

**CONTRIBUTION ON THE DEBATE TO RECOGNISE SIGN LANGUAGE AS ONE OF THE NATIONAL LANGUAGES AND THE APPOINTMENT OF SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETERS ON LIVE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES, BY KLETUS H. KARONDO, SWAPO MP.**

**Honourable Speaker, Honourable Members**

I rise to make my brief contribution to this very important motion tabled in this August House by the Deputy Minister of Disability Affairs , Honourable Manombe-Ncube, the motion that seeks to discuss and recommend that Namibian Sign Language be recognised as one of the national languages in Namibia and the appointment of sign language interpreters for live Parliamentary debates.

Sign language is regarded as a bridge that connect us to the world of those who have an impaired hearing or impaired verbal ability. An array of gestures made using hands, fingers, arms, head and facial expressions besides symbols constitute a sign language which helps the deaf to communicate with people around them which enables them to understand the world around them through visual descriptions and in turn contribute to society.

The World Federation of the Deaf estimate that there are 72 million deaf people in the world of whom 80% live in developing countries, of the 72

million only two percent (2%) have access to formal education while less than one percent (1%) are in formal employment.

The biggest challenge affecting the deaf community is stigmatization, as people consider the disability a hindrance to one's ability to engage in the duties and abilities performed by ordinary people. There are also other social implications of not being able to communicate in the same way as the majority of the society: It is for example, more difficult to order a cup of coffee/tea or open a bank account if there is nobody who can communicate with you simply and effectively by non-oral means. Research indicates that people who are deaf have poorer employment outcomes. Deaf people in general have increased difficulty with accessing primary health care services as they are mostly not able or rather unable to communicate with medical staff. Deaf people in most cases have increased barriers accessing the criminal justice system and are not able to serve as jurors.

At the occasion of signing the South African Sign Language Bill into law, President Cyril Ramaphosa said and I quote "recognising sign language as an official language was a step towards realising the rights of people who are deaf or hard of hearing" end of quote. Thus, the South African President recognised that this was the first step towards inclusivity, an

essential step towards realising the rights of persons who are deaf or hard hearing.

Just as there are different languages taught in schools, researchers Long and Bolton (2016) stated that one set of languages that receive comparatively little attention are sign languages such as the Australian Sign Language, British Sign Language and American Sign Language. Positive progress was achieved in the United Kingdom where the British Sign Language was made available as a GCSE subject, whereas in the United States the provision of American Sign Language in secondary schools is increasing although it remains a very small minority of foreign enrolments.

In the Namibian context, I would maintain that sign language should be accessible, prioritised and integrated into the school curriculum, whether primary, secondary or both. This would make sign language education accessible to both hearing and deaf or hard-of-hearing students.

### **Honourable Speaker, Honourable Members**

Teaching a sign language has further benefits: Firstly it benefits an individual as it improves overall communication skills, provide additional cognitive advantages that can foster analytic thinking and enhance

multitasking. Learning a sign language provides additional benefits too, as not only does it make a person bilingual but also bimodal. It provides several cognitive gains as it improves the use of co-gesture in speech, improves the ability to identify facial expressions and enhances vocabulary development.

There are additional social benefits to learning a sign language. For example, it allows people to communicate in very noisy environments or in environment where noise may not be allowed. It facilitate effective communication with members of the deaf community who do not communicate orally, without the need for an interpreter. Sign language further provides another modality beyond the verbal to express oneself. A large part of communication is non-verbal, and the use of sign language integrates, formalises and expresses this non-verbal communication in an effective way.

Secondly the acquisition of widespread knowledge of sign language would benefit numerous groups who are already disadvantaged, such as those with communication disability, particularly those who are deaf or hard-of-hearing. These individuals are at risk for social isolation, stigmatisation, loss of independence, poorer literacy and academic outcomes, underemployment

It is so important to note that even if people only acquire a small amount of sign language, this could have significant benefits in terms of the social acceptance of deaf culture. It is more difficult for people who are deaf to communicate with other members of society and go about their daily lives.

Thus, Mweri (2014) identified factors that underline the importance of Sign Language in the life of deaf people and pointed out that, Sign Language; removes invisibility of deafness, fosters pride and identity among the deaf, builds language competence, facilitates learning, expand educational and professional opportunities, and crystallizes intellectual abilities of the deaf.

Although some of these problems are systemic and institutional, if the number of people who are able to communicate in sign language were to increase, even if that level of communication is not particularly strong or skilled, this will be helpful in assisting to alleviate the difficulties deaf people face as they go about their daily life.

**Honourable Speaker, Honourable Members**

Namibia, especially under the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture has made tremendous efforts in implementing the Sign Language under various inclusive schools across the country and this initiatives has helped to bring learners who are deaf, visually impaired to access education. Deaf people in countries that have recognized their national sign languages have been able to excel and managed to become professionals in different fields.

As we are living in a modern digitalized world, where access to information is crucial, Namibia cannot afford to be left behind. Thus, efforts to officially recognize Namibia Sign Language should be supported as this is a step in the right direction and will in return help protect the rights of deaf people. The need to appoint Sign Language interpreters for live Parliamentary debates will definitely come at cost, thus the necessary budgetary provisions should be considered in the long run as we are moving in this direction. Like all other citizens of this country deaf people too deserve the right to be informed and follow live Parliamentary debates on our national broadcaster.

I therefore support the motion and concur that it be refer to a relevant Parliamentary Standing Committee.

I so submit and I thank you