Introduction

This module is based on Manual on Sign Language Work. All credits go to this website. This module contains information about how Sign Language Work should be conducted in practice, in an ethical and sustainable way. According to the WFD, cooperation between countries should prioritize the establishment and strengthening of an organization of the deaf and Sign Language Work. Sign Language Work is important because it is a tool for enhancing human and linguistic rights. The process of Sign Language Work leads to community ownership and the empowerment of the deaf community. The aim of Sign Language Work is to awaken the linguistic awareness of deaf community and to create opportunities for deaf people to learn about linguistics and research methods. This in turn will raise linguistic awareness, capacities, and skills.

For example, Sign Language Work may eventually lead to governmental or local recognition of sign language. Thus, the products of sign language research are also tools for lobbying the government for the legal recognition of a sign language, and for developing other legislation. As a result of Sign Language Work, the capacity of the deaf community is strengthened, and community members are empowered by the skills that they have acquired. The Sign Language Work conducted by deaf community members is concrete proof of what the community can achieve on their own. Training and sharing information are therefore essential elements in Sign Language Work.

What is Sign Language Work

Sign Language Work incorporates several important elements and entails much more than establishing a sign language dictionary, such as deaf education, interpreter training, organisational capacity building and advocacy work. Deaf education includes providing sign language training programmes for teachers and students, planning, implementing and evaluation of deaf education programmes and curriculum. Interpreter training involves training for students about sign language and sign language grammar and developing programmes for deaf people to become deaf interpreters. Linguistic awareness training for deaf community is an example of organisational capacity building work. Finally, advocacy work focuses on legislation and policies, access to service and information, and promoting the use of sign language in media.

Sign Language Work includes training for community members in basic sign linguistics, language documentation and description, and research methods, and linguistic advocacy work and language status planning for recognition of your local sign language and for improving existing legislation. It can consist of application of the research results into dictionary work or other kind of publications, like teaching materials, training in sign language structure and grammar for sign language interpreter students, training deaf people in how to teach sign language as a foreign language to hearing people and establishing contacts to universities and promoting research in your local sign language.

Sign Language Work emphasizes that signed languages are natural languages on their own terms, and do not need to be changed to resemble spoken languages. This means that in practice, you should train deaf people to conduct Sign Language Work themselves.

Sign language documentation and research is the starting point for the emphasis of the deaf community. This empowerment takes place when work is conducted by deaf sign language users themselves.

Sign Language Work has both short-term goals (three years) and long-term goals (10-20 years). Short term goals are to raise linguistic awareness within the deaf community, to start sign language documentation and research, to share and disseminate information about Sign Language Work and to develop skills for lobbying for human and linguistic rights. The long-term goal of Sign Language Work, which will happen after 10–20 years, is the realization of human rights for deaf people, secured through the legal recognition of sign language. In practice this means significant positive changes in access to society; funding interpreter services and information in sign language provided by the government, and the availability of bilingual education using sign language.

Ideally, in 10-20 years sign language research is ongoing and conducted at university level with deaf researchers and the close cooperation of the deaf community. The deaf community is empowered and has increased skills and knowledge. Community members contribute to society in many ways and are regarded as a resource and a model example for other (linguistic or disability) minority groups of how to challenge and remove discrimination. More detailed information about the processes that can be used to obtain these goals are described in the sections of SLW manual.

Before starting Sign Language Work, you should investigate the priorities made by the deaf community, the linguistic situation of the country, including the status and use of sign language, the wider social context in your country, your country's history and background, and your national legislation and policies. You should also ensure that there are resources available, such as human, financial resources, and time. Before going further, it is important to understand that Sign Language Work is not a quick fix and cannot be completed in a single year. For Sign Language Work to be successful and sustainable, it requires patience and takes several years.

One should understand that all activities and methods cannot and should not be applied in the same way to any deaf community in the world. You should find a method that fits your community and culture. Sign Language Work should take a point of departure in community-based approach. Sign Language Work should not be conducted in isolation by few individuals, but in close and transparent cooperation with the local deaf community.

Concrete research materials should not be transferred from a country to another, not that methods and results are copied and pasted directly from one country to another. There should be sign language linguistic involved in collecting, processing, analysing, and describing sign data. If your country or deaf association does not have sign language linguistics who can train deaf people to conduct Sign Language Work, you should identify a suitable linguistics from abroad. If you have an international advisor / partner, s/he should not be the one who does the work. The work should be conducted by the local deaf people themselves. The role of the advisor is to plan the sign language work activities together with the community, to provide training and to support the learning process. When doing Sign Language Work, the international advisor should respect local sign language(s) and deaf

culture. Minimise influence from International Sign, do not introduce foreign sign language and do not try to impose cultural changes.

Sign Language Work within the framework of development cooperation

'Development cooperation' refers to empowering a deaf community in a developing country. Development cooperation is a process with different stages. The first step in this capacity building process is usually organizational support – since a strong organization of the deaf is a prerequisite for further (development) work. When the organization is running and functioning well, it can then begin to facilitate Sign Language Work. This arrangement is important for ensuring that the deaf community has ownership of Sign Language Work. If the country does not have a national deaf association, Sign Language Work can be started in conjunction with a local deaf club or in some disability organization that truly represents the deaf community. Even if a university later becomes involved as a partner in sign language research, it is important that the real ownership of sign language research remains in the hands of sign language users.

Development cooperation programs are based on training. In addition to the training in sign language research, deaf community members need skills to lobby for the fulfilment of their human rights. Therefore, training on advocacy is also essential. Lobbying the government and cooperation with education authorities is often necessary to improve education for deaf children. Sign language interpreters are needed to facilitate communication between deaf and hearing persons, so interpreter training programs also need to be established. Development cooperation activities may encompass several objectives, and therefore might have a program-like structure with various elements.

Insights from Sign Language Work are crucial not only for the people who are conducting the concrete sign language activities. Those who manage projects, or project funding must understand how the empowerment of deaf communities depends upon linguistic concerns. Therefore, sign language linguists should be used as advisors in the planning of the project, together with the deaf community and project or funding managers. If the results of Sign Language Work are to be sustainable, clear long-term planning is required, and advisor input is needed for training deaf community members so that the community can develop.

Deaf led- and community-based approach in Sign Language Work

You should adopt deaf-led and community-based approach when conducting Sign Language Work. Deaf-led approach means that the staff members who conduct Sign Language Work are all deaf, as the members of the working group. The ownership of sign language needs to remain with the deaf communities. Both the development of linguistic awareness and the empowerment of the community depend upon deaf people having the opportunity to take the lead in Sign Language Work. A deaf-led approach to Sign Language Work empowers deaf individuals and the community, because deaf people can become the acknowledged experts on their sign language. When deaf people lead and participate in all phases of Sign Language Work, this also becomes a model for good ethical research practices that respect the community.

Do not employ hearing people as sign language work staff or working group members. There might also be hearing people who have deaf parents (Children of Deaf Adults, or CODAs) and are fluent signers. However, for the empowerment of deaf people to take place, it is crucial that deaf people realize they are fully able to conduct Sign Language Work. In this way the process contributes to undoing the effects of linguistic oppression. If the early stages of Sign Language Work are led by hearing people who don't understand why the process should be deaf led, there is a risk that they begin to dominate the process. This might lead to deaf people assuming the passive role.

Hearing people can be included in the later stages of the work for specific tasks that required competence in both sign language and written language if no bilingual deaf people are available for this, for example to find equivalents and translate collected signed data into a written language. It must be emphasized that the core part of Sign Language Work (data collection and analysis) must be conducted by deaf people themselves. This is because being part of a sign language community, sign language is the natural language of deaf people, and deaf people have access to intuitive linguistic knowledge and metalinguistic skills.

Community-based participatory approach means that Sign Language Work is not implemented by a few deaf individuals but is conducted through a close relationship between Sign Language Work staff and the working group that represents the deaf community. There are several reasons for actively involving the language community. First, community members embody linguistic variation in the language that they use, and their language skills are therefore relevant to linguistic work. Second, the ownership of language documentation and description starts and remains with the deaf community. Third, the active involvement of the community during Sign Language Work guarantees the commitment of community members to the work that is conducted, and their acceptance of this work.

Colonialism

According to the sign language work manual, the term colonialism refers to linguistic or cultural influences from a dominant culture that leads to the replacement of indigenous languages or cultural practices. It is very important that deaf community members are aware of international influences and learn to resist them. The advisor should be recruited in cooperation with deaf community and project funder. Once the advisor is appointed, the behaviour of the advisor is important. If the advisor is unaware of local culture, uses International Sign or another sign language, the local sign language is exposed to risk of being displaced. The foreign advisor must learn the sign language and become accustomed to local deaf culture. While engaging in the Sign Language Work, the advisor should adopt a background role, in which the advisor advises instead of doing the work. By advising, the advisor makes it possible for trainees to implement the work themselves, and sustainable capacity building can take place.

