

# International month for deaf people

By [Nomonde Mhukwa](#)

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In September 1951, hundreds of people from around the world met in Rome, Italy to discuss challenges faced by people with disabilities, and in particular deaf people. They demanded equal opportunities for deaf people around the world and full inclusion in communities.



Source: [Pexels](#)

They established the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) to champion the rights of persons who are deaf or hard of hearing.

This year marks 72 years since the first World Deaf Congress was held where the WFD was established. In commemoration of this milestone, September is observed as the International Month for Deaf People to promote awareness of the rights of deaf persons around the world.

The month is also used to bring to the fore challenges faced by deaf people. It aims to promote understanding of the deaf community and encourage people to take steps to be more inclusive and celebrate diversity. This includes learning sign language so that we can communicate with the deaf community.

South Africa joins the international community in commemorating this important month and honours the contributions of deaf people in the development of our country.

This year's commemoration comes less than two months since President Cyril Ramaphosa signed into law the South African Sign Language Bill, which recognises the South African Sign Language (SASL) as the 12th official language.

The signing into law was a historic moment and an important step towards the realisation of the rights of persons who are deaf or hard of hearing. It promotes inclusivity and substantive equality as well as prevents unfair discrimination on the grounds of disability, as enshrined in the Constitution.

## Recognising South African sign language

This milestone also builds on the achievements we have made since 1994 to ensure that the deaf community's equal rights are realised as enshrined in our Constitution. In 2007 for instance, South Africa signed and ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and in 2013 Cabinet adopted the country's first report to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

In 2012, the Department of Basic Education commissioned a curriculum management team to compile a sign language curriculum and just over two years later offered a standardised SASL curriculum to Deaf learners up to matric level. In addition, in 2022 South Africa developed the first bilingual South African Sign Language Dictionary which is available as an app on smartphones to provide a standardised SASL lexical terminology.



Here's why you should learn sign language

Wits Plus 30 Aug 2023



Speaking at the signing ceremony of the South African Sign Language Bill into law, President Cyril Ramaphosa stressed the importance of the official recognition of this language. He said: "Having sign language recognised as an official language will address access to education, economic and other social opportunities as well as public participation. People with hearing impairments will be able to also access more services, public information and a host of other opportunities."

## Advancing rights, inclusion, and development

The law will not only promote and protect the rights of sign-language users but will facilitate the provision of sign-language interpreters and education in sign language.

The signing into law of sign language as an official language will also have a positive impact on the social and economic development of the deaf community, as well as on their access to information and services.

This official recognition follows an intensive and extensive public-consultation process, which is in line with the country's founding democratic principle to take into account people's opinions and their input towards building a better life for all.

By signing this Bill into law, South Africa becomes the 41st country in the world and the fourth in Africa that has recognised sign language as an official language.

It also means that national government institutions will need to review their language policies to include SASL as an official language. All government departments are now obliged to make provisions for South African sign language interpreters as well as train civil servants, particularly front-line workers on basic SASL.

While the language has long been part of curriculum in our schools, preparations are underway to ensure it is available as a second additional language. This will mean that learning and taking the language as an additional language is not restricted for learners with special needs.

We call on all South Africans to learn our new 12th official language. By doing so we can create an inclusive society that

creates space for everyone to thrive and enjoy the gains of our democracy.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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