



Legal Seat -- Helsinki, Finland

WORLD FEDERATION OF THE DEAF

An International Non-Governmental Organisation in official liaison with ECOSOC, UNESCO, ILO, WHO and the Council of Europe

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24 May 2011

SUBJECT: SUPPORT FOR THE RECOGNITION OF THE ITALIAN SIGN LANGUAGE

Distinguished members of the Chamber of Deputies,

World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) is seriously concerned about the recent developments in Italy where the recognition of the Italian sign language (LIS) in legislation is encountering strong opposition from the Chamber of Deputies.

As an umbrella organisation of 131 member associations of deaf people all over the world, representing approximately 70 million deaf, WFD strongly encourages the Italian legislators to cease immediately all the measures aiming at decreasing the status of the Italian sign language. Non-recognition of LIS would have serious impact on the whole deaf community in Italy and it would reject all the principles and goals of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), ratified also by Italy on 15 May 2009.

WFD stresses the importance of the following CRPD articles: 2, 9, 21, 24 and 30 that should be taken into account when dealing with sign language legislation. In CRPD article 2 languages are defined as spoken and signed languages and other forms of non spoken languages. Article 9 on accessibility obligates states to provide sign language interpreters and article 21 on freedom of expression and opinion, and access to information includes that states need to accept and facilitate the use of sign languages in official interactions as well as recognize and promote the use of sign languages. And further article 24 on education strengthens the rights of deaf students for states need to facilitate the learning of sign language and promote the linguistic identity of the deaf community as well as ensure that deaf and deaf blind children's education is delivered in the most appropriate languages. To ensure the above mentioned rights states have to employ teachers who are qualified in sign language. And finally, article 30 states that persons with disabilities, on an equal basis with others, are entitled to recognition and support of their specific cultural and linguistic identity, including sign languages and deaf culture.

Thus, all planned legislative measures that are contradictory to the meaning and goals of the CRPD need to be stopped immediately; any practice that breaches the rights of persons with disabilities is discriminatory. Italy needs to continue to comply with its international obligations, included the respect for CRPD because the UN convention acts as international law.

Sign language researchers have stated that sign languages are natural, independent and vivid languages with their own cultural heritage and history. They can be defined in a following manner: Sign languages (alternatively signed languages) are human languages whose forms consist of sequences of movements and configurations of the hands and arms, face and upper torso. Typically sign languages are perceived through the visual mode. [...] Sign languages are visual-gestural languages, whereas

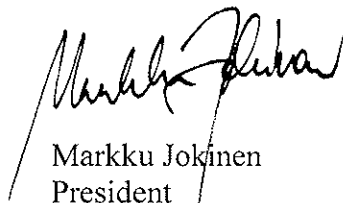
spoken languages are auditory-vocal languages. [...] Natural signed languages show all the structural properties of other human languages yet have been evolved independently of the spoken languages that surround them. (Newport & Supalla) Thereby any claim or presumption that sign languages are not languages is false (see also article 2 of CRPD).

Finally, WFD rectifies the mistaken assumption that sign languages are no longer needed with the current development where many kids get cochlear implants. Research has consistently shown that deaf children, regardless of technology, learn best in a rich language environment. It has also been proven that cochlear implant doesn't guarantee full hearing and communication for a child using it. WFD reacts strongly to this presumption that children with cochlear implants shouldn't have the opportunity to use sign language.

The CRPD states that representation of organisations of persons with disabilities is necessary when discussing matters that concern them (article 4.3). The national associations of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing and Deafblind have the best expertise and knowledge in the use of sign languages and they are representative organisations of the national signers, thus, they should not be left out from any legislative process that affects their lives. Therefore, WFD urges the Italian legislators to involve Ente Nazionale Sordi – Onlus (ENS) in the current decision-making process and to take carefully into account their comments and views. WFD supports in all ways ENS in the protection of the human and linguistic rights of Italian deaf people.

We believe that strong co-operation between the Italian legislators and ENS assures the best possible future for the Italian deaf community.

Yours sincerely,



Markku Jokinen
President
World Federation of the Deaf