



Summary of the WFD Board Meeting

Minna Katainen and Jerry Pua attended the 83rd World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) board meeting that took place a few days at the Valkea Talo (Light House) before the debut of the WFD International Conference for Human Rights. The lighthouse is the home of WFD headquarters, Finnish Association for the Deaf offices, and all services for the Deaf that you can think of.

The meeting sluggishly started with excited group chatters, long-time-no-see hugs, people arranging papers, meeting minutes, and WFD administrative secretary making sure everyone's got their own seats including the spectators. Regional Secretariats, honorary board members, ex-board members, and recently appointed regional representatives were present. The representative from the South America objected that there was not any translation in Spanish for the meeting. The fact still stands that English is the lingua franca – especially in the international arena. The representative from the Asia-Pacific region did not report to the meeting.

You should have seen the original meeting agenda. It was unbelievably long like an epic written by a Greek philosopher. Markku Jokinen, the current WFD president, waved to everyone and directed the board members to seat. The meeting agenda contents were not immediately followed after the start of the meeting. Markku reminded everyone that it was the 83rd WFD Board Meeting. Everyone clamoured in amaze. He did the roll call and was concerned about the absence of Asia-Pacific secretariat. So, he requested the ORG (ad-hoc committee within the WFD board) to re-evaluate the requirements to appoint a new replacement for region secretariat/representative.

Every board member basically had a landfill-sized pile of papers on the table ready to make their usual reports and comments. According to the agenda, Markku directed Liisa Kauppinen, the ex-WFD president, to summarize the minutes of the prior WFD Board meeting and the unfinished business to cover up. She eloquently explained. There were already several raising up in the overly-ventilated air of the conference room. The spectators were already complaining of too much air conditioning while the outside air still lingers of the morning chill. Mr. Jokinen was good at remembering who raised hand in the chronological order. It was interesting how the meeting was run because in an ordinary hearing meeting, one person could easy speak at a time. Sounds can easily blur if two people speak at the same time. However, for sign language, it was quite different for the Deaf-based board meeting because people could easily talk simultaneously while a certain person was trying to say or finish something. Markku had to inform everyone to remain silent. The WFD board meeting was supposed to last for two consecutive days. On the other hand, according to the agenda, there are so many things to cover. Every crucial business, regional reports, and such had to be reported very quickly (probably five minutes or less) not to mention additional comments, hand-raisings, and suggestions. The WFD



board consists of different people, of different levels, and of different experiences. International Sign has been used for the whole event.

Markku Jokinen still did a great job conducting the meeting. Minna and Jerry were so amazed how could they even cover up the whole meeting agenda within 2 days? The agenda included financing, budget, membership campaigns, regional reports and progresses, developing countries reports, and et cetera. The WFD board most certainly has a heavy responsibility for their own regions, notes, and progress. Mr. Jokinen temporarily left conference room to rest. Mr. Feliciano Sola Limia of Spain, the WFD vice-president, took over the meeting. His style of administering the meeting was a bit sloppy, not as smooth as Markku. But, it would still be a good experience for him to run a heavy agenda meeting.

The WFD Board meeting is crucial to keep up the progress of WFD projects all over the world. This is not an easy task. Big improvements do not occur overnight. They all work together to make the world a better place for the Deaf and Hard-of-hearing people.

International Conference of the World Federation of the Deaf: *Our Rights, Our Future* Presentations

At the International Conference of the World Federation for the Deaf (WFD), the focus was on “Our Rights, Our Future”, the human rights of Deaf people. Many notable speakers presented about the fight for human rights and the various issues involved. Many of them focused on the human right to use our native and most natural language, sign language, for communication and access to society in general.

Sign Languages

Thorsten Afflerbach of the Council of Europe and Helga Stevens of the Flemish Parliament and President of the European Union of the Deaf (EUD) focused on the recognition of sign languages in Europe and the role of politics.

Mr. Afflerbach shared information about the Council of Europe and its mission. He explained that the Council is responsible for protecting and promoting human rights, as well as promoting democratic stability and strengthening the social cohesion in Europe. It is this Council’s responsibility to ensure that people with disabilities are integrated into society and that their human rights are being met. In 1992, the Council of Europe recognized the use of regional and minority



languages, both territorial and non-territorial, through the *European Charter on Regional or Minority Languages*. Unfortunately, this document did not include any reference to sign languages.

The Council of Europe became involved in sign languages in 2001 when the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe adopted Recommendation 1492 (2001). This focused on the rights of national minorities, which included a recommendation to the Committee of Ministers to “*give the various sign languages utilized in Europe a protection similar to that afforded by the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, possibly by the means of the adoption of a recommendation to member states*” (paragraph 12. xiii).

The Council also created several recommendations relating to people with disabilities and Deaf people. They recommended that the Committee of Ministers devise a specific legal instrument on the rights of sign language users and to undertake research in regard to the protection of sign languages.

In her presentation, Ms. Stevens, President of the EUD, also focused on the importance of recognizing sign languages and explained a project that she undertook in 1996-1997. This *EUD Sign Languages Project* identified the obstacles and problems involved in recognizing sign languages and determined how to place priority of sign language recognition higher on the government agenda. This project received so much attention and paved the way for more action relating to the issue of sign language recognition.

In 1998, after intensive lobbying by the EUD and the Disability Intergroup, the European Parliament adopted a *Resolution on Sign Languages for the Deaf* to help promote the right of Deaf people to use sign language/s as their preferred languages. The European Parliament also called upon the European Commission to take extra measures to ensure that sign languages are officially recognized and protected by each member state. In 2003, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe voted to adopt Recommendation 1598 (2003) on the protection of sign languages in member states of the Council of Europe.

In the EUD, there are only five countries that have constitutional or legal recognition of sign languages. They are: Czech Republic (1988), Slovak Republic (1995), Finland (1995), Portugal (1997) and Austria (2005). The United Kingdom has recognized British Sign Language as a language in its own right since 2003.

However, an Act formally recognizing British Sign Language has yet to be introduced in parliament. Other countries have recognized their national sign language by other legal measures and some have reference to the recognition of sign languages in legislation. These areas of legislation includes broadcasting, criminal investigation, disability insurance, education, equal opportunities and so on.



Human Rights for People With Disabilities

Presenter Theresia Degener, a Professor at the University of Applied Sciences in Germany also focused on human rights. As someone with a disability, she could relate to the experience of the Deaf community and shared her personal experiences. Growing up, she experienced the trauma of visiting countless doctors who tried to force her to wear prosthetic limbs and having her feet laced up in boots so she could not “free” herself. Ms. Degener discussed how the medical model of people with disabilities started to shift to a human rights model in the 1980s. However, in 2001, Ms. Degener performed a study that shows the medical model still prevails in society today.

Focusing on the rights in education, Ms. Degener discussed how historically, people with disabilities have been denied their rights to basic education and were always segregated in institutions. People with disabilities did not receive equal education and in 1954 the United States Supreme Court declared that *separate education is inherently unequal*. Since then, there has been increasing focus on integrating people with disabilities into the mainstream by placing them in public schools with students who do not have disabilities. However, the Deaf community has distanced themselves from other disability groups and have asked for the right to segregated education that uses sign language and bilingual education.

Currently, the Disability Rights Convention is being drafted and includes many rights for education. They include:

- Right to choose inclusive and accessible education
- Right to choose special/alternative education where the general education is inadequate
- Right to choose teaching in sign language or Braille for persons with sensory disabilities (in the general school system)
- Right to a quality and inclusive education for all disabled persons
- Right to segregated education only for Deaf, Blind and Deafblind children and young students
- Right to adequate appropriate support and assistive devices (including sign language and Braille) in every education system
- Right to multilingual education for Deaf and Deafblind students



DEAF OR DEAD? OUR RIGHTS, OUR FUTURE!! STOP GENOCIDE!!

It is up to you to think about what this picture means to you.

Question:

What will the Deaf community be like in the year 2050? Will our culture and sign languages be as strong as ever? Or will doctors find a cure for the deafness gene?

The reality is that Genocide is happening here and now. How? By Linguistic Oppression of our Sign Languages and improvements in Genetic Research.

WHAT IS GENOCIDE ?

