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# NEWS

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# Sign Language Recognition

by Carol-lee Aquiline

*Official recognition of sign languages is an important aim pursued by WFD and many of its member organizations. What exactly does "official recognition" mean? This may vary from country to country depending on the legal system and which government bodies have responsibility for providing services and enforcing laws.*

Following is information that WFD has received from countries worldwide that have some level of recognition of their national sign language:

*In national constitution:* Brazil, Czech Republic, Ecuador, Finland, Greece, Portugal, South Africa, Uganda, and Venezuela.

*In government legislation or policy:* Australia, Belarus, Canada, Colombia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Ecuador, Finland, France, Iceland, Lithuania, Norway, Peru, Poland, Russian Federation, Sweden, Switzerland, Ukraine, United States of America, Uruguay, Zimbabwe, and some German states.

*In a government resolution:* Thailand

*In a separate sign language law:* Slovak Republic.

The most recently recognized sign language is British Sign Language (see p. 38), but this is not outlined in any law at the moment.

The following are some examples of different kinds of sign language recog-

inition around the world:

*Sweden:* The Swedish Parliament accepted Swedish Sign Language in an educational policy. Policies, as created by the Swedish Parliament, usually have legal enforcement. Swedish Sign Language has not been accepted as an official language but it has been accepted as a true language.

*United States:* The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accepts American Sign Language (ASL) for accessibility reasons. In this sense, ASL is a protected language.

*Slovak Republic:* The Slovakian law is similar to the American ADA but clearer on protection and less clear on accessibility.

*Thailand:* The Thai government, not Parliament, recognized Thai Sign Language officially in one of its resolutions. From the legal viewpoint, resolutions can be discarded more easily than laws, although such resolutions in Thailand do have legal enforcement.

*Switzerland:* The Swiss Parliament

decided to put sign language under the protection of cultural diversity, instead of recognizing it as an official language as demanded by Deaf people.

*Finland:* The Finnish Constitution clearly regards sign language as an official language. This Constitution accepts both the dominant and minority languages.

*Uganda:* The Ugandan Constitution was the first in the world to recognize sign language as an official language (see p. 10). This Constitution was enacted in 1995 and clearly promotes the development of sign language for Deaf people.

*Colombia:* The Colombian law has 14 articles, which cover everything from recognition of the Colombian Sign Language "as the language owned by the Deaf Community in the country," to sign language on television, training of interpreters, development of technology, and "legal protection" for parents and guardians (see p. 9). WFD

*Written with input from Yerker Andersson.*

## PORTUGAL

### Recognizing and Protecting Sign Language in the Constitution

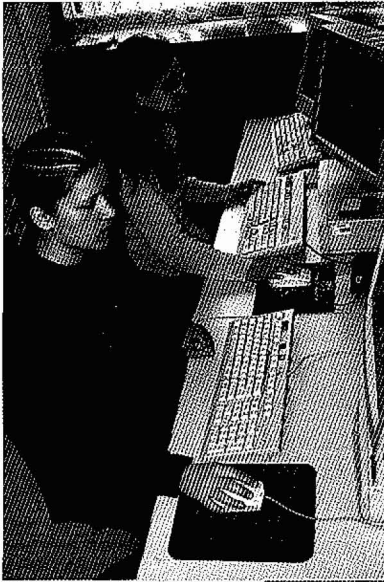
by Helder Duarte  
and Maria José Almeida

Interest in sign language in Portugal began to develop in the early 1980s, influenced by the International Year of Disabled People in 1980. First, the government supported a short training course at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C., United States, for two Deaf teachers of Portuguese Sign Language (PSL). After they returned to Portugal they started courses to teach hearing people—parents of Deaf children, teachers, and friends—who were interested in improving communication with Deaf people. Through these sign language courses and also through meetings, conferences, seminars, and workshops, the Deaf community opened its doors to the hearing world and helped

them see the beauty and richness of sign language and the culture of Deaf people.

*Gestuário*, the first sign language dictionary, was published in 1991 in cooperation with the Deaf community, with funding from the government. The first courses for sign language teachers and interpreter training were also initiated at this time.

The most important turning point occurred in November 1995. Associação Portuguesa de Surdos (APS), the oldest association of Deaf people in Portugal (founded in 1958), took the initiative and convened a meeting to discuss official recognition of PSL. Attending the meeting were Deaf organizations from all over the country, as well as others



Above: RTP Multimedia staff putting captions on television programmes  
 Right: These children will benefit from recognition of PSL and the increased awareness of the need to educate Deaf children in their first language, sign language.



Photo by Helder Duarte

connected in some way with the Deaf community, including parents, teachers, sign language interpreters, and representatives of schools for the Deaf.

This was a very fruitful meeting; those attending reached a consensus and established the Commission for the Recognition and Protection of Portuguese Sign Language to represent their interests. This commission included five associations: APS, Sign Language Interpreters Association, Parents Association, Teachers Association, and the Portuguese Federation of Deaf Associations. The Centre for Deaf Youth later joined the commission.

The commission held several meetings to decide the best strategies. The first step was to send a letter to government departments, the national Parliament, and political parties. During 1996 and 1997 the commission had more than 50 meetings with these entities. Commission members also participated in seminars, conferences, and workshops involving important issues such as family, education, training, employment, health, social rights, tele-

communications, access to information, and equal opportunities. Many of these events were organized and held by the Deaf community with the theme "Deaf People Looking into the Future."

On all these occasions the main objective was to make people aware of the situation of Deaf people and the difficulties they have to face. A member of Parliament provided great support to the Deaf community by presenting a proposal to Parliament that PSL be given

official recognition in the Constitution, which was being revised. An important detail in this process was that Deaf people went to Parliament and followed the debates with sign language interpreters. Thus the Deaf community earned great consideration, respect, and support. The article in the Constitution about PSL gained support from all the parties represented in Parliament and was unanimously approved. The revised Constitution was published 20 September 1997, with PSL included in Article 74, Education:

In the implementation of its policy for education, it is the duty of the State:

To protect and value the Portuguese Sign Language as cultural expression and instrument of access to education and equality of opportunities.

The Deaf community celebrated this achievement, but knew that the fight for equal rights was just beginning. The commission carried on with its work and established new objectives, adding the words "and for the defense of Deaf people's rights" to its title. Several meetings and

conferences were held dealing mainly with the following subjects: family life—communication and the importance of sign language in the family; education of Deaf children and youth; access to university education; and access to information—television with subtitles and sign language interpreting.

The work undertaken by the commission led to new achievements:

- 6 May 1998: A law from the Ministry of Education recognized the need for sign language teachers, sign language interpreters, and teachers of Deaf children and youth who are able to communicate in sign language.
- 14 July 1998: A television law included several recommendations about sign language interpreting and subtitling as well as conditions to produce programmes aimed at the Deaf community. (On 11 February 2002 another law amended the first one reinforcing the rights of Deaf people to access television through sign language and subtitles.)
- 19 March 1999: A government-funded project was started that provides subtitling in public television. This subtitling project uses a teletext page; it also employs Deaf people as subtitling operators.
- 5 July 1999: A law recognized and regulated the occupation of sign language interpreters.

More recently, a team has been working to gain official recognition of Deaf sign language teachers who have been working for many years in schools with Deaf children but without adequate professional status.

Although the commission no longer exists, most of its members continue to participate actively in different areas of interest to the Deaf community. The first important step was the inclusion of PSL in the Constitution, and more gains will follow.

It is hoped this information will be useful to Deaf communities around the world in the fight for official recognition of sign languages. **WFD**

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