BUILD A DEAF ORGANISATION

Language planning

Sign Language Work is regarded as a part of language planning, which consists of four areas: attitude planning, corpus planning, status planning and acquisition planning. It is important to emphasize that Sign Language Work is a complex and flexible set of activities that shift over time in accordance with the needs of the sign community. There is no strict order in which language planning activities take place, there is however sometimes a certain focus of the goals to be achieved that influence the order of the activities.

Attitude planning means raising the linguistic awareness of deaf community members, for example concerning equality between spoken and signed languages and sharing linguistic information with hearing people, to replace misconceptions with accurate information about sign languages – e.g., that there are many sign languages in the world, and they are equal to spoken languages. Corpus planning refers to Sign language documentation, research, and description, with a view to publishing dictionaries, grammars, and other material about the sign language.

Status planning is about lobbying for legal recognition of sign language, for the use of sign language as a language of instruction within deaf education, and for sign language in new domains of use, such as the media (TV, the internet, etc.). Finally, acquisition planning includes activities that increase the number of sign language users. In addition to signing deaf members of the sign community, other groups need sign language skills, e.g., deaf persons not being exposed to sign language from before, hearing parents of deaf children, sign language interpreters, and hearing teachers working in deaf education.

Unification / standardization

There have been cases where sign language dictionaries are made by choosing only one variant for each spoken language word. This is not an adequate way to proceed with sign language dictionary work because the richness of expression in sign language should be respected. Several attempts have been made to change or unify sign languages in different parts of the work. Attempts should not be made to standardize varieties or variants to reduce variation. Linguistic variation in sign languages should be respected. Foreign sign languages should not be imported into a country to replace an existing sign language. If a foreign sign language has been introduced to a country, the use of the original / indigenous sign language should be supported and revitalized by community-based sign language documentation and research, and language awareness training.

The aim of Sign Language Work is to document sign language used by a community, and not to unify different sign languages or to produce a single standard alternative to different variants. You should not standardize sign language by selecting and promoting single variant. It should promote linguistic variation and respect for the right use of different variants. Sign language documentation should not be conducted by working through a list of words and asking deaf community members to provide a sign for each one.

How to conduct Sign Language Work: Steps to Sign Language Work

1. Involve the deaf community

Prior to starting Sign Language Work, you should involve the deaf community on an equal basis. Sign Language Work should be conducted by deaf people themselves. It is crucial that the control of the sign language remains within the deaf community.

2. Recruit a linguistic advisor

While Sign Language Work is to be conducted by local deaf people, they might lack the linguistic knowledge necessary to start work independently. Because of this, input from an advisor is needed. If there is no suitable trained sign language linguistics in your country, an advisor should be appointed from another country. Please keep in mind that the linguistic advisor should be suitable and qualified for the task.

3. Conduct a survey

Deaf communities around the world differ, and before Sign Language Work can begin, it is necessary to conduct an initial survey of the target community. The person conducting the survey must be deaf because it is necessary to have in-depth knowledge about deaf issues, culture and identity and excellent sign language skills. The person must have prior experience of conducting surveys. If you do not find a suitable candidate from your country, it may be necessary to find someone from outside of your country to work with the deaf community on this survey.

4. Plan the Sign Language Work

If you have an advisor from another country, you should wait that the advisor has become familiar with the local sign language work and the circumstances of the community. Once relevant data has been collected through a survey, an action plan for sign language work can be developed. This can be designed by the advisor and representatives of the deaf community. The planning should be based on the needs identified through the analysis of the survey data. This way, the priorities of Sign Language Work can be determined. You can discuss and decide together the priorities and the goals of the Sign Language Work and make a timetable.

5. Recruit staff of Sign Language Work

The recruitment process to find the most suitable local deaf people to conduct Sign Language Work should be one of the top priorities in the first phase because it will ensure positive outcomes. You should identify deaf people who are fluent signers with strong linguistic intuition, good cultural knowledge and are actively involved in your local deaf community. Do not employ hearing people as Sign Language Work staff or working group members. Hearing people can be included at a later stage when the focus of the work is to find equivalents and translate collected signed data into a written language.

BUILD A DEAF ORGANISATION

6. Share information about Sign Language Work

Information must be actively shared with the deaf community, and not kept within a restricted group of a few deaf individuals. Regular updates on progress of Sign Language Work are also a part of raising the linguistic awareness of community members. You should also deliver information about the process to other relevant groups and stakeholders, such as governmental bodies and institutions, disability organizations, deaf schools, interpreters, and hearing family members. If Sign Language Work is funded, project funders need regular updates on the progress and development of the work that has been done.

