

## SECURING AND UTILISING THE SERVICES OF SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETERS FOR THE UNITED NATIONS

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Whenever planning international events, all efforts should be made to communicate with the delegates well in advance in order to arrange the most linguistically appropriate services.

These guidelines may also be applied to events which are not organised by the United Nations (UN) and where WFD representatives or deaf people needing sign language interpretation are invited as a participant or a presenter.

### LANGUAGES DEAF PEOPLE USE

Sign languages (SLs) are the preferred languages of the majority of deaf people. SLs are languages in their own right and each country has its own national SL, i.e., sign language is *not* universal. Many countries who share the same official spoken language still have different sign languages (e.g., each Spanish-speaking country has its own SL). Countries with more than one official language often have more than one sign language (e.g., Canada, Belgium, Switzerland). The Governments of many countries have either directly or indirectly recognised their national SL, and training for interpreters is available on the university level. However, in numerous countries, especially in the developing world, a corps of professional sign language interpreters does not yet exist.

International Sign (IS) is not a true language, in the sense that it does not always convey the richness of meaning that can be expressed in a full language, nor is it as efficient as a natural language. However, IS has evolved naturally over the past century to serve deaf people who have become more active in international cooperation. IS has certainly been used when there is no option of providing interpreting services in every national sign language represented at a meeting, and it has proven very effective when the participants from different countries meet in conferences where the vocabulary has become fairly conventionalised (like the Congresses of the World Federation of the Deaf and the CRPD Conference of States Parties).

Deaf people who attend UN meetings often have a working knowledge of written English, though it may be their third, fourth, or fifth language.

The choice of whether a national SL or IS should be provided for a given meeting should be decided by the deaf participants; the organiser should not to decide alone which sign language is to be made available. Deaf participants should always be asked for their language preferences: some may prefer a national SL, some IS, and some a written form such as CART (Computer Assisted Real Time) captioning services in English on the screen as a supplement to interpreting. *The great advantage of real time captioning is that all the delegates in the meeting, for many of whom English is also their third, fourth, or fifth language, will benefit from the captioning, whether they are*

hearing or deaf (as is often true, accommodations for disabled people often benefit their non-disabled colleagues).

## **SECURING INTERPRETERS**

There is a general shortage of sign language interpreters worldwide, which means that qualified interpreters are likely to be fully booked well in advance. For some events (such as conferences or meetings) at least 4 (four) weeks' notice is required; however the earlier the better.

When booking an interpreter you should provide the following details:

- Date and time of the event including start and finish times.
- Full address of where the event is to take place including directions/map.
- Contact name, telephone number and/or e-mail address of the person making the booking as well as the contact person at the event.
- The nature of the event.
- The numbers of deaf and hearing participants and their language preferences.
- Any other information that could be helpful, e.g. if there are gender preferences, if a person also has a visual impairment, or any specific needs.
- Considerations for fees and other costs (interpreters should be paid for preparation, per diem, travel time and expenses such as accommodation), invoicing and payment procedures, and travel costs to and within the country where the meeting is being held. (In some countries, interpreters or agencies might expect a “retainer”, an advanced deposit to reserve the service of an interpreter, which will be deducted from the total of the final invoice.)

In booking national SL interpreters, if that is the preference of the deaf participant, the UN approved agency/vendor for spoken language interpreters may or may not have SL interpreters in their interpreter data bank. If they don't, the national Deaf Association, national sign language interpreter association, or WASLI may be contacted for interpreters who may be experienced in international conferences. Even if the approved vendor does have SL interpreters, care must be taken that they be familiar with the jargon and environment of the UN.

In booking IS interpreters, if that is the preference of the deaf participant, it should be noted that few of the vendors will understand the qualifications necessary for an IS interpreter. It is almost always necessary to ask the advice of the Deaf person in question, WASLI, or the WFD which IS interpreters in the country or region might be skilled enough for the assignment.

The WASLI website ([www.wasli.org](http://www.wasli.org)) contains a list of countries and their associations of sign language interpreters. You can also contact the WASLI regional representative on the “WASLI Board” section of the website and they can refer you to appropriate services in the country in which the event is being held, if services are available, or the country nearest if there are no qualified interpreters available in the host country.

It should be clear beforehand if the Department ordering interpreting services can engage them as independent contractors or if they can only be paid through an approved vendor. Most IS interpreters at this level work as independent contractors.

The quality of the interpreting service can be improved by providing the interpreters with adequate preparation. The interpreter should be provided with the following:

- Copies of any relevant paperwork – including minutes, agendas and speeches (powerpoint presentations/illustrations, etc).
- Prior to any deaf participant's intervention, an appropriate amount of time for the deaf presenter to meet with the sign language interpreters to prepare.
- In larger and demanding events, adequate time for the deaf presenter/deaf chair to meet with the person responsible for interpreting arrangements, technical staff and interpreters to go through the process, such as seating arrangements, lighting, screens, cameras and general visibility.
- If there are to be any presentations or other media forwarding the slides or CD/DVD in advance or allow time for the interpreters to watch them before they are presented to the audience. *It is strongly recommended that CD/DVDs to be subtitled in English to ensure that it is accessible to a wider audience, which includes deaf people who do not use a signed language and hearing delegates for whom English is a third or fourth language.*
- The name of the person in charge of the event on arrival.
- Contact details of co-workers (interpreters), if any.
- Any other information that is relevant to the event.

## **INTERPRETER QUALIFICATIONS**

For national SL interpreters, the interpreter should have certification/accreditation from the country of the SL, if that is possible. Some countries have not yet instituted certification procedures. In any case, it is preferable that the deaf participant should be consulted as to which interpreters would be qualified for the assignment.

For IS interpreters, there is no international certification/accreditation. In New York, there is a very limited pool of interpreters who are skilled in IS, and some may have to be brought in from other states or from Europe; in Geneva, skilled IS interpreters will have to be brought in from other countries in Europe. WFD and WASLI can assist in identifying professional interpreters with international experience. In regional UN events, such as UNESCAP, sign language interpreters from the region should be considered where there are interpreters with international experience. Again, the Deaf participant, WFD, and WASLI will be of invaluable assistance in finding the appropriate interpreters.

## **INTERPRETER TEAMS**

As with spoken language interpreters, national SL and IS interpreters work in teams so as to reduce the potential for inaccuracies from mental or physical fatigue.

A unique feature of IS teams is that a team might consist of more than two interpreters. Interpreters who are themselves deaf are often more adept at IS than interpreters with normal hearing, so deaf interpreters are integrated into the team. Working with a hearing partner who relays the information from English into their national SL, the deaf interpreter works from the national SL into International Sign for the audience. Working in teams of deaf-hearing interpreters provides a level of service not possible with a hearing interpreter alone.

## **INTERPRETER FEES**

Interpreter fees depend on a number of factors, including:

- The nature of the assignment.
- The times and duration of the assignment.
- The qualifications and experience of the interpreter.
- And, in some cases, the number of deaf participants (if there are deaf panellists or chairs of sessions, they may need a separate team in a different location from the deaf delegates or observers).

For further information on the fees, please see [Guidelines on fees and conditions for International Sign interpreters working for the World Federation of the Deaf \(WFD\)](#) and [International Sign fee guidelines for United Nations events](#).

## **TYPICAL WORK PRACTICES**

If the event will last longer than two hours and/or is particularly complex more than one interpreter should be booked. Like spoken language interpreters, sign language interpreters typically work in teams, each interpreter working for 20-30 minute periods of time in order to maximize the accuracy and the effectiveness of the interpretation.

Interpreters need regular breaks during the event. For full day conferences, the interpreting team should include interpreters who can work during the conference breaks so that deaf delegates and participants may network and conduct short meetings outside of the conference proceedings. This will sometimes mean teams of 3 or 4 interpreters working a single conference in a day to cover not only the formal conference, but also networking during breaks and covering side events before and after the agenda of the conference.

All the material received will be treated with confidentiality and will be returned to the conference organisers at the end of the events. Should the event be recorded (audio and/or video) please inform the interpreters beforehand in order to discuss relevant acknowledgements and copyright of their work product.

Ethical practices of interpreters. WASLI and WFD are international organisations with national members. The national members monitor the profession and support the ethical practice of interpreters. National associations have codes of ethics and dispute resolution processes. In addition to this, national Deaf organisations and/or interpreter service providers may have policies that guide interpreting services.

Problems between interpreters and event organisers are best resolved through direct communication at the event. Should there be a need to lodge a formal complaint about the service, contact the agency or organisation through which the interpreter was booked.

WASLI and WFD recommend that interpreters booked for conferences be members of the national association of their country, if one exists. If no national interpreting association exists in the country, seek recommendations from the national deaf organisations(s).

