

Sign language named 12th official language

The National Assembly (NA) has approved the South African Sign Language (SASL) as the 12th official language during a hybrid plenary sitting on Tuesday.



Image source: SHVETS production from [Pexels](#)

The National Assembly approved the Report of the Portfolio Committee on Justice and Constitutional Development on the Constitution Eighteenth Amendment Bill [B1 – 2023] to amend section 6 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996.

The amendment was to include South African Sign Language as an official language to promote the rights of persons who are deaf and hard of hearing.

Until now, the South African Constitution provided for 11 official languages, which include Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu.

“Primarily, the amendment seeks to advance the cultural acceptance of SASL, the deaf culture; ensure the realisation of

the rights of persons who are deaf and hard of hearing to equal protection and benefit of the law and human dignity; and to promote inclusive and substantive equality and prevent or eliminate unfair discrimination on the ground of disability, as guaranteed by section 9 of the Constitution,” Parliament Spokesperson, Moloto Mothapo, said.

The Bill was introduced and referred to the committee on 12 January 2023, and the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development briefed the committee on the contents of the Bill on 27 January 2023.

In response to the call for public comment, the committee received 58 written submissions from individuals and organisations, with the majority of the submissions in support of the Bill.

The committee noted the opposing views expressed by a few commentators, but submitted that the recognition of SASL as a 12th official language “is an important step towards the realisation of the rights of persons who are deaf and hard of hearing”.



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“Further, the committee acknowledged that SASL is not a universal language (different countries have their own sign language and regions have dialects) but submits that, in South Africa, it is in the promotion and development of SASL that the various dialects are also recognised.

“In terms of section 74(4) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, a Bill that amends the Constitution may not include provisions other than constitutional amendments and matters connected with the amendments. The Committee noted that the use of South African Sign Language is mentioned in legislation, such as the Use of Official Languages Act 12 of 2012, the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996, and the Pan South African Language Board Act 59 of 1995,” Mothapo said.

He emphasised that the adoption of the Bill could impact the scope and purpose of the reference to sign language in such legislation.

“Relevant departments administering those and related legislation should take note of this constitutional amendment recognising SASL as an official language in terms of section 6 of the Constitution and consider whether the adoption of the Bill may require consequential amendment to associated legislation for purposes of clarifying the status of SASL as expressed in the Constitution,” Mothapo said.

The amendment was adopted without opposition in the NA.

“The adoption of this constitutional amendment yesterday will bring to 12 the number of official languages in South Africa, once the President signs the Bill into law.”