



For immediate release
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Sign Languages' status under threat in Denmark and the Netherlands?

WFD – EUD conference attendees noted with alarm that the status of sign languages is under threat in Denmark and the Netherlands. Recent developments in Denmark have led to the adoption of an educational philosophy which denies deaf and hard of hearing children any visually accessible communication, including the right to education in sign language. At the same time the Netherlands is undergoing debates over sign language's place in the education of deaf children.

World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) and European Union of the Deaf (EUD) together with the Ål Experiential College and Conference Center for Deaf People and with financial support from the Norwegian Foreign Ministry are organizing a conference from 6th to 9th November in Ål, Norway. The conference titled *Sign Languages as Endangered Languages* brings together deaf community leaders, academics and educators to debate the status of sign languages and emerging trends in sign language education.

Monday's keynote presenter, professor emeritus Stuart Blume, from University of Amsterdam discussed the globalisation of technology and the start and spread of cochlear implantation programmes. According to Blume, deaf community leaders do not seem to have the same networks and access to politicians and media as the advocates of the cochlear implants. He also introduced idea of learning from the indigenous peoples' experience in promoting their rights and suggested deaf communities to build coalitions and look for allies in anthropologists, sociologists and researchers on a national level.

President of the Danish Deaf Association (DDL) Ms. Janne Boye Niemelä presented the alarming situation in Denmark where 99% of all newly born children are offered cochlear implants; yet at the same time the provided support services do not include sign language but instead concentrate on auditory verbal therapy. With the number of deaf schools decreasing the recent developments in the Danish society would seem to aim at promoting speech to the detriment of Danish sign language. Furthermore, according to Ms. Corrie Tijsseling the deaf community in the Netherlands is currently dealing with a similar debate on sign language's place in deaf children's education.

The president of the Swedish Association of the Hard of Hearing (HRF) and the former president of International Federation of Hard of Hearing (IFHOH) Mr. Jan-Peter Strömngren highlighted that both hard of hearing and deaf children should have the right to bilingualism and give them the opportunity to choose later their linguistic identity. He also recommended good cooperation between associations of hard of hearing and deaf people pointing out that also many hard of hearing people use sign language.

The conference will continue on Tuesday concentrating on laws and best practices in promoting and protecting sign languages.

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