## **LOGISTICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

There are a number of things that will enable the sign language interpreter to provide effective service:

- The environment needs to be conducive to effective communication. This means sufficient lighting and sound systems (i.e. provision of wireless microphones and portable headsets if necessary), as well as an appropriate background against which the interpreter will work that is free of visual distractions. If the interpreter will be onscreen, the background should be plain so that the interpreter's hands will be visible.
- Effective communication requires that deaf people and interpreters are able to see each other. SL interpreters must be placed in the conference room, not in a booth, and no more than 6 or 8 feet from the deaf delegate for whom they are interpreting. The deaf participants should be able to see both the interpreters and the presenters, whether in person or through screen or monitor projections.
- If the proceedings are projected on a screen, the interpreter should be included somewhere on the screen large enough to be seen by the entire room. On the screen, the speaker, the SL interpreter, and the Computer Assisted Real Time (CART) captions should all be visible. Especially at the UN, where protocol often determines where Chairs, Panelists, Delegates, and observers may sit, a screen with all three images will be necessary for any Deaf participant to follow the proceedings. Power-point or DVD presentations should also allow for the interpreter and captions to appear on the screen simultaneously. (This may necessitate a review of the audio-visual procedures and software available in large conference rooms, as well as ensuring that the microphones of each delegate be flexible enough to be available to the SL interpreter (interpreting from SL to English) for the delegate signing at his or her seat.)
- Deaf delegates should be consulted about whether they prefer to stand in front of their audience, as deaf signers are accustomed to visual contact with their interlocutors in their culture. This could have ramifications for the cameras tracking speakers for the screen.

As with spoken language interpreters, there will be a short lag time when a sign language interpreter is working between a SL and a spoken language. Allowing time for this process is important during questions and answer sessions or during discussions to ensure that all participants are included.

## **THE RESPONSIBILITY TO PROVIDE SL INTERPRETERS**

Although there are many rules at national level that regulate the service provision of sign language interpreters, ultimately it is the United Nation (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Article 9 paragraph 2(e), that mandates this service: Provide forms of live assistance and intermediaries, including guides, readers and professional sign language interpreters, to facilitate accessibility to buildings and facilities open to the public. In addition, Article 21 (b): Freedom of expression and opinion states: 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.

As the organization behind the CRDP, the Secretariat and Agencies of the UN are in a position to lead the way in modelling proper provision of interpreting services at all levels of the UN system.

## Interpreter Check list

When the UN or its special Agencies send an invitation to the WFD or another deaf organisation or when deaf participants attend an event the organiser should pay attention to the following sign language interpreting arrangements:

1. Event organiser will book sign language interpreters after having consulted with the deaf participant(s) (if necessary also with WFD or WASLI) about the participant's language preference and whether s/he has a liking for a particular sign language interpreter.
2. Fees and other expenses, salary, accommodation and travel arrangements shall be agreed between the sign language interpreters and the organiser prior to the event.
3. All meeting materials and practical information that are sent to the participants need also to be delivered to the sign language interpreter(s).
4. If the event is meant for a large audience the seating arrangements for sign language interpreters have to be checked prior to the event: they should be seated opposite to the deaf participant so that the deaf person has accessible visual contact to the sign language interpreters, the presenters and the screen. The sign language interpreters need to have chairs without armrest. Sign language interpreters have to be able to use a microphone and they will be provided with a head set.
5. Sign language interpreters should be given the opportunity to have their notes and meeting papers on display while they interpret. All materials distributed to the participants in the meeting will be circulated also to the sign language interpreters. Provision of water or other refreshments should be guaranteed during the meeting.
6. In small scale events and workshops the deaf participant and the sign language interpreters should be able to seat opposite to each other.
7. In a case where deaf person chairs an event or presents all practical arrangements should be coordinated well in advance between the organiser, deaf person and sign language interpreters.

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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](http://www.wfdeaf.org)) Email: [info@wfdeaf.org](mailto:info@wfdeaf.org)*

### **About the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters**

*WASLI's goal is to promote and support the development of interpreters around the world. For example, some countries do not yet have interpreter associations or interpreter training, so WASLI works to encourage those countries to create national interpreter associations. WASLI also work to promote strong working ties between national interpreter associations and national Deaf associations, in the same way that WASLI and the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) work together. (<http://wasli.org/>)*