Towards a National Sign Language in Vanuatu

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Abstract

As of 2025, there is no national sign language in Vanuatu. Sign languages are natural languages that emerge in deaf communities. While studies in the United States have estimated that approximately 95% of deaf children are born into hearing families who do not sign (Mitchell & Karchmer, 2004), there is no equivalent demographic data available for Vanuatu. This highlights a critical evidence gap. Because most deaf children are born into hearing families without signing skills, language acquisition of a language of wider use typically occurs in schools or other gathering places of the deaf community. These settings are critical for the establishment of intergenerational transmission of a national sign language. Historically, such settings have not existed for the deaf community in Vanuatu.

This article reports on efforts by the Curriculum Development Unit through the Ministry of Education and Training and the Vanuatu Deaf Association to improve access to language for deaf people in Vanuatu. The project consists of multiple phases which broadly include building a corpus of recordings the signs for common objects and actions used by deaf people in all the provinces of Vanuatu, selecting signs from this corpus to be included in a dictionary, and finally dissemination of these signs to stakeholders. This last ongoing phase aims to equip educators around the country and disability associations so that teachers can use the signs with deaf children in public schools.

By providing access to sign language for all deaf children as well as gathering places for the deaf community, future generations of Vanuatu deaf people will have access to language which allows them to thrive in all areas of society.

Summary in Bislama

Vanuatu i nogat wan nasonal saen lanwis. Plante pipol long Vanuatu we oli def oli yusum ol defdefren homsaen. Hemia i mekem i had blong ol pipol we oli def long Vanuatu blong kasem gudfala edukesen mo sosol patisipesen. Karikulum Divelopmen Yunit (Ministri blong Edukesen mo Trening) mo Def Asosiesen long Vanuatu oli stap wok long wan projek blong divelopem wan saen lanwis blong Vanuatu. Projek ia i wok blong dokumentem mo standetaesem ol saen long siks provins blong Vanuatu. Wok blong projek ia i inkludum tu divelopmen blong wan Vanuatu diksonari long SooSL mo wan tija gaed blong gaedem ol tija long edukesen blong ol pikinini we oli def. Projek ia i stanap strong long tingting ia se "Evri desisen blong mifala i mas karem voes blong mifala." Folem stamba tingting ia, ol pipol we oli def raon long siks provins blong Vanuatu nao oli givim ol saen blong divelopem saen lanwis ia. