# **The WFD Human Rights Project: Building Human Rights Capacity – Including the Voice of people who are Deaf in Parallel Reports**

The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) carried out a project 2013-2017, which is involving advocacy and training aimed at ensuring that the voice of deaf people, which are often excluded, is effectively represented in parallel reports submitted in relation to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). The parallel report is seen as a necessary complement to the State Party report because only then the perspectives of the civil society, on the actual implementation of the CRPD, are considered. In total eight countries from the Global South have participated in the project’s activities.

The project facilitated human rights advances for deaf people worldwide, by: strengthening the capacity of national associations of the deaf. This has been achieved through the delivery of training in eight countries and the provision of tools to the respective participants leading to the outcome that the participants will then be equipped to foster cooperative relationship with their local national coalitions of organizations of persons with disabilities (DPOs). The partnership enabled them to contribute and provide a unifying consultative role in preparing a parallel report to the UN on the progress of implementation of the CRPD.

# **The problems being addressed in the project**

While there are five articles in the CRPD enshrining sign language rights, the point of view of the deaf and sign language is often excluded in the implementation and monitoring process of these articles in the country. The WFD conducted a wide fact finding survey that led to the publication of the Deaf people and human rights report in 2009. In trainings carried out in 2013-2016 the WFD has seen that the human rights situation has not significantly improved since 2009 despite the ratification of the CRPD.National associations of the deaf are often excluded from disability movements due to e.g. lack of information in sign language, poor educational background or lack of professional sign language interpretation. Under such circumstances the associations need to be trained and supported to become actively involved in the CRPD parallel reporting process with other national organisations of persons with disabilities. Unless the steps are taken, the exclusion will pose grave and systematic violation of the CRPD.

Presently, deaf people in most developing and developed countries have limited or no access to quality barrier-free education that are culturally and linguistically considered. Instead, there is a strong focus on “oral” methods emphasizing heavily on speech and lipreading at the expense of sign language resulting in illiteracy and systemic exclusion. This gives rise to meagre educational results leading to poor economic, health and social outcomes for deaf people and their families.

Respect for deaf people and sign language is important if deaf people are to have a voice in decision-making about their lives. Government and related authorities rarely have contact with deaf people themselves. Moreover, the “experts” who influence public policy often perpetuate damaging prejudices against sign language and deaf people. Only when there is public acceptance of sign language and of deaf people regarded as positive manifestations of human diversity, can deaf people start to participate in family, community and civic life as equal citizens.

Sign language interpreting is a fundamental means by which deaf people can gain access to education and employment opportunities, as well as medical, legal and social services. However, sign language interpreting training and accreditation is non-existent in many developing countries. Consequently, deaf people often lack access to basic services and opportunities.

The project’s activities included training to leaders and activists of eight national associations of the deaf and strengthening WFD’s international advocacy work to address aforementioned issues. Requesting representatives of national associations of the deaf to participate in cross-disability workshops is considered ineffective if they are not trained beforehand to acquire knowledge through sign language on concepts such as human rights, the CRPD and its parallel reporting process. Thus, our project aimed to equip participants to foster cooperative relationship between national associations of the deaf with other national organisations of persons with disabilities. This partnership enabled them to provide a unifying consultative role to issues relating to disabilities.

# **Impact of the project**

By providing a full sign language and inclusive training environment for the deaf participants, the trainings have led to the remarkable results that the deaf issues are more visible in the eight countries’ parallel reports through the deaf participants’ better understanding of their rights as enshrined in the CRPD and higher degree of participation in the parallel reporting process together with the other DPOs. Furthermore, the Government in one of the countries has now established an advisory forum with five of the trained participants to advise the government on deaf issues and how to appropriately solve them, which unfortunately is a rare incident of fulfilling the objectives as set in the CRPD Article 4.3. Some national associations of the deaf have become empowered from capacity building trainings to become involved in the national monitoring of the CRPD that has led to e.g. official recognition of national sign language.