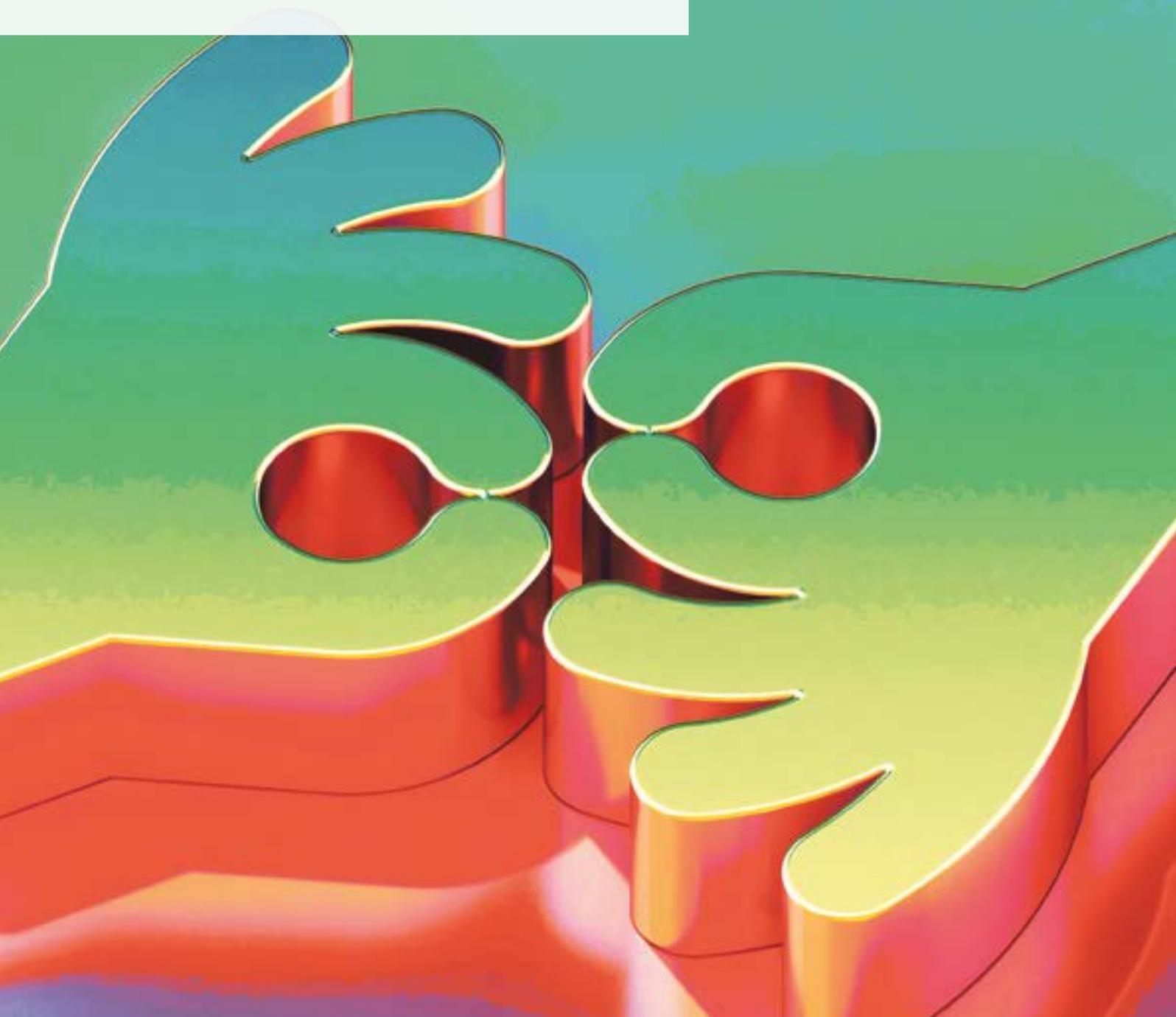


Situation Analysis **Sign Language in Vanuatu**

Executive Summary



Introduction

Sign language is critical in order to enable deaf and hard of hearing people to have equitable access to their communities. Language is a social practice that is used to create and represent meanings and enables communication with others. Language is a way of seeing, understanding and communicating about the world and each language user uses their language differently to do this.

Sign language is an important mechanism through which deaf and hard of hearing people claim their rights. However, as in several Pacific countries, knowledge and use of sign language across Vanuatu is limited, which results in the exclusion of deaf and hard of hearing people from many areas of life. Without including deaf and hard of hearing people, the Sustainable Development Goals and more specifically, Vanuatu's National Sustainable Development Plan, will not be achieved.

Across the Pacific, practices are emerging to address this gap, however these are in their early stages. In Vanuatu, policy commitments have been made to develop a national sign language, and there are good practices in the post-school education and training sector that could be learned from.

Purpose

The purpose of this situation analysis was to contribute to improved opportunities for deaf people and people with communication difficulties to realise their rights to equitable participation through greater access to nationally agreed and accepted sign language in Vanuatu.

