

A C C E S S

By:

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ACCESS

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1. Characteristics of the Deaf

When we speak of the "Deaf", we refer to those persons who have severe hearing impairments and who cannot hear, even with the use of hearing aids. Often, the inability to hear creates speech problems as well. For this reason, Sign Language came to be used quite naturally among the Deaf as a means of communication, and developed as the language of the Deaf. By using Sign Language, the Deaf can communicate smoothly among themselves. There are no communication problems among the Deaf. For this reason, the Deaf tend to associate among themselves and form so-called "Deaf communities".

However, the world is centered on a hearing society. The Deaf find it hard to communicate with hearing persons. It is even harder to come to a mutual understanding with hearing persons. Misunderstandings are not infrequent, making it hard for the Deaf to participate in society. It is extremely difficult for the Deaf to convey their needs to hearing persons, to society, and consequently to the government. This has resulted in

extremely meager governmental policies supporting the Deaf.

However, for the Deaf who use Sign Language, communication with the hearing society can be conducted smoothly through Sign Language interpreters. If Sign Language interpretation is guaranteed in every phase of social life, a large portion of the basic problems related to deafness can be solved. This fact is demonstrated by European countries, the United States, Japan and other advanced countries of the world, where there is a common Sign Language being used throughout the country and where Sign Language interpreters are working actively in society.

In the Asia-Pacific region, the basic problem lies in the fact that many countries are unable to develop such a common Sign Language, often because of the inability to establish a nationwide organization of the Deaf. Many Deaf people do not have the opportunity to learn Sign Language, and in some cases, do not even understand the need for Sign Language interpretation. In such situations, it is difficult to develop a Sign Language interpretation system.

2. Organizations of the Deaf

In order to create an environment in which all the Deaf can learn Sign Language, convey their needs to the government, and communicate with society, the establishment of a unified nationwide organization of the Deaf is

extremely important. In the advanced countries of Europe, the United States, Japan, etc., policies which really support the Deaf, such as Sign Language interpretation guarantee, were the result of persistent and continuous negotiations between the Deaf association and the government. The development of a national association of the Deaf is also a prerequisite for the development of a common Sign Language.

The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) is an organization unifying all the national Deaf associations of the world. I speak on behalf of the World Federation of the Deaf, Regional Secretariat in Asia-Pacific. Deaf associations of 123 countries are now enrolled as members of WFD. This is about 65% of the United Nations' 190-country membership. As for the ESCAP region, I think about 41 countries are members of UN ESCAP. Our WFD Regional Secretariat in Asia-Pacific currently has 18 member associations. This is less than 50% of the UN ESCAP membership. Many of the countries of the Asia-Pacific region are developing countries. These countries are either not enrolled as members of WFD, or, even if they are enrolled as members, show a lack of potential to conduct significant activities.

3. Goals of the Deaf Associations

In order to realize "full participation and equality" for the Deaf, it is important to establish and strengthen a unified national organization of the

Deaf, to conduct movements organized by the Deaf themselves for the realization of their own demands and rights. If we were to define what we mean by a unified national association of the Deaf, we refer to those organizations “of the Deaf, organized by the Deaf, for the Deaf”. Unfortunately, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Fiji still do not have a Deaf association representing all the Deaf people in the country. Even those countries which are enrolled as WFD members, are much too weak to have any substantial influence on the government.

Therefore, one of the targets of WFD Regional Secretariat in Asia-Pacific (WFD RSA/P) is to support non-member countries to establish a national Deaf association and to support member associations lacking in power. For example, the annual WFD RSA/P Representatives Meeting is hosted in turn by different member countries. This creates a good opportunity for mutual exchange of information and for strengthening the activities of the region. The Japanese Federation of the Deaf gives financial support to the host country as well, to help them organize and host the meeting.

Moreover, in order to train Deaf people who are qualified to become leaders in their national organizations, a program called the “Leadership Training of Asian and Oceanian Deaf Persons” is held every year, with cooperation from JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency). The 45-day training program invites 8 Deaf leaders from 8 countries (one person per country) to Japan to transfer skills related to the reinforcement of organizational

activities and improvement of welfare for the Deaf. The program has been held every year since 1995. This year again, we have 8 promising leaders receiving training in Japan. They will participate in the Osaka Forum to Commemorate the Final Year of the Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons.

The Japanese Federation of the Deaf is also helping other countries to conduct Sign Language studies and to publish a Sign Language dictionary for the promulgation of a uniform Sign Language. The Japanese Federation of the Deaf also furnishes funds for scholarships to enable more Deaf children to attend schools, and cooperates with local Deaf associations to recognize and comply with such needs as purchasing a school bus for a Deaf school located in a remote area, etc. This kind of cooperation requires huge funds. The Japanese Association of the Deaf operates its international cooperation operations through funds donated by its members and other friends.

This kind of international cooperation is meaningful, not only for its direct effects, but also for its indirect benefits. The Japanese Federation of the Deaf offers such international assistance through the Deaf association of the recipient country. Through the operations involved in such projects, the recipient organization is developed and its social recognition is enhanced.

So as explained, the World Federation of the Deaf, Regional Secretariat in

Asia/Pacific aims to establish a nationwide organization of the Deaf in all the countries of the region, so that through this organization, the Deaf can work together for the promulgation of a common Sign Language, the training of Sign Language interpreters, the establishment and strengthening of a Sign Language interpreter dispatch system, and thereby aim to realize "full participation and equality" for all the Deaf people in Asia-Pacific.

4. Catching Up With and Getting Ahead of the Western Countries

Although there may be room for further development, the level of achievement of the goal of "full participation and equality" in the United States and Europe is truly amazing.

In the field of Deaf education, Sign Language is used to teach Deaf students in Deaf schools. The Deaf students acquire literacy and go on to higher studies, where they can study together with hearing students in an inclusive environment because they are guaranteed Sign Language interpretation. After receiving education in such an environment, these skilled young Deaf work together with their hearing peers in governmental positions, as school teachers, as professionals in institutions, as businessmen, etc. They are also advancing into such highly specialized professions as lawyers, doctors, scientists, researchers, etc.

Needless to say, the underlying precondition for their success is the

guarantee of stable provision of Sign Language interpretation. In the United States and other advanced countries, equal opportunities for the Deaf are guaranteed by making it a legal obligation to provide Sign Language interpretation in employment examinations and other situations related to employment and labor. If the company or employer does not provide Sign Language interpretation, it is considered to be a violation of criminal law and subject to due punishment.

To form a background for such advanced legislation, we must first point out the need to eliminate and revise all laws containing groundless discrimination against persons with disabilities. In Japan, for example, we have succeeded in eliminating the clauses restricting the acquisition of drivers' licenses, and equality for persons with disabilities has been achieved in many other formerly discriminative laws.

ICF (International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health), revised in 2001, gives a new model based on levels of functioning, disability, activity, and participation. Participation, as defined in the new ICF, is a matter related to the social systems. The Deaf people's way of life in Europe and America clearly demonstrates the fact that if there are social systems answering the needs of the Deaf, they will be able to participate in society without difficulty.

There is no doubt that the future for Deaf people is very bright. The models

and methods for achieving this future are evident. The problem is whether or not there will be international cooperation to backup efforts of the Deaf, whether or not governments are willing to implement policies to support the Deaf, whether or not the population at large will become aware of the need to offer support.

In order to catch up with and perhaps even get ahead of the Western countries, I ask for your understanding and support. Thank you.