Many people think Genocide is linked to the Holocaust and the killing of Jews. This is true. There are however six different definitions of genocide in the UN International Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (E793, 1948).

The 'genocide' of the Deaf Community fits two of the six definitions.

Article II(e): '*forcibly transferring children of the group to another group*'; and

- Deaf children like other minority children are taught through the medium of a dominant language (subtractive teaching)
- It prevents profound literacy and gaining the knowledge and skills that would correspond to their innate capacities and would be needed for socio-economic mobility & democratic participation
- Over 98 % of deaf children in the world never receive education in their most fluent language, Sign Language, the language of their group

Article II(b): '*causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group*'; (emphasis added).

- Trying to force Deaf children to become oral only, to the exclusion of Sign languages and preventing them from fully developing a Sign language in formal education, deprives them of the chance of learning through this education the only type of language through which they can fully express themselves.



- Since they do not share this mother tongue with their parents, they are completely dependent on formal education to really develop it to the highest possible level.

Inclusion in education:

The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994) promoted the inclusion of disabled children in education. However it makes a very strong statement about the education of Deaf children. Article 21 of the Framework states that: "Owing to the particular communication needs of Deaf and Deaf/blind persons, their education may be more suitably provided in special schools or special classes and units in mainstream schools."

BUT! The harsh economic reality for most countries in the South, however, prevents the building of separate provision for Deaf children. A tiny minority of Deaf children are currently educated in specialist schools or informally integrated into mainstream schools. The vast majority are excluded from education of any kind. This means less children are educated in sign language.

Sourced from http://www.eenet.org.uk/deaf/meeting_sep2001.shtml

GENOCIDE OF DEAFHOOD AND PEOPLE

Hearing arguments:

- The best thing we can do for deaf children is to make them hear. Gives them better opportunities in society. Can lead 'normal' lives.
- Less money for interpreters, disabled benefit, hearing aids, paying for Deaf who have low literacy 'because they are deaf'
- If we compare the Genocide of Deaf communities i.e. Cochlear Implants to the Holocaust and what is happening in Rwanda, some can argue that genetic engineering or cochlear implants do not hurt people. It benefits them. It helps them hear.
- Deaf people do not want to have children with Downs Syndrome. Why try and stop the Downs Syndrome gene, but save the Deaf gene?

Deaf Arguments:

- Genetic engineering = UNETHICAL
- PLAYING GOD IS UNACCEPTABLE, EVEN WORSE **UNETHICAL!**
- Currently 98% of Danish children are implanted before the age of one



GENOCIDE OF SIGN LANGUAGE

Hearing arguments:

- Cochlear Implants help Deaf children assimilate well into society
- Oralism is most effective for the Deaf people to 'function' in general
- Deaf children need to be a versatile part of the whole communicative society.

Deaf arguments:

- Emotional harm (isolation, psychological problems, etc..)
- Assimilation is more harmful than a separate deaf school
- The genocide of Sign Language by Oralism: The transfer to majority language speaking group without choice. This Lack of Choice = genocide. Alternatives should exist. We have a right to choose.
- Destruction of a **culture** and **language**. No opportunity to access one's Mother Tongue
- According to the United Nations, **linguistic rights are officially accepted as part of human rights**. So it's a right to get education in sign language.
- Closure of Deaf organisations

SOLUTION ?

- Sign language recognition = may lead to accepting the Deaf community and culture. It is a powerful protocol to equalise the rights of Deaf people.
- Awareness on Deaf needs
- Re-educate all medical professionals about Human Rights and Sign Language
- Increased Sign Language Exposure in media
- Make sure we are seen as a cultural group rather, not disabled.



THE BOTTOM LINE (main points)

FRONTRUNNERS SAY: DEAF ORGANISATIONS + DEAF PEOPLE ARE NOT DOING ENOUGH TO STOP GENOCIDE!

TOO MUCH TIME IS BEING WASTED WHILE DOCTORS WORK ON FINDING A CURE FOR DEAFNESS. THIS IS A RACE... WE NEED TO EDUCATE THE DOCTORS, SO THEY CAN TAKE NEUTRAL ADVICES AND SPREAD DEAF AWARENESS TO HEARING PARENTS.

100% ACTION IS MANDATORY!