The situation analysis sought to explore:

- Current international, national and regional commitments to the strengthening of sign language education, providing examples of good regional and global practices which could inform efforts in the Vanuatu context;
- The experiences of both mainstream skills development programs and schools that have included deaf people, including the barriers and enablers of inclusion;
- The situation of deaf people and people with communication difficulties and their families in Vanuatu, through examination of existing data / reports and discussion with key informants about lived experiences;
- Current and past services, programs and efforts which support sign language education and uptake in Vanuatu; and
- Perceived barriers to the establishment and uptake of sign language.

The analysis sought to provide short, medium and long-term recommendations for future action by Government, civil society and training providers to improve access to sign language across Vanuatu.

Approach

The situation analysis was undertaken between October 2017 and February 2018 and included a desk review of existing policies and documents, and a visit to Vanuatu. Interviews and focus groups were conducted with key stakeholders in Melbourne, Port Vila, Santo and Gaua in Vanuatu. Those involved included:

- Approximately 50 deaf and hard of hearing individuals and approximately 35 of their family members;
- Government representatives;
- Civil society representatives;
- Service providers; and
- Training providers.

An Aide Memoire containing key preliminary findings and recommendations was presented to representatives of the Ministry of Education and Training, Ministry of Justice and Community Services, Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and Vanuatu Skills Partnership.

Key findings

The situation analysis highlighted a significant lack of sign language being used, and very few sign interpreters available, which has a detrimental effect on access to education, employment and socialisation opportunities for people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

There is a stark need for the development of sign language, and opportunities to be created for deaf and hard of hearing people to unite and create their community, language and culture. Sign language will increase opportunities for currently marginalised deaf and hard of hearing people to communicate, develop social skills, gain an education, participate in cultural and social life, gain access to paid work and participate in political processes amongst many other rights. A nationally recognised sign language will also allow for the development of sign language interpreters who will be communication bridges between hearing and deaf or hard of hearing people.

According to the World Federation of the Deaf, the transplanting of another international sign language to Vanuatu is not recommended. Sign languages must be influenced by the culture, heritage and traditions of their own country. To develop a sign language that is faithful to the Vanuatu context, culture and languages, stakeholders such as Government, civil society, service providers and, importantly, deaf and hard of hearing people and their families will need to work together to address some key challenges moving forward.

The establishment of sign language will not alone lead to deaf and hard of hearing people experiencing equitable access to life opportunities and improved wellbeing; others in their lives, such as family members, need to be able to communicate with them too. Sign language interpreters are important resources, who can enable equitable access to school, training, health services, justice and social and cultural opportunities.

Findings are summarized as follows.

GAPS:

- Due to the lack of services available to diagnose deafness, language acquisition is delayed for children who are deaf or hard of hearing.
- The few services which have been made available to map home signs and teach sign language have been limited to the intermittent engagement of international volunteers. As a result, many deaf and hard of hearing people lack language and communication skills, which limits their participation in their communities, and leads to isolation.
- There is no nationally agreed sign language in Vanuatu.
- There are no qualified sign language interpreters resulting in a reliance on family members as informal interpreters to support participation which affects independence and, in some cases, affects access to justice.
- Deaf and hard of hearing people experience significant negative attitudes and stigma, which limits their access to church, communities and school.
- Families frequently experience grief about family members who cannot communicate with others, and are concerned for the deaf or hard of hearing person's future and wellbeing.
- People who are deaf and hard of hearing experience significant barriers to enrolling in and attending educational institutes with some schools either denying enrolment or expelling students, and some families are unaware of their right to education or the ability of deaf and hard of hearing children to learn.
- Where deaf and hard of hearing students are enrolled in school, a lack of sign language or other communication modalities, and a lack of educational supports such as teacher aides or sign language interpreters, severely limit their learning.
- Access to post-school education and training is sometimes challenging for deaf and hard of hearing youth, due to challenges experienced by trainers who must adapt to include deaf or hard of hearing persons in their class.
- Deaf and hard of hearing people face barriers in accessing paid work and the majority of those interviewed who were working, worked for their families. Of those who were working in paid employment, they did not socialise with their workmates.



Vanessa, a deaf Skills Centre client from Santo, produced dresses for sale following participation in sewing skills development activities

Promising practices:

- A Deaf Camp held in October 2017 enabled deaf and hard of hearing people to share a safe space where they were able to initiate development of a small, fledgling community.
- The Vanuatu Civil Society Disability Network supports deaf representation, currently comprised of an individual deaf member.
- The Ministry of Education and Training has plans to establish a Sign Language Working Group.
- Matafanga School in Gaua has a Quality Assurance Officer / Principal who teaches Basic English for 45 minutes every school day and up to 5-10 signs a week to three deaf girls. The school is actively seeking deaf students to join.
- Vanuatu Skills Partnership, through the provincial Skills Centres, is responsible for working with key government and non-government stakeholders to facilitate improved access to quality, relevant training, and has made significant investments to enable deaf and hard of hearing people to access post-school education and training opportunities. Vanuatu Skills Partnership supports post-school education and training providers to use visual aids, family members as interpreters and supports teachers to teach deaf and hard of hearing students. Two deaf students have graduated from the Vanuatu Institute of Technology and are now employed. However, the lack of access to primary education means many deaf and hard of hearing youth lack the literacy and numeracy requisites needed to enrol in vocational skills training programs.
- Multiple policies including the Inclusive Education policy reference the need to establish sign language, and disability inclusion appears across the National Sustainable Development Plan.

