



**Republic of Namibia**

**MOTION IN PARLIAMENT  
BY THE DEPUTY MINISTER  
OF THE  
MINISTRY OF GENDER EQUALITY, POVERTY  
ERADICATION AND SOCIAL WELFARE: DISABILITY  
AFFAIRS:**

**HON. ALEXIA MANOMBE-NCUBE**

**FOR THE RECOGNITION OF NAMIBIAN SIGN  
LANGUAGE AS A NATIONAL AND THE  
APPOINTMENT OF SIGN LANGUAGE  
INTERPRETERS FOR LIVE PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**

**WINDHOEK, 12 SEPTEMBER 2023**

# **MOTION ON RECOGNIZING OF NAMIBIAN SIGN LANGUAGE AS ONE OF THE NATIONAL LANGUAGES IN THE COUNTRY AND THE APPOINTMENT OF SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETERS ON LIVE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATE.**

**Honourable Speaker**  
**Honourable Members**

Before I start with the motion, I want to inform you that the theme for this year's International Day of Sign languages is "A WORLD WHERE DEAF PEOPLE EVERYWHERE CAN SIGN ANYWHERE." The sign language interpreters will sign it for us.

1. Namibia has one official language, namely English and has 13 languages recognised as national languages. Oshikwanyama, Oshidonga, Rukwangali, Otjiherero, Rucirriku, Silozi and Setswana, all belonging to the Bantu language group, and Khoekhoegowab and Ju/hoan belonging to the Khoesan language group and are among the ten indigenous languages. English, German and Afrikaans are the three Indo-European languages. The Namibian Constitution, in Article 3 recognises the right of Namibians to learn in their mother tongue, as well as the Language Policy for Schools in Namibia (January 2003). Namibian Sign Language is the mother tongue of deaf people in Namibia. Currently 563 deaf children are enrolled in Resource and inclusive Namibian schools. The inclusive schools are Mweshipandeka Secondary School and Gabriel Taapopi SS (Ongwediva, Oshana Region), Maria Mwengere

Secondary School (outside Rundu, Kavango East), Cosmos Secondary School (Windhoek, Khomas Region), Haimbili Hausiku S.S (Eenhana, Ohangwena Region), Coastal High School (Swakopmund, Erongo Region). The Resource schools are National Institute for Special Education (NISE) School for Hearing Impaired (Windhoek), Eluwa Special School (Ongwediva), Uusko Nghaamwa Special School (Eenhana), Katima Combined Deaf Unit, Andreas Kandjimi PS (Rundu), Swakopmund Deaf Unit.

2. In September 2022, during the International Deaf Awareness Month, in a Ministerial Statement on the importance of recognizing Namibian Sign Language as one of the national languages in the country. I requested for the support of this August House to ensure the full recognition of NSL as one of the languages in Namibia and to help protect the rights of deaf people and to promote inclusivity. The request was overwhelmingly supported by the members of this August House, a move that demonstrated that the political will exist in our country. The recognition of the NSL will be a move in the right direction for Namibia. This is a best practice globally, with examples of other African countries such as Zimbabwe, Kenya and Uganda. World Atlas, an online site that studies demographics, says “only 41 countries recognises sign language as an official language and this is actually a very low number considering the number of countries in the world”. South Africa recently enacted South African Sign Language as their 12th Official Language.

3. It is important for the whole family to learn sign language as many deaf children are born into families who are not deaf, thus services must be in place to provide sign language learning and support to families so that they can learn and use sign language at home and make it easy to communicate with the deaf children and assist with educational activities.
4. On 23 September each year, we are celebrating International Sign Language Day. The International Day of Sign Languages is a unique opportunity to support and protect the linguistic identity and cultural diversity of all deaf people and other sign language user. The *acquisition* of sign language is critical for the cognitive and social development of deaf children.
5. The Charter on Sign language rights for all, recognises that deaf people are found among all cultural, linguistic, and ethnic minorities and the deaf community is a diverse and intersectional community. Deaf communities are part of a unique intersectionality of rights, belonging to both linguistic and cultural groups, and the disability movement. Deaf people have their own identity, mainly tied to national sign languages and social connections built on the shared experience of the use of these languages. Sign language and deaf culture strengthen multilingualism and are means of promoting, protecting and preserving the diversity of languages and cultures globally, including in Namibia. Language is not just a tool to communicate. It is also an important tool for social inclusion and participation. The recognition of NSL as a national language will promote wider inclusion and deepens participation in our democracy.

**Honourable Speaker**  
**Honourable Members**

6. Sign Language is a legitimate language in its own right, with its own syntax, morphology and structure. It is capable of functioning as a language of communication in all settings, from educational to political. This fact has been accepted and enacted in Article 2 of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, which define sign language as equal to spoken languages. Sign language being visual in nature provided full accessibility to deaf individuals who are recognised as belonging to a linguistic minority group, the Deaf Community specifically have the right to education in their Mother tongue. This include the right of deaf children to the sign language of their country. The UNCRPD emphasises that without respecting linguistic rights of the deaf students, their human rights cannot be fulfilled. It obligates state parties to help people to learn sign language and promote the linguistic identity of the deaf community. The UN Secretary General, Mr. Antonio Guterres said “sign language are crucial to express oneself, connect with others and participate in all aspects of economic, social, cultural and political spheres.” By recognising the Namibian Sign Language and by ensuring implementation of deaf people’s linguistic rights, we honour our commitments in our national and international frameworks.
7. In practise this entails laws and decrees that guarantee access to education, interpretation, information, employment of deaf

citizens and promotion of sign language and the deaf culture. Namibia has signed and ratified the UNCRPD and five articles in the CRPD have direct reference to deaf people and sign languages ( Article 2; Article 9.2e, Article 21b and 21.e; Article 24.b and 24.c and 24.4; Article 30.4), and by recognising the NSL, we will fulfil our pledge made in the UNCRPD.

8. Article 29 in the UNCRPD state that States parties shall guarantee to persons with disabilities political rights and the opportunity to enjoy them on an equal basis with others and shall promote actively an environment in which persons with disabilities can effectively and fully participate in the conduct of public affairs, without discrimination and on an equal basis with others, and encourage their participation in public affairs. Currently, deaf people are excluded from following live Parliamentary debates due to the absence of sign language interpreters and the creation of such positions on the parliamentary structure and the appointment of these interpreters, would allow deaf people to participate in public affairs.
9. It is important that Deaf communities, governments and civil society organisations work collectively in fostering, promoting and recognising national sign languages as part of their countries' vibrant and diverse linguistic landscapes. We are collaborating with the Namibian National Association of the Deaf (NNAD) to achieve this goal. NNAD represents the Deaf Community in our country and has significant expertise on issues concerning sign language and deaf people.

10. Mr. Niklaas Fredericks from the Namibia University of Science and Technology, wrote in his Master's theses on challenges facing the development of Namibian Languages that Government of Namibia has established the National Institute of Educational Development (NIED) to look into the issues of the implementation of the language policy, but NIED focuses on curriculum issues and does not have adequate resources to tackle issues of language research and development. We call on the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture to increase the budget of NIED for the development of the curriculum of Namibian Sign language for hearing people and not as it is in its current form for deaf persons only.

**Honourable Speaker**

**Honourable Members**

11. Hence my humble submission to the House to discuss this motion and subsequently refer to a relevant Parliamentary Standing Committee for further consultation and report back to the House.

I thank you.