7. Start sign language documentation and research

First, two or three deaf staff members should receive basic linguistic training from the linguistic advisor, where they learn about sign language structure and grammar, and how to conduct research and document sign language. Then, sign language documentation can begin. You should start to collect sign language data by filming the signing of deaf community members. Linguistic findings are then processed and invested together with a working group consisting of representatives of the deaf community. During this stage, you should establish sign language working group. Whereas Sign Language Work is conducted by a team of two or three deaf staff members, they work in collaboration with sign language working group. The group should consist of 10-15 deaf signers, gender balance, represent different ages, ethnicities, religions, and ethnographical locations. The working group should meet on a regular basis, for example at weekends. It is important to remember to reserve funds for local travel, meal allowances and possible accommodation expenses in your budget.

8. Language description (dictionary)

During sign language documentation and research, it is important for the staff to learn how to organize the collected linguistic information in sign files. They should learn how to note down the form of the sign (handshape, orientation, movement, place of articulation), and information about the signer (gender, age, region). Signs should be arranged in groups, for example based on the structure of the sign (handshape).

The collected and analysed material should be discussed in the working group. After the discussions, the signs need to be re-filmed if the planned outcome of the language description is a dictionary. You should find the equivalents to the signs in spoken language and find someone to translate the signed example sentences into written language. You can use support from bilingual (hearing) persons with skills both in sign language and written language. You can consider developing a dictionary as it can function as a valuable first step for describing signs in a language, as an important symbol, and as a lobbying tool for sign language recognition. Make sure not to publish a dictionary only in the form of a book, but also in a live format, such as a website, a DVD, or a USB memory stick.

9. Provide trainings

The linguistic advisor should provide at least three groups trainings: Sign Language Work staff members who are recruited for the day-to-day work, sign language working group that consists of volunteer members representing the deaf community and hearing staff from the deaf organization and other hearing people who work closely with the deaf community. Over time, the advisor should withdraw from the role as an active trainer of the working group and responsibility for this will be assumed by the Sign Language Work staff.

Training should be provided as capacity-building, where skills are shared in a sustainable way. Sign Language Work may be at risk of ending if people who have been trained, unexpectedly resign from their work. It is important to plan Sign Language Work to minimize the changes of this happening. Training should not be limited to only a few individuals as the empowerment process becomes vulnerable of the sharing of skills is focused on only those employed to conduct Sign Language Work. It is essential that the staff passes on their own learning, knowledge, and skills to the working group. You can establish Training of Trainers (ToT) approach which guarantees a broad pool of trained deaf people.

It is important to include trainings that aim to develop skills for lobbying for human and linguistic rights. The advocacy of human rights derives from the participation of deaf people in Sign Language Work, together with their improved knowledge of linguistic issues, and human and linguistic issues. By training community members on human rights issues, deaf people can carry out advocacy work. The focus of the lobbying activities for improved legislation may be the following: legal recognition of sign language, development of education for the deaf, for the government to assume responsibility for covering expenses related to sign language interpreter services and for the government authorities to provide information in sign language.

Suggested topics and content for Sign Language Work Training: deaf awareness, basic sign language linguistics, Sign Language Work documentation, training on how to teach (pedagogy training) and training in human and linguistic rights advocacy. For more detailed information please refer to Sign Language Manual.

10. Language planning

You need a language plan that covers a period of between five and ten years that will help you to identify the steps that need to be taken. You should start with attitude and corpus planning activities which will lead to raised awareness and new linguistic skills that are needed for the next phase. Once the skills and competence of community members has increased, and documentation has been conducted, linguistic status planning can begin. This includes lobbying for a legal recognition of sign language, development of education and access to information in sign language in the media. Similarly, before acquisition planning can take place, it is necessary to conduct research and produce linguistic material (corpus planning) that can be used for language teaching.

Challenges in Sign Language Work

There are several challenges when conducting Sign Language Work. Those are realistic planning, time management, cultural differences, and volunteerism. Sign Language Work is a long process, which makes it difficult to make a realistic plan. A few years is a short time for Sign Language Work, as learning new concepts takes time, and there is a limit to what you can learn at one time. There may be some cultural differences that cause misunderstandings between the international advisor and the working group. Also, it is important to consider how to commit the working group members and deaf people to a long-term work on voluntary basis.