

**Submission – International Disability Equity and Rights Strategy.**

**Fiji Association of the Deaf**

The Fiji Association of the Deaf (FAD) serves as a crucial advocate for the rights of the Deaf community and plays a pivotal role in raising awareness within the wider public. To ensure the continued relevance of its work in alignment with the organization's vision and mission, FAD is actively engaging in the development of submissions to feed the International Disability Equity and Rights Strategy. This strategic involvement is essential to shaping policies and initiatives that directly impact the Deaf community in Fiji.

In making submissions, FAD articulates the unique challenges faced by the Deaf community, highlighting specific issues related to accessibility, communication, and equal opportunities. FAD can contribute valuable insights that shed light on the necessity for inclusive policies and practices. This submission emphasizes the importance of recognizing sign language as a legitimate and essential means of communication for Deaf individuals, reinforcing the principles outlined in international agreements such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and NA

Furthermore, FAD's submissions should advocate for the inclusion of Deaf perspectives in decision-making processes related to disability equity and rights. This involves promoting the active participation of Deaf individuals in discussions, ensuring that their voices are heard and their experiences taken into account. FAD is also advocating for the allocation of funding resources to support initiatives that address specific needs within the Deaf community such as access to healthcare, access to information, capacity building and sustained employment opportunities.

Collaboration with other disability advocacy organizations, both nationally and internationally, can strengthen the impact of FAD's submissions. By aligning with broader disability equity and rights initiatives, FAD can contribute to a collective effort that promotes inclusivity, equal opportunities, and the full recognition of the rights of individuals with disabilities.

In summary, active participation in the development of the International Disability Equity and Rights Strategy is a proactive step for FAD to ensure that the unique needs of the Deaf community are acknowledged and addressed. Through this well-articulated submission, FAD can advocate for policies that resonate with its organizational vision and mission, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and equitable society for Deaf individuals in Fiji.:

1. **Awareness and Advocacy**

Securing adequate funding for the awareness, advocacy, and empowerment initiatives undertaken by the Fiji Association of the Deaf (FAD) is paramount to ensuring the sustainability and effectiveness of planned programs. Funding is essential for developing and implementing comprehensive awareness campaigns that reach the Deaf community and the wider public, emphasizing the rights of Deaf individuals as outlined in legislative frameworks and international agreements such as the UN Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Financial support is needed to create accessible materials, organize events, and leverage various communication channels to disseminate information that empowers Deaf individuals to make informed decisions independently.

Specialized training programs, especially those focusing on critical areas such as sexual and reproductive health, ending violence against women and girls and cyberbullying awareness for Deaf youth and women require dedicated funding. These programs play a vital role in bridging gaps in knowledge and addressing specific needs within the Deaf community. Funding would enable FAD to collaborate with experts, develop tailored educational materials, and organize training sessions that empower Deaf individuals with the skills and knowledge necessary for informed decision-making regarding their health and well-being and action referrals of actual cases which for the Deaf is on the rise.

Financial resources are essential for sustaining ongoing advocacy efforts that challenge systemic barriers, promote inclusivity, and push for policy changes that benefit the Deaf community. Advocacy campaigns often involve collaboration with various stakeholders, including government bodies, NGOs, and the wider public. Funding supports the development of compelling advocacy materials, facilitates engagement with decision-makers, and enables FAD to actively participate in forums and discussions where the rights of Deaf individuals are at the forefront.

To achieve the overarching goal of empowerment and the creation of a safe inclusive environment where Deaf individuals can live free from discrimination and coercion, a stable funding source is necessary. This ensures that FAD can plan, implement, and evaluate its initiatives consistently, making a lasting impact on the lives of Deaf individuals in Fiji. Collaborating with governmental bodies, international organizations, and private donors is crucial to establishing a sustainable funding model that aligns with the long-term vision of FAD and the well-being of the Deaf community.

**2. Fiji Sign Language** (FJSL):

The promotion of a standardized national sign language in Fiji, building upon the existing Fiji Sign Language (FJSL), would bring about crucial benefits, especially in terms of communication consistency and accessibility. While some variations may exist due to diverse habits and contextual influences, having one common sign language would provide a unifying and standardized communication tool. This standardization is particularly valuable in formal and educational settings, ensuring that Deaf individuals across different divisions can access consistent linguistic resources, such as sign language dictionaries in the form of text book or online dictionary and educational materials. It would also facilitate effective communication in legal, healthcare, and professional contexts, reducing the potential for misunderstandings that can arise from regional variations.

The continuous development of a common sign language and its documentation in a comprehensive dictionary would serve as a vital resource for the entire Fiji Deaf community. A centralized repository of signs in the form of a dictionary would provide a reference point for standard signs and help preserve the linguistic integrity of FJSL. This resource would not only aid in formal education but also serve as a tool for community empowerment, allowing Deaf individuals to teach and learn a standardized sign language regardless of their beliefs and cultural background. Additionally, a well-documented sign language contributes to broader societal awareness and understanding, fostering an inclusive environment where linguistic diversity is respected and accommodated.

 **3. Stable Funding for FAD Staff**

Ensuring sustainable funding for the Fiji Association of the Deaf (FAD) office staff is imperative for the organization to effectively pursue its strategic goals and engage in collaborative initiatives. While volunteer work is undoubtedly valuable, relying solely on inconsistent donor funding poses a significant challenge to the stability and continuity of the FAD's operations. To address this, a shift towards sustained funding sources is essential to provide financial stability and enable the dedicated office staff to prioritize their crucial roles without the fear of abrupt funding cuts.

**Stable funding for the FAD's office staff consists of the Office Manager, Communications Officer, Accounts Officer and Project Officer would not only enhance their ability to focus on core office functions but also fortify the organization's overall capacity. With a dependable source of financial support, the FAD can invest in professional development opportunities for its staff, implement long-term projects, and establish a more robust collaboration with partners and stakeholders**. This sustained funding approach is pivotal for creating an environment where the FAD can strategically plan, execute, and expand its initiatives, ultimately leading to a more impactful and enduring contribution to the Deaf community in Fiji. By diversifying funding sources and establishing partnerships with organizations committed to the cause, the FAD can build a resilient financial foundation that aligns with its long-term vision and mission.

 **4. Accessing the Healthcare system**

The persistent lack of accessibility for Deaf individuals within the healthcare system in Fiji is a significant and concerning barrier to their well-being. The utilization of a verbal number system, which has remained unchanged despite years of advocacy, exacerbates the challenges faced by Deaf people seeking medical attention. This limitation in communication can lead to misunderstandings, potentially resulting in incorrect diagnoses, inappropriate treatments, or even life-threatening situations. To address this issue comprehensively, there is an urgent need for a paradigm shift in the healthcare system towards recognizing and accommodating the linguistic needs of the Deaf community.

Ensuring that hospital staff are trained to accommodate sick Deaf individuals during the triage stages of the hospital process is critical. The provision of a sign language interpreter, coordinated through the Fiji Association of the Deaf (FAD), is essential to guarantee effective communication between healthcare professionals and Deaf patients. This proactive measure is not only about avoiding medical errors but also about upholding the basic right of Deaf individuals to equitable access to healthcare. Hospitals must acknowledge the unique challenges faced by the Deaf community, and by having a professional sign language interpreter present at all times during check-ins, the healthcare system can make significant strides towards creating an inclusive and welcoming environment for Deaf individuals.

**Recognizing and addressing the lack of support for Deaf individuals in the healthcare system is paramount to ensuring their safety and well-being. It is imperative that the healthcare system in Fiji not only acknowledges the importance of professional sign language interpreters but also allocates resources to make this support system a standard part of their service.** This step is not just a matter of accommodation; it is a commitment to the principle of equal treatment for all, regardless of hearing ability. By taking these measures, the healthcare system can bridge the existing gap, moving towards a more accessible and inclusive approach that prioritizes the health and lives of Deaf individuals in Fiji.

