “essential that deaf teachers enjoy an equal role with Hearing teachers and that all teachers have near-native sign language fluency.”

By “qualified in sign language,” WFD explains that teachers of Deaf children need “near-native levels of proficiency” in a sign language.

The WFD Position Paper on Inclusive Education also clarifies that providing sign language interpreters in regular schools “does not replace direct instruction in sign language or a fully accessible sign language environment. Provision of an interpreter is not bilingual education but rather education in a majority language mediated by an interpreter.” (p.4).

Essentially, the WFD Position Paper on Inclusive Education (reinforced by the CRPD) reflects Deaf cultural knowledge that sign language and Deaf identity naturally exist in communities of Deaf people,


and that inclusive bilingual learning therefore ideally takes place in a collective situation where linguistic and cultural identity is shared.

**Box 7. Deaf Woman in Sports: “Vitalizing Deaf Sports,” Ms Elvira Ligay, Tashkent, Uzbekistan**

Deaf people from all over the world come together to compete in sporting events called “Deaflympics” which is recognized by the International Olympic Committee.\(^{106}\) Elvira Ligay has been representing Uzbekistan in athletics and volleyball since 1986. In that capacity, Elvira has participated thrice in the Deaflympic Summer Games: Rome (2001), Chinese Taipei (2009) and Sofia (2013).

![Elvira at the Deaflympic Summer Games, Rome, 2001 (fourth from right)](image)

Elvira has been teaching physical education at Tashkent Specialized Boarding School № 101 for Deaf Children for 28 years. There, she teaches Deaf students the rules of sporting codes, how to enjoy sports and how to improve their performance, nurturing future athletes.

![Elvira teaching physical education to grade 5 Deaf students](image)

In 2004, Elvira attended the JICA Training Course for Deaf Leaders in Japan. In the Course, Elvira learned about the living conditions of and welfare system for Deaf people in Japan and other countries.

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\(^{106}\) Founded in 1924 and known as the CISS (Comité International des Sports des Sourds), the International Committee of Sports for the Deaf (ICSD) is the main governing body responsible for the organization of Deaflympics and other World Deaf Championships. ICSD is now approaching the century mark of being the organization behind the building, evolving and fortifying the tradition of inviting deaf/hard of hearing elite athletes from all of the world to come together not only to compete in their respective sports, but to also develop comradeships between their countries: [https://www.deaflympics.com/](https://www.deaflympics.com/).
She also learned International Sign during the Course. Building on the knowledge and experience gained, Elvira has been working as an International Sign interpreter for Deafblind persons in Uzbekistan when they participate in competitions.

Elvira holds an executive position in the Sports Federation of the Deaf of Uzbekistan. The Sports Federation promotes sporting activities for Deaf persons by organizing sporting events, such as football, volleyball, table tennis, taekwondo and chess. Elvira believes that the challenge is to raise the status of Deaflympics so that Deaflympians receive support that is on par with that accorded to those participating in the Olympic and Paralympic Games and to ensure that the Government of Uzbekistan understands the importance of sports for Deaf persons.

Elvira training Deaf Uzbeks in tug-of-war.

In recognition of her contributions, Elvira was elected in 2021 to the Executive Board of the Asia Pacific Deaf Sports Confederation (APDSC). In her new role, Elvira is actively working on raising the profile of Deaf sports in Uzbekistan and at the Asia-Pacific level.

107 Accessed on 12 November 2021: <https://www.apdeafsports.org/20210609_001.php>. APDSC membership is composed of the following: Afghanistan; Australia; Bangladesh; China; Chinese Taipei; Fiji; Hong Kong, China; India; Indonesia; Iran (Islamic Republic of); Japan; Kazakhstan; Kyrgyzstan; Macau, China; Malaysia; Mongolia; Nepal; New Zealand; Pakistan; Philippines; Republic of Korea; Singapore; Thailand; Turkmenistan; and Uzbekistan; as also Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen.
Chapter Six: Sign Language Interpretation

Q1. How do communication and information barriers impact key areas of life for Deaf persons?

As in other parts of the world, Deaf people in the Asia-Pacific region experience barriers to information and communication in many areas of daily life. Those include education, healthcare, justice, broadcasting, social services, commerce, employment, recreation and civic events. The situation differs from country to country, as also the ways in which the barriers are addressed.

Regarding Kyrgyzstan, for example, sign language is legally recognized and protected by the law; the need for sign language interpretation is written into the law. Article 3 of the 2008 law on rights of and guarantees for persons with disabilities obliges the Government to provide sign language interpretation in areas of education and health care, in court proceedings, in the provision of State and municipal services and in other areas, with the purpose of protecting and promoting the rights of persons with disabilities. The law also obliges the Government to provide training to sign language interpreters, teachers and speech therapists and to ensure the inclusion of sign language in the media. The United Nations Special Rapporteur for Minority Issues has noted that it is the Kyrgyz Society of the Blind and Deaf that supplies the Government with sign language interpreters, including for court proceedings. Despite positive comments about the work of the Kyrgyz Society of the Blind and Deaf, its roster only has four Bishkek-based sign language interpreters and there remains a shortage of trained sign language teachers.