Recommendations:

1. Creating Spaces and Supporting Self-Advocacy

Create safe spaces for deaf and hard of hearing people to meet and socialise in order to start developing a Deaf community. This will encourage the organic development of a locally relevant sign language. Increasing and strengthening deaf-specific initiatives, such as the deaf camp held in Santo in 2017, will enable deaf and hard of hearing people to engage with their peers, improve their confidence, and germinate the development of a local sign language as well as establish a self-advocacy mechanism.

2. Sign Language Development

Develop a national sign language, led by deaf and hard of hearing ni-Vanuatu. Given the current lack of language among ni-Vanuatu deaf people, further exploration will be required to ensure a rights-based and culturally and contextually appropriate approach to the development of a sign language that can be used nationally. Further, an expert in sign language linguistics and/ or the Fiji Association of the Deaf could be engaged to work with interested organisations to run national consultation workshops with deaf and hard of hearing people and their families to determine the next steps. This work should be done in line with or in cooperation with the World Federation of the Deaf.

Given the cultural and geographic diversity of Vanuatu, there is also a need to involve deaf people and their families from different geographical areas, languages and cultures, and to accommodate cultural differences which exist locally (including home signs) in order to successfully develop a national sign language.

3. Deaf Resource Centre

Consider the establishment of a Deaf Resource Centre where deaf people can come to develop their sign language and learn from each other. This could also eventually be a place where families, teachers and other interested people could learn sign language. In addition, training to become sign language interpreters could be provided in the future by deaf ni-Vanuatu in partnership with the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters.

4. Policy and Legal Changes

Address the terminology used to describe deaf and hard of hearing people, especially in legal and policy frameworks within organisations, Disabled People's Organisations and government by updating the legislation to reflect the language recommended by the World Federation of the Deaf and the International Federation of Hard of Hearing and ensuring that policies clearly outline provisions for reasonable accommodation.

5. Advocacy and Awareness Raising in the Community

Active inclusion of deaf and hard of hearing people in daily community activities will reduce stigma and enable them to become valued and equal members of their communities. Including deaf and hard of hearing people in disability awareness-raising and advocacy efforts and celebrating specific events such as the International Day of Sign Languages on September 23, would help improve awareness of the rights of deaf and hard of hearing people, and the importance of sign language.

6. Increasing Resources and Support Services for Post-School Education

Increasing resources and support services for post-school education and training providers will improve the enrolment, retention and learning outcomes for deaf and hard of hearing students. This could include professional development for trainers, teacher's aides, sign interpreters and visual and practical resources which will enable the student to learn alongside their peers.

7. Cross Sectoral Inclusion of Deaf and Hard of Hearing People

Resourcing further studies to explore the enablers and barriers experienced by deaf and hard of hearing people and their families in accessing other essential mainstream and specialised services will be the first step towards broader inclusion. Key sectors of concern include education, early identification services, health services and justice services. These are critical to the participation and future of the deaf and hard of hearing people and their families.



Vanessa now works in the Northern Provincial Hospital kitchen after completing her Certificate in Culinary Arts at VIT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Conclusions

- There is an urgent need for the development of sign language, beginning with the creation of opportunities for deaf and hard of hearing people to unite and organically create their community, language and culture.
- Sign language needs to be developed locally, and influenced by the culture, heritage and traditions of its own country.
- To develop a sign language that is faithful to the Vanuatu context, stakeholders including Government, civil society, service providers and, importantly, deaf and hard of hearing people and their families will need to work together to address some key challenges moving forward.
- With 83 islands in Vanuatu it will be important to strategise how to enable deaf people to gather together in order to develop a language which can be easily shared. It will also be necessary to allow time for the diversity of languages and cultures in Vanuatu to inform understanding and agreement on sign language development.
- A nationally recognised sign language will allow for the development of sign language interpreters who will be bridges of communication between hearing and deaf and hard of hearing people, enabling access to educational and work opportunities, and engagement in public and private spaces.
- Sign language will increase opportunities for marginalised deaf and hard of hearing people to communicate, develop social skills, gain an education, participate in cultural and social life, gain access to paid work and participate in political processes.
- Vanuatu has already demonstrated inclusive practices through the work of the Vanuatu Skills Partnership and others, and while existing good practices have been identified, further study is needed within each sector to identify the main barriers and facilitators of inclusion.
- While this study focused on access to sign language to support the inclusion of deaf and hard of hearing people in skills development, broader systemic issues play a key role in creating barriers for deaf and hard of hearing people, particularly in the early years. Access to early diagnosis and intervention programs and models of education that support deaf education, as well as access to justice, are particularly critical. These require further exploration.

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