**5. Support Services - Sign Language Interpreters**

The critical role that sign language interpreters play in ensuring effective communication for the Deaf community in various settings, including healthcare, police interviews and interactions , and media, cannot be overstated. However, the persistent issue of interpreters not being adequately compensated for their services poses a significant barrier to their sustained availability and the quality of interpretation provided. It is essential to recognize that interpreting is a skilled profession that requires continuous professional development and training. Establishing a dedicated funding pool specifically for interpreter services in Fiji would not only acknowledge the importance of their work but also ensure their financial well-being, which is crucial for sustaining a pool of qualified interpreters.

With only 38 recognized sign language interpreters in Fiji, the demand for their services is high, particularly in critical settings like healthcare and legal interactions. Allocating separate funds for interpreter services would help prioritize and compensate interpreters appropriately, reinforcing the notion that their work is a professional service rather than charity. This financial support would not only address the immediate concern of fair compensation but also enable interpreters to access ongoing professional development opportunities, ensuring that they stay updated on best practices and maintain the highest standards of service delivery.

**A dedicated funding pool for interpreter services would contribute to the overall accessibility and inclusivity of services for the Deaf community.** By valuing and investing in the profession of sign language interpretation, Fiji can foster a supportive environment for interpreters, encourage more individuals to pursue this career path, and ultimately enhance the quality of communication for the Deaf population. It's an investment in breaking down communication barriers, promoting understanding, and upholding the rights of the Deaf community to equitable access to information and services.

**6. FAD Board, Staff and Sub Committee Capacity Building**

Securing funding for the continuous capacity building of the board, staff and five sub committees of the Fiji Association of the Deaf (FAD) is crucial for maintaining a well-functioning and effective organization. Regular training on good governance and development opportunities are essential for both the board and staff to stay informed about the latest best practices, regional and international standards, and relevant legal and regulatory changes. These capacity-building initiatives ensure that the FAD team remains adept in their roles, fostering a culture of professionalism and due diligence in the organization's operations.

Investing in the ongoing training and education of the board, staff and sub-committee members not only enhances their individual skills but also contributes to the overall organizational effectiveness of FAD. It ensures that the team is well-equipped to navigate the complexities of advocacy work, community engagement, and the unique challenges faced by the Deaf community. By staying current with national, regional and international standards, FAD can benchmark its practices against global best practices, enhancing its credibility and impact in advocating for the rights and well-being of the Deaf community in Fiji.

Moreover, a well-kept office with updated documentation is crucial for organizational transparency, accountability, and efficiency. Capacity building in this regard ensures that FAD maintains meticulous records, adheres to ethical standards, and follows due diligence in all its activities. This, in turn, contributes to the organization's credibility and builds trust among stakeholders, including donors, government bodies, and the Deaf community. By securing funding for continuous capacity building, FAD can reinforce its commitment to excellence and professionalism, ultimately strengthening our capacity to fulfill its mission and vision effectively.

**Conclusion**

The Fiji Association of the Deaf (FAD) plays a vital role in advocating for Deaf rights and raising awareness within the wider public. To ensure the continued relevance of its work, FAD is actively engaging in the development and submission of proposals to the International Disability Equity and Rights Strategy. FAD's submissions emphasize the unique challenges faced by the Deaf community, promoting the inclusion of Deaf perspectives in decision-making processes and advocating for resources to address specific needs. Additionally, securing funding is crucial for maintaining organizational effectiveness. This investment supports ongoing training for the board and staff, ensuring they stay informed about the latest best practices, regional and international standards, and legal changes. By staying current and well-equipped, FAD strengthens its advocacy efforts, enhances its credibility, and upholds its commitment to excellence in serving the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community in Fiji.

**Tuliana Waibuta**

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**Office Manager**

**Fiji Association of the Deaf**