Furthermore, there is no Government programme in place for the provision of sign language interpretation in hospitals and other medical centres, and Deaf persons are obliged to be accompanied either by their own interpreter or by a Hearing relative who can facilitate communication with the medical personnel. It is the understanding of the Special Rapporteur that this is the case in most public services, with the exception of education and court proceedings. There is, therefore, a need for stronger government support, including adequate public funding and State involvement in the provision of sign language interpretation, and the development and implementation of training programmes for sign language interpreters. The Special Rapporteur has recommended that the Government of Kyrgyzstan provide Deaf people with additional support for employment through job creation and the award of tenders.

The Special Rapporteur has urged the Government of Kyrgyzstan to “recognize sign language as a fully-fledged language and guarantee access to public services and the use of sign languages in areas such as education and health care.” He has also recommended stronger government planning and support, including adequate public funding and State involvement, in the provision of sign language services, as well as the development and implementation of training programmes for sign language interpreters. A first national plan for the use of, and teaching in, sign language in education has been strongly urged for 2022.


109 Ibid., para. 64.

110 Ibid., para. 107.
Regarding the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities has noted the recognition of Korean sign language as an official language since 2003, the existence of an association of sign language interpreters with deaf interpreters, the possibility for deaf persons to send free text messages and the provision of sign language interpreters during investigation and trials in accordance with articles 172 and 229 of the law on criminal procedures and article 12 of the law on civil procedures. There was also an initiative under discussion to grant Deaf persons reduced fees on phone calls. At the Sci-Tech Complex, the Special Rapporteur visited the special e-reading room equipped with a virtual platform with sign language features to enable deaf persons to access information. However, she was informed that there was no captioning or sign language interpretation on the news or on any other television programme or mass media event. The Special Rapporteur has urged the Education Commission to take measures for the progressive implementation of an inclusive quality education system and to provide learners with disabilities with the support needed to access education on an equal basis with others. Such necessary support and reasonable accommodation would include sign language interpretation.\textsuperscript{111}

Sign language interpretation is an essential service to enable communication between Deaf sign language users and those who do not use sign language.

Situations in which a Deaf person might require the services of a sign language interpreter include the following, when:

- Interacting with health care personnel for a medical check-up or treatment at a health care facility;
- Making enquiries about items of interest at commercial outlets (e.g., medicines and supplements at a pharmacy);
- Interacting in diverse ways and situations with the police, other members of the justice system or civil defence personnel;
- Participating in on-site inspection of a road crash;
- Making a police report;
- Seeking or receiving legal advice;
- Giving witness testimony;
- Going to trial;
- Participating in school education / vocational training programme;
- Attending an ad hoc skill development course;
- Interviewing for a job;
- Attending a meeting or training at work;
- Attending a town hall meeting or an election rally;
- Participating in a community event (e.g., a fundraiser rally / community cleaning or tree planting);
- Participating in disaster risk reduction planning and drills;
- Participating in sports training and competitions;
- Attending an event where an important person or guest of honour delivers a speech or lecture;
- Making a phone call;
- Negotiating a bank loan;
- Leasing, renting, buying high-value assets (e.g., land, living quarters or a vehicle) and gathering information prior to making a decision;
- Discussing important matters with Hearing family members;
- Attending a family event, e.g., during celebration of a festival, a wedding or a funeral.

To make information accessible, sign language interpretation is required in the following situations, for example:

- All announcements of breaking news with national and local implications, especially important government announcements;
- TV news programmes;
- Public events, such as community festivals or commemorations;
- Debates for local, State / provincial government and parliamentary elections;
- Evacuation warnings and instructions in the event of a disaster

Recently, many countries have regularized the provision of sign language interpretation at government press conferences to communicate information updates on the status of the COVID-19 pandemic and related standard operating procedures for public health.

**Q2. Who are sign language interpreters?**

Improving information accessibility and supporting communication are indispensable elements for Deaf persons to engage fully in social participation. A person who is trained to interpret between spoken language and signed language is called a sign language interpreter.

Sign language interpreters need to be highly skilled in both a spoken and signed language. They have to demonstrate proficiency in interpreting techniques, professional ethics and experiential knowledge of working in diverse settings.

In situations where there is a lack or no interpreter training and services, family members or school teachers often act as volunteer interpreters, with varying levels of skill. Sign language courses and interpreter training courses are now increasingly available in higher education institutions, including government-sponsored training courses, and sign language interpreting has become more professionalized in societies that understand the importance of sign language.

Systems of interpreter training and service provision vary from country to country. In Japan, for example, sign language ‘aides’ are trained at the municipal level and sign language interpreters are trained at the prefectural level. Sign language interpreting qualifications are granted at both prefectural and national levels. As of November 2021, there are 3,831 sign language interpreters who have qualified at the national level, but it is not known whether all of these are working as sign language interpreters. Even where there are qualified sign language interpreters, stable job opportunities are few. Working conditions and standards remain an issue in many places, especially where interpreting services are not consistently required and state resources for this may not be readily available when required.

It is not only Hearing people who work as sign language interpreters. Deaf persons also work as interpreters in certain contexts. Trained Deaf interpreters may be included in an interpreting team to provide a more expanded interpretation for Deaf individuals who have limited education and/or gaps in their language proficiency or who, for other reasons, will benefit from communication support from a Deaf peer. Some Deaf interpreters may work on communication between their native sign language and a foreign sign language, to support Deaf migrants or other Deaf persons in an international situation. Other Deaf interpreters work with Deafblind individuals to relay communication through tactile signing which is a specialized skill.

[112](http://www.jyoubun-center.or.jp/slit/list/)
The CRPD stipulates the need for states to provide professional sign language interpreting services in Article 9 (Information Accessibility) and Article 21 (Communication).

**CRPD Article 9, Accessibility**

para 2:
States Parties shall also take appropriate measures to:
(e) Provide forms of live assistance and intermediaries, including guides, readers and professional sign language interpreters, to facilitate accessibility to buildings and other facilities open to the public;

**CRPD Article 21, Freedom of expression and opinion, and access to information**

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities can exercise the right to freedom of expression and opinion, including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas on an equal basis with others and through all forms of communication of their choice, as defined in article 2 of the present Convention, including by:

para (b) Accepting and facilitating the use of sign languages, Braille, augmentative and alternative communication, and all other accessible means, modes and formats of communication of their choice by persons with disabilities in official interactions;

Regarding sign language interpreters, the Incheon Strategy to “Make the Right Real” for Persons with Disabilities in Asia and the Pacific specifies the number of sign language interpreters as one of the indicators for tracking progress towards the achievement of “Goal 3, Enhance access to the physical environment, public transportation, knowledge, information and communication.”

**Q3. Why is it important to professionalize sign language interpreting?**

Deaf people’s participation in society is regularly facilitated by interpreters who translate between spoken and signed language. It is therefore vital that Deaf individuals and societal organizations that need to be accessible can be assured that sign language interpreters will be competent, ethical and provide service at an agreed professional standard. Professional training, assessment and the regulation of standards to work as an interpreter are key elements in achieving Deaf people’s accessibility rights under CRPD Article 9. Without the implementation of professional standards for interpreting services, there are significant risks to Deaf individuals and to public service providers from potential miscommunication or unethical conduct. Training with certification helps ensure the availability of qualified interpreters for meeting service needs. It is an incentive for attracting individuals to opt for sign language interpreting as a professional career.

The World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI) is an international membership organization that advances professionalization by developing and promoting standards for high quality training, education and assessment of sign language interpreters worldwide. WASLI views the role of sign language interpreters as workers who support the human rights of Deaf people.\(^\text{113}\)

WASLI (as of 29 November 2021) has 65 members --- i.e., professional associations of sign language interpreters --- whose existence is indicative of the status of the profession.\(^\text{114}\) There are 13 WASLI members in the ESCAP region: six in East and North-East Asia (Democratic People’s Republic of Korea; Japan; Mongolia; Republic of Korea and Taiwan, province of China); three in the Pacific Eastern Asia (Democratic People’s Republic of Korea; Japan; Mongolia; Republic of Korea and Taiwan, province of China); three in the Pacific Eastern Asia (Democratic People’s Republic of Korea; Japan; Mongolia; Republic of Korea and Taiwan, province of China); three in the Pacific

\(^{113}\) <https://wasli.org/>

\(^{114}\) <https://wasli.org/wasli-national-members/>
(Australia, Fiji and New Zealand); two in South and South-West Asia (India and Nepal); one in South-East Asia (Philippines); one in North and Central Asia (Russian Federation).

Japan is unique in having two WASLI members: Japanese Sign Language Interpreters (JASLI) and the National Research Association for Sign Language Interpretation (NRASLI). The Korean peninsula is fully represented by the Sign Language Interpreters’ Association of Korea (SLIAK) of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea and the Korean Association of Sign Language Interpreters of the Republic of Korea.

One WASLI member in the Pacific, the Sign Language Interpreters Association of New Zealand (SLIANZ), was established in 1995 to represent and advance the sign language interpreting profession in New Zealand. SLIANZ members commit to upholding the seven general principles of its Code of Ethics: Professional Conduct, Confidentiality, Competence, Accuracy, Impartiality, Clarity of Role Boundaries and Professional Development. The Association maintains formal qualification as the standard for entry to the profession, offers continuing professional development, as well as advises on working conditions for interpreters and related issues. SLIANZ provides a representative voice for New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) interpreters and a vehicle to maintain relationships with Deaf and other allied organisations. On its website, SLIANZ describes the link between the development of an interpreting profession and increasing sign language recognition and participation of Deaf people in society:

“In April 2006 the New Zealand Sign Language Act gave official recognition to NZSL, alongside Māori and English. For most of the 20th century, NZSL was stigmatised within society, leaving Deaf people reluctant to use sign language in public. The NZSL Act did not directly increase provision for interpreting, but highlighted the Deaf community’s historical exclusion from proper access to education and public life through sign language. The development of interpreting services, and of a professional identity via SLIANZ, have in turn helped raise the profile of NZSL and contributed to changing public understanding about Deaf people by enabling greater participation in public domains.”

Due to efforts under way in Indonesia, South-East Asia may expect to have a second WASLI member. The WASLI President, Christopher Stone, and Deaf Interpreter Advisor, Arūnas Bražinskas, were invited by the Indonesian Association of the Deaf to support the establishment of a national interpreter association. The meeting was attended by Deaf and Hearing representatives of the NAD, the national interpreting agency, and senior interpreting professionals.

WASLI also works at the regional level to foster information sharing and collaboration among its members, to achieve mutual goals. Its goals include establishing interpreter training and accreditation, as well as developing national associations and collaborative relationships with national Deaf organizations. For example, in June 2021, an Asia-Pacific WASLI forum involved 60 participants from 13 countries and territory (China; Hong Kong, China; India; Indonesia; Japan; Malaysia; Nepal; Philippines; Republic of Korea; Singapore; Sri Lanka; Thailand; Viet Nam). The forum and other regional communications addressed issues such as training curricula, code of ethics, establishing a registration system, setting up a national association, and developing leadership in the interpreting profession.

115 <https://slianz.org.nz/>


117 <https://slianz.org.nz/about-slianz/>

profession. Such ‘bottom-up’ efforts at local, regional and international levels make important contributions to improving Deaf communities’ practical rights to quality interpreting services.

WASLI support for sign language development in the ESCAP region includes the following: WASLI has embarked on discussions with sign language interpreters in Uzbekistan regarding online interpreting training, as well as sign language interpreting issues in vocational training and professional colleges. Following long negotiations, a WASLI letter of support for Georgian Sign Language has been sent to the Georgian Union of the Deaf including the appeal to the WFD and the European Union of the Deaf. WASLI has set up a working group in the Pacific to establish interpreter training. Among the members are the President of WFD Oceania and a representative of the Fiji Association of the Deaf.

WASLI and WFD have signed a memorandum of understanding. Both have jointly issued the WFD-WASLI International Sign Accreditation Handbook which aims to introduce readers to the WFD-WASLI International Sign Interpreter Accreditation and its implementation and monitoring process. The WFD 70th anniversary webinar series highlighted the need for collaboration between Deaf associations, Interpreters associations, and other stakeholders, to ensure appropriate interpreter training, service provision and legal entitlements. WASLI Asia Region has conducted an event on collaboration and cooperation between National Deaf Associations and Interpreter associations. Both the Presidents of the WFD and WASLI have joined the WFD Regional Secretariat Asia and the WASLI Regional Representative (RR) and Regional Deaf Interpreter Advisor (RDIA) to discuss interpreting and collaboration in the region. This enabled them to gather some demographic information from the representatives present to ascertain an idea of the number of deaf people, the numbers of interpreters overall, and the number of deaf interpreters working at the country/territory level.

Q4. Who pay sign language interpreting?
Demand for sign language interpreters is increasing due to the expansion of rights for Deaf people to participate in society. However, in many cases, the allocation of budgetary and other resources to provide this service has not been sufficiently planned for.

The actual cost of sign language interpreting varies by country, subregion and by the type of context (e.g., healthcare, conference and legal interpreting may involve different rates of remuneration).

There are various practices and approaches to funding interpreting. State parties that have ratified the CRPD have a responsibility to provide resourcing and infrastructure to meet accessibility commitments,


120 Ibid., p. 20.

121 Ibid., p. 2.

122 Ibid., p.17.


125 Ibid., p. 4.
which includes provision of (beyond the ‘right to’) professional sign language interpreting. From the viewpoint of equalizing opportunities for Deaf persons to participate in society, government or companies should bear the cost of sign language interpretation rather than Deaf individuals or charitable organizations. In healthcare, for example, a government could contract sign language interpreters to attend consultations in public health facilities to ensure that Deaf persons receive, with clear communication, medical advice and treatment. Arrangements for the booking and payment of interpreters in ‘core’ services (such as health, justice, welfare, education and employment) will depend on each country’s scale of population and distribution of Deaf people, existing public funding systems, the specific provisions of laws and policies that regulate rights to services in the domains where interpreting is required. Most countries have mixed models of paying for interpreting – for example, sign language interpreters working in schools, courts, or in Deaf individual’s workplaces are likely to be contracted and remunerated in different ways.

National and regional governments are encouraged to develop systems that link the training, certification, employment arrangements and continuing education of sign language interpreters.

Q5: What is the difference between remote interpreting and telephone relay service?
Depending on the situation in which the Deaf person requires access, sign language interpretation can be provided face-to-face or remotely. For example, when a Deaf person goes to the hospital for a medical examination, it is usually best to have an interpreter present in the room. However, if an onsite interpreter is not available due to insufficient notice or other reasons, an option is to tap the services of a remote interpreter using a video phone. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the physical presence of onsite interpreters has been restricted, as part of general measures for everyone to reduce infection risk.126

Consequently, the demand for remote interpretation is increasing, creating a need to improve video communication systems and adapt interpreting techniques. It is also necessary to raise awareness of how to work with interpreters in this evolving situation.

Apart from remote interpretation, many countries provide telephone relay services. This is a service in which the operator (a trained interpreter) relays the conversation when a Deaf person calls a Hearing person or a Hearing person calls a Deaf person over the phone (or online video app in the case of Deaf callers). By enabling Deaf people to make and receive phone calls, this telephone relay service is a way of achieving full participation and equality of Deaf people in the field of telecommunications.

The accuracy of automatic translation and interpretation between spoken languages is increasing due to many years of research. In contrast, research into automatic translation and interpretation between spoken and sign language languages is at a nascent stage. There are some difficult challenges in how to enable sign language to be read by a computer, how to generate computer graphics for sign language and how to achieve translation that can be understood by Deaf people with widely varying levels of literacy, knowledge and overall comprehension.

Box 8. Telephone Relay Service / Remote Interpreting in Thailand

The Thai Telecommunication Relay Service (TTRS) was launched in 2011, to enable Deaf and speech impaired individuals to make and receive relayed phone calls. The TTRS also allows Deaf people to place calls to emergency services. As well as the telephone relay service, TTRS provides remote video sign language interpreting for situations in which Deaf persons and Hearing persons who are in the same place need to communicate with one another without an interpreter onsite. Thirty-nine operators who are fluent in Thai spoken language and Thai Sign Language are employed to interpret or relay these conversations. Their photographs and names are published on the website.

TTRS offers 10 services to meet diverse user needs. The services are available on internet-connected computers, smart phones and public terminals. The main users are people with hearing or speech impairment. There is no registration or call charges and the total number of calls made in 2020 was 282,551, rising to 310,962 in 2021 (as of 19 November).

TTRS was set up under the Office of the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission (NBTC) with the following main objectives, to:

1. Guarantee equal telecommunication access for people with hearing or speech impaired by providing continuous services;
2. Provide people with impaired hearing or speech more channels to communicate with others in society through the use of technology;
3. Enable Hearing or speech-impaired groups to access public and private services independently and efficiently.

To achieve the above objectives, the Office of the NBTC, the Universal Foundation for Persons with Disabilities and the National Science and Technology Development Agency (NSTDA) work together.

127 [https://www.ttrs.or.th/]

128 There are 180 'KIOSKs' throughout Thailand whose locations are listed on the TTRS website.
to manage the TTRS. In addition to government officials, the Steering Committee includes representatives from disability organizations, including representatives of the Thai Association of the Deaf and the Thai Association of Sign Language Interpreters.

Q6. Is sign language interpretation unnecessary when there is captioning for information, education and entertainment programmes in audio-visual format?

Many Deaf communities express a preference for sign language interpretation rather than subtitles or captions on television programmes, especially news programmes. There are also Deaf persons who prefer to concurrently use both sign language interpretation and captioning, especially in training situations when new concepts and explanations have to be grasped that might be unfamiliar for the sign language interpreters and the Deaf persons.

Under “Goal 3 Enhance access to the physical environment, public transportation, knowledge, information and communication” of the Incheon Strategy adopted in 2012:

“Target 3.C Enhance the accessibility and usability of information and communications services”

Indicator 3.3: Proportion of daily captioning and sign language interpretation of public television news programmes;

In follow up to the Incheon Strategy, ESCAP issued in 2019 “Disability at a Glance 2019 Investing in Accessibility in Asia and the Pacific.” With regard to Indicator 3.3:

“A notable finding identified from the progress reported on Indicator 3.3 on accessible news programming is that captioning accounts for 82 per cent of total accessible news time, while sign language interpretation is used less frequently (see Figure 5.E). This could be due to a false perception that provision of real-time captioning is sufficient with regard to accessibility provisions, particularly as sign language interpretation is costlier. In fact, for both rights-based and practical reasons, it is important for broadcasting companies and other relevant entities to provide both of these services.”

The rights-based reasons for providing interpreting are that Deaf persons have the right to receive mass media services in subtitles or captions or in sign language, as stated in the CRPD. Written text in captioning is not equally accessible by all Deaf individuals, as literacy outcomes for Deaf populations tend to be below the general average, due to barriers in education.

**CRPD Article 21, Freedom of expression and opinion, and access to information**

Para (d) Encouraging the mass media, including providers of information through the Internet, to make their services accessible to persons with disabilities;

A good practice example of an accessible national news programme is "Sign Language News" provided by NHK, Nippon Hosō Kyōkai (Japan Broadcasting Corporation). In this programme, Deaf hosts present news summaries in sign language and Japanese subtitles are added. In addition, the video clips are uploaded to the Internet and can be viewed for five days after they were originally aired.131

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131 [https://www.nhk.or.jp/shuwa/](https://www.nhk.or.jp/shuwa/)
Still image from the video clip on NHK's Sign Language News website (as of 26 November 2021)

There are also examples elsewhere of Deaf initiatives to broadcast news programmes in sign language online.¹³²

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many Governments at central, State/provincial and local levels have assigned sign language interpreters to press conferences. It is a good practice to have both a sign language interpreter and captioning when special announcements and press conferences are broadcast on television and posted online. National Deaf organizations or Deaf organizations focusing on media matters have played an important role in recording and disseminating signed translations of public health information to keep Deaf communities informed.

Ms Juniati Effendi was born deaf and attended a boarding school for Deaf children from the age of four where she first learned sign language. From the age of 12, she attended secondary school with Hearing students. This was highly exceptional, given the observation that very few pupils with special needs attend regular school. Based on her university entrance exam results, she was accepted for enrollment in the dentistry course at Universitas Prof. Dr. Moesto in Jakarta. Despite her having fully met the admission criteria that led to her being accepted in the dentistry course, the university was concerned about Ms Effendi's deafness and recommended that she opt for an alternative course in medical administration or pharmacy. This recommendation was made in the full knowledge that no disqualification clause existed in Indonesian law to prevent a Deaf person from becoming a dentist. There was no reasonable accommodation either throughout her studies: no provision was made for her to have sign language interpretation or notetaking services. She managed by using written and oral communication. Ms Effendi transcended the challenges of pursuing a university degree course under those circumstances and qualified as a dentist. However, for three years after graduation, she was denied employment because of her Deafness. In 1990, she was employed as an assistant in a dental clinic. Five years later, in 1995, Ms Effendi opened her own dental practice – in her own home in Jakarta.

Ms Effendi’s knowledge and skills as a dentist are as good as that of a Hearing dentist. She is proficient in Indonesian Sign Language which she uses to communicate with her family. The initial challenge was how to communicate with Hearing patients. Fortunately, most people in her neighbourhood community know that she is Deaf, and she communicates with them by writing and/or by the oral method (communication by voice and lip reading, as distinct from communicating in sign language).

In addition to working as a general dentistry practitioner, Ms Effendi is also active in the Indonesian Association for the Welfare of the Deaf (IWAD). IWAD now contracts more than 100 sign language interpreters, a number that has grown from just one at the time it hosted the Asia-Pacific Deaf Congress in 2004. In her advocacy for systematic strengthening of sign language interpretation in Indonesia, Ms Effendi observed that sign language interpreters who practise in Indonesia tend not to have official (Government) recognition. There is no law setting uniform standards and regulating criteria that must be met to qualify as an Indonesian Sign Language Interpreter. Ms Effendi is contributing to efforts for recognition of sign language as integral to the identity of Deaf Indonesians, to be taught in the national education system. With the goal of improving social justice for Deaf people all over Indonesia, Ms Effendi continues to work hard for IWAD.

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134 <http://moestopo.ac.id/>

Ms Juniati Effendi in her dental practice
Chapter Seven: How Do We Promote Sign Languages through Laws?

Q1. Why is it important for national governments to legally recognize sign languages?

To fully realize the human rights of Deaf citizens, it is necessary for national and local governments to legally recognize that sign languages have equal status to spoken languages. Therefore, it is important that language(s) identified in national legislation include not only spoken languages, but also signed languages of the country.

Since the 1980s, social and legal recognition of sign language users has advanced through campaigns focusing on disability rights and accessibility. At the global level, there were two unifying initiatives, namely, the United Nations Year of Disabled Persons (1981) and the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons (1983-1992). The world’s first regional decade of disabled persons that followed right after the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons were the three Asian and Pacific Decades. The third in the series is in the Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities, 2013-2022.

The Asian and Pacific Decade complements and follows up on the CRPD which entered into force on 3 May 2008. The CRPD specifies that state parties are responsible for enabling Deaf people to acquire and use sign language in society, and to maintain Deaf culture.

International and national Deaf organizations have also lobbied persistently to strengthen social participation through national sign language laws. The peak international body, the World Federation for the Deaf, “considers the lack of meaningful sign language legislation on the national level a grave violation of deaf peoples’ fundamental rights.”

The Japanese Federation of the Deaf, as an example of national association of Deaf people, advocates for sign language rights as follows:\(^ {137}\)

- The right to **acquire** a sign language
- The right to **learn** in a sign language
- The right to **study** a sign language
- The right to **use** a sign language
- The right to **protect** the sign language

The thrust of national sign language laws differ.\(^ {138}\) A common thrust area, for example, is to uphold and protect the following rights:

**The right to acquire a sign language**

- Following diagnosis of deafness in children, medical institutions, in collaboration with deaf education institutions, should provide parents with information about the acquisition of a sign language, along with information about cochlear implants.

\(^ {136}\) [https://wfdeaf.org/news/the-legal-recognition-of-national-sign-languages/]

\(^ {137}\) [https://www.jfd.or.jp/en/2020/03/13/pid1818]

- Education systems should provide environments in which deaf infants and children can acquire a sign language, with support for their families to learn sign language.

**The right to learn in a sign language**

- There is a requirement for teachers and other education personnel working with Deaf students to be fluent in sign language, and to provide educational environments in which Deaf students can learn curriculum subjects through sign language.

**The right to study a sign language**

- Develop a curriculum through which Deaf and Hearing students can learn a sign language, in parallel with the study of spoken languages in schools.

**The right to use a sign language**

- Sign language interpreting and translation services should be provided to enable Deaf people who use sign language to access and participate in all aspects of society.

**The right to protect a sign language**

- Planning and resources are required to properly support linguistic description and documentation of signed languages and their use by Deaf communities.

To be effective, sign language legislation must reflect meaningful consultations with those who will benefit from the law and those who will have to implement it. Hence, the consultations will have to engage Deaf communities and those who work closely with Deaf persons. Adequate budgetary allocations and monitoring mechanisms would be needed, to support its practical implementation.

Q2. **What has the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD Committee) recommended to national governments regarding sign language in the Asian and Pacific region?**

The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD Committee) provides feedback to States Parties (Governments that have already ratified the CRPD) via two types of document. One is concluding observations to a specific State Party responding to that country’s report on the implementation of the CRPD. The other is General Comments on specific themes; thus far seven have been issued. The CRPD Committee has issued seven General Comments: No. 1 on equal recognition before the law; No. 2 on accessibility; No. 5 on inclusive education; No. 6 on equality and non-discrimination; and No. 7 on the participation of persons with disabilities, including children with disabilities, through their representative organizations.
Major concerns expressed by these reports regarding sign languages are the lack of legal recognition of sign languages, the lack of provision of sign language interpretation in all aspects of lives of persons who need such services, lack of provision of education in sign languages, official recognition of the sign languages of ethnic minorities in a given state.

The CRPD Committee’s recommendations on sign languages concern the following:

1. Recognition of sign languages by law and support for Deaf culture.
2. Ensuring provision of sign languages in the education of Deaf people.
3. Ensuring provision of sign language interpretation in health care, entertainment and culture, court rooms and police stations, on TV, as also on information related to recruiting processes and the workplace, and social protection.
4. Implement measures to increase the number of qualified or certified sign language interpreters, including through allocation of public resources to provide training and development of sign language interpreters.
5. Translation of the CRPD into sign languages.

Parallel (or shadow) reports by civil society organizations support the above points; in addition, they also highlight specific issues that include the following:

1. False charges against Deaf people owing to the fact that they did not understand spoken language-based communication, and that no sign language interpretation was provided.
2. A need for professionalization of sign language interpreters
3. The lack of or insufficient provision of sign languages in situations of risk, including emergency preparedness, parliamentary sessions, election campaigns and related broadcast programmes.
4. Use of sign languages in schools is not mandated.
5. The costs of sign language interpretation to file a lawsuit are borne by Deaf people. So, many deaf people feel inhibited from filing lawsuits.

Q3. What is the value of promoting sign languages in the framework of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?

It is important, practical and effective to promote the use of sign languages for the following three major reasons:

1. The SDGs constitute the leading development agenda of the United Nations Member States, along with a wider group of stakeholders. Unlike the CRPD which is a human rights treaty that requires a Government to ratify to implement, the SDGs do not require prior government ratification for its implementation. Therefore, all governments are immediate stakeholders. In addition, the private sector, civil society organizations, academic institutions have been encouraged to implement the SDGs. Therefore, promotion of sign languages in the SDGs framework can potentially involve wider stakeholders to support the cause;
2. The SDGs, unlike the predecessor MDGs, are disability-inclusive to a certain extent.

The SDGs constitute 17 Goals, 169 corresponding targets and 231 indicators. While the SDGs do not contain a specific goal on disability-inclusion, there are 11 direct references to persons with disabilities (as detailed in the box below).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title of location of references in the SDGs</th>
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<th>Actual references</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DECLARATION</td>
<td>1. Human Rights (Paragraph 19)</td>
<td>19. We reaffirm the importance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as other international instruments relating to human rights and international law. We emphasize the responsibilities of all States, in conformity with the Charter of the United Nations, to respect, protect and promote human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, without distinction of any kind as to race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, disability or other status.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. Vulnerable Groups (Paragraph 23)</td>
<td>23. People who are vulnerable must be empowered. Those whose needs are reflected in the Agenda include all children, youth, persons with disabilities (of whom more than 80 per cent live in poverty), people living with HIV/AIDS, older persons, indigenous peoples, refugees and internally displaced persons and migrants. We resolve to take further effective measures and actions, in conformity with international law, to remove obstacles and constraints, strengthen support and meet the special needs of people living in areas affected by complex humanitarian emergencies and in areas affected by terrorism.</td>
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<td>3. Education (Paragraph 25)</td>
<td>25. We commit to providing inclusive and equitable quality education at all levels – early childhood, primary, secondary, tertiary, technical and vocational training. All people, irrespective of sex, age, race or ethnicity, and persons with disabilities, migrants, indigenous peoples, children and youth, especially those in vulnerable situations, should have access to life-long learning opportunities that help them to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to exploit opportunities and to participate fully in society. We will strive to provide children and youth with a nurturing environment for the full realization of</td>
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<td>their rights and capabilities, helping our countries to reap the demographic dividend, including through safe schools and cohesive communities and families.</td>
<td>1.3.1 Proportion of population covered by social protection floors/systems, by sex, distinguishing children, unemployed persons, older persons, <strong>persons with disabilities</strong>, pregnant women, newborns, work-injury victims and the poor and the vulnerable.</td>
<td>Goal 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere</td>
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<td>4.5.1 Parity indices (female/male, rural/urban, bottom/top wealth quintile, and others such as <strong>disability status</strong>, indigenous peoples and conflict-affected, as data become available) for all education indicators on this list that can be disaggregated.</td>
<td>4.a.1. Proportion of schools with access to: (a) electricity; (b) the Internet for pedagogical purposes; (c) computers for pedagogical purposes; (d) adapted infrastructure and materials for <strong>students with disabilities</strong>; (e) basic drinking water; (f) single sex basic sanitation facilities; and g) basic handwashing facilities (as per the WASH indicator definitions).</td>
<td>Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all</td>
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<td>8.5.1 Average hourly earnings of employees, by sex, age, occupation, and <strong>persons with disabilities</strong>.</td>
<td>8.5.2 Unemployment rate, by sex, age, and <strong>persons with disabilities</strong>.</td>
<td>Goal 8: Promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all</td>
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<td>10.2.1 Proportion of people living below 50 per cent of median income, by sex, age, and <strong>persons with disabilities</strong>.</td>
<td>11.2.1 Proportion of population that has convenient access to public transport,</td>
<td>Goal 10: Reducing inequalities</td>
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<td>Goal 11: Inclusive cities</td>
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| 11.7.1 Average share of the built-up area of cities that is open space for public use for all, by sex, age, and persons with disabilities.  
11.7.2 Proportion of persons victim of physical or sexual harassment, by sex, age, disability status and place of occurrence, in the previous 12 months. | Proportions of positions in national and local institutions, including (a) the legislatures; (b) the public service; and (c) the judiciary, compared to national distributions, by sex, age, persons with disabilities and population groups.  
16.7.2 Proportion of population who believe decision making is inclusive and responsive, by sex, age, disability, and population group. |  |
| Goal 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels |  |
| Goal 17: Means of implementation, data | Sustainable Development Goal indicators should be disaggregated, where relevant, by income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability and geographic location, or other characteristics, in accordance with the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics |  |
| FOLLOW-UP AND REVIEW Data disaggregation | FOLLOW-UP AND REVIEW Data disaggregation | 74. Follow-up and review processes at all levels will be guided by the following principles:  
(g) They will be rigorous and based on evidence, informed by country-led evaluations and data which is high-quality, accessible, timely, reliable and disaggregated by income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migration status, disability and geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts. |  |

3. Organizations of persons with disabilities, including the World Federation of the Deaf, have been one of the major stakeholders in mainstreaming disability into the SDGs during its drafting and after its adoption for implementation. Therefore, SDGs are yet another familiar global tools for Deaf community to advocate their causes.
Q4. What are key elements of laws and programmes to promote Sign Languages?
(The answer: a table that names countries with specific key elements of legal recognition of
sign language; a reference to the WFD Toolkit due to be launched this year.)

Q5. What are noteworthy examples of legislation in the Asia-Pacific region?
Information on laws / regulations of the 11 ESCAP member States that have legalized Sign
Language that have laws/regulations recognizing sign language – for example:

Mongolia

New Zealand: most noteworthy example.

Philippines.

Republic of Korea

Box 10. Deaf Man in Family Business: Managing a Family Pharmacy, Serving Community
Needs for Medicines, Mr Mohamed Zahir Mohamed Amjeth, Matara, Sri Lanka

Mohamed Zahir Mohamed Amjeth was born in Matara, the son of a pharmacy owner. At the age of 3,
Amjeth lost his hearing as a side-effect of a vaccination. Amjeth attended the Ceylon School for the
Deaf and Blind, Ratmalana, a suburb in Colombo District, Western Province, Sri Lanka. Established in
1912, this is the oldest educational institution for deaf and blind children in Sri Lanka. Like most Deaf
peers attending the School, Amjeth joined as a full-time residential student. Amjeth lived in a boarding
house and remembers that while some of the teachers could sign, others only used spoken language,
mainly Sinhala.

During periods of extended school holidays, Amjeth would return to his parents’ home in Matara,
Southern Province, on the southern tip of Sri Lanka. From the age of 10, his father instilled in him a
knowledge of medicines. As soon as he graduated from school at the age of 16, he started working with
his father in the pharmacy. Although Amjeth is not a certified pharmacist himself, he uses the
knowledge he gained from his father and his self-taught English to help customers at the pharmacy
counter.
Amjeth communicates with his customers mainly through writing in Sinhala or English.

The people of Matara accept Amjeth's deafness and trust his knowledge of medicines. Amjeth has a sense of pride in his work. He sees himself as a competent Deaf person who can understand the usual symptoms that most customers complain of and for which he is able to recommend appropriate medicines. Amjeth communicates with his Hearing family through Sri Lankan Sign Language. He hopes that his own children will take over the pharmacy in the future.

In 2004, Amjeth's pharmacy was completely destroyed by the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami. Amjeth engaged with a network of pharmacies across Sri Lanka, especially those in Colombo, and secured the help needed for rebuilding the family pharmacy. Today, Amjeth manages the pharmacy that is an important source of medicines for the people of Matara, a major commercial hub and the administrative capital and largest city of Matara District.
Conclusion
Annex: Resources

- CRPD
- SDGs
- Dictionaries of sign languages
- Sign language research
- Deaf Media
- WASLI
- WFD
References