



WORLD FEDERATION OF THE DEAF



3 July 2015

Submission to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights for study on the rights of persons with disabilities on situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies

The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD), the International Deaf Emergency (IDE) and the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI) are pleased to have an opportunity to provide information in the OHCHR upcoming study on the rights of persons with disabilities on situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies. In this submission, the WFD, IDE and WASLI share concerns about deaf people in situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies and documents on how to address needs and rights of deaf people in such situations.

The WFD and IDE have a [memorandum of understanding](#) to work together to support local deaf people when natural disaster occur. The WFD and WASLI have a [cooperation agreement](#) to improve the availability and quality of professional sign language interpretation in all countries to enhance human rights of deaf people through the provision of interpreter service including emergency situations.

Accessibility covers a broad range of situations. Often, the emergency planning or policy for people who are deaf and hard of hearing who need to gain access to aural-based information is overlooked or is not written because deaf people do not experience difficulties in physical accessibility. No provision in providing information through sign language or through any visual non-aural based format constitutes barrier for deaf people. For instance, in emergency situations information is often provided via radio, which is inaccessible for deaf people. The high rate of emergency services don't have knowledge on basic sign language to interact with deaf and deaf-blind people. According to the WFD, the vast majority of deaf people are illiterate in developing countries and therefore have difficulties in communicating with emergency services even with paper and pen. The most effective means using public information would be the provision of professional sign language interpretation in television to inform the whole population. However, the availability and quality of sign language interpreter training and service and television broadcasting network vary greatly between countries. This has affects the possibility to provide professional sign language interpretation in situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies.¹ Persons with disabilities are even four times in higher risk of dying in natural disaster compared to people without disabilities.² Accessibility to information for deaf people in situation of risk and emergency could save lives.³ For an effective and accurate inclusive humanitarian and emergency response, workers in this field should know at least some basic sign language, which can benefit the whole population including deaf people. The equipment of emergency services should be visual. In situations with low visibility due to smoke or smog, all people would benefit from a flashing light that is primarily targeted for deaf people.

Based on IDE's experience in Haiti and Nepal, there has been no cooperation between humanitarian and emergency agencies with national and local organisations of persons with disabilities (DPOs). Especially deaf people suffer from the lack of cooperation in humanitarian aids coordination after the earthquakes because they were not included as part of the emergency preparedness including training, drills and pre-emergency materials. Through intervention, the IDE has been able to coordinate with national and local DPOs to ensure that the services were provided to the deaf after the earthquake as part of the inclusive emergency response. Examples of such practises include erecting solar power panels benefitting deaf people who have then been

¹ Haualand & Allen: Deaf People and Human Rights. 2009. <http://www.wfdeaf.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/Deaf-People-and-Human-Rights-Report.pdf> pages 10, 36 and 45.

² <http://www.unescap.org/events/asia-pacific-meeting-disability-inclusive-disaster-risk-reduction-changing-mindsets-through>

³ CRPD/C/GC/2 paragraph 36.

able to communicate in sign language at night time or in dark, the provision of electricity through generators to make it possible for deaf people to charge mobile phones and computers to contact their families and friends and the provision of batteries for hearing aids. Having papers and pens have been useful for literate deaf people to communicate with civil workers in writing. Signal flashes have been used to notify deaf people that important announcements were being made and available in the refugee camps. The IDE has identified particular emergency shelters at the regional level where to send a team of sign language interpreters or volunteers who are fluent in sign language, and to set up an electrical hub for people who rely on cochlear implants, hearing aids, or smartphones for their communication accessibility, to create visual communication such as symbols in various locations and to provide a few white boards to be used for information exchange. Such regional shelters targeted for deaf and hard of hearing people with the provision of aforementioned services have made them feel assured that they are safe. The IDE has also involved local and regional organisations of the deaf to empower them. The involvement and participation of deaf people in activities have been important. They can serve in any role and assume responsibilities or utilise their skills. Currently, the IDE is supervising a project funded by the Disability Rights Funds in Haiti with the aim of integrating deaf people in the society in connection with the CRPD. One of objectives of the project is disaster risk reduction training for organisations of the deaf. Regular meetings at the local and national levels are being held to advocate for inclusion of deaf people in the plans and programs of action in the event of natural disaster.

At the level of developing laws, policies and strategies the following factors should be considered important to promote the participation of persons with disabilities:

- Ensuring that new and existing hospitals and health facilities are safe, operational and accessible for persons with disabilities as per Article 11 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).
- Training and empowering communities, private and public sectors, and DPOs to take charge of setting up disaster preparedness to become less dependent on governmental authorities during and after disasters.
- Including all disability-specific workers and volunteers in the emergency structures and infrastructures in emergency response, recovery and reconstruction.
- Capacity building of authorities, communities, DPOs and volunteers through training and sharing experience. Ensuring equal access to and usage of information, training and formal and informal education on disaster risk reduction for all disability-specific groups to enhance their participation in all processes related to disaster risk reduction.
- Policies and practises for disaster risk management should be based on an understanding of risk in all dimensions of vulnerability, capacity, accessibility, needs and exposure of persons with disabilities.
- Promoting collaboration at trans-boundary levels to enable policies and planning for the implementation of accessibility-based approaches with regard to shared resources, such as within a river basin along the coastline, to help disaster reduction and build resilience.
- Allocating resources to all levels of administration for the development and implementation of disaster risk reduction policies, plans, laws and regulations in all relevant sectors after consulting with key stakeholders including DPOs.
- Encouraging the revision of existing or the development of new building codes, universal design, accessibility standards, rehabilitation and reconstruction.
- Developing and strengthening the implementation of information technology for communication purposes through internet, Wi-Fi connection and any other available and feasible capabilities. Ensuring that connectivity is functioning in a timely manner and that the delivery of mass alerts or early warnings reach their devices in advance that would save lives.
- Promoting further development of standards, codes, accessibility strategies and other guidance instruments to support emergency preparedness and responsiveness.
- Developing and devising practical guidance and complication of good practices – both with emphasis on accessibility provisions for disability-specific groups to support planning, investments, and policy development and decision-making.
- Promoting and improving dialogue and cooperation among scientific communities including social, health, economic, cultural and environmental science practitioners, businesses, DPOs and policy makers.
- Promoting the implementation and incorporation of disaster risk education in curricula at all levels of education and informal education systems, as well as in professional education, both through aural and visual forms. Visual forms include sign languages and symbols.

- Promoting national strategies to strengthen public education on best practices and services for persons with disabilities, and awareness through campaigns. Deaf people would benefit from sign language, open captioning and visual aids.
- Stimulating the development of quality and accessibility standards and mechanisms for disaster risk management with the participation of private and public sectors, DPOs, professional associations and scientific organisations.
- Integrating accessibility and sharing management with persons with disabilities in national disaster risk reduction and development strategies in order to augment resilience.

The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD Committee) has advised governments to ensure access to all information including aural-based messages for deaf people in emergency situations. Most recently, the CRPD Committee requested governments of the Cook Islands, the Czech Republic, the Dominican Republic, Germany and Mongolia to provide sign language interpretation in emergency situations and include deaf people's needs such as access to information by providing sign language as part of the disaster risk management and national plans concerning situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies.⁴ This development reflects the lack of consultation with deaf community and including information in sign language. However, national governments rarely have expertise on deaf and sign language issues. For this reason the WFD and the WASLI adopted [guidelines on Communication during natural disasters and other mass emergencies for deaf people who use signed language](#) in January 2015. The document includes several recommendations addressed to national governments and service providers on how to improve and ensure access to communication and information for deaf people. Our organisations would like to highlight the importance of consulting with deaf people, through national associations of the deaf, when preparing and planning emergency protocols and other programs concerning situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies.

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About the World Federation of the Deaf

The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) is an international non-governmental organisation representing and promoting approximately 70 million deaf people's human rights worldwide. The WFD is a federation of 134 nations; its mission is to promote the human rights of deaf people and full, quality and equal access to all spheres of life, including self-determination, sign language, education, employment and community life. WFD has a consultative status in the United Nations and is a member of International Disability Alliance (IDA). (www.wfdeaf.org) Email: info@wfdeaf.org

About the International Deaf Emergency

The International Deaf Emergency (IDE), a 501(c)(3) USA based nonprofit organization established in 2010, is an independent, neutral organization committed to providing humanitarian protection and assistance for Deaf and Hard of Hearing people in an event of disasters and to ensure full communication access is provided at all times. Past activities involved providing humanitarian assistance to Deaf Communities in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake; representing on behalf of the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) at the third United Nations World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in Sendai, Japan, and providing recovery assistance with Deaf Communities in Nepal after the recent earthquakes. IDE is a current International Member of the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD). (www.ideafe.org)

About the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters

The World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI) is an international non-governmental organization representing sign language interpreters. Established in 2005, WASLI promotes the development of interpreting globally, by helping countries to create national interpreter associations and to lobby for effective training and standards of practice. Our members come from 40 nations. By promoting the professionalization of sign language interpreting, deaf people's human rights can be supported through the provision of qualified and ethical interpreting services. WASLI collaborates closely with the World Federation of the Deaf in order to advance issues of importance for both associations. (<http://wasli.org/>)

⁴ CRPD/C/COK/CO/1 paragraph 22, CRPD/C/CZE/CO/1 paragraph 20, CRPD/C/DOM/CO/1 paragraph 18, CRPD/C/DEU/CO/1 paragraph 24 and CRPD/C/MNG/CO/1 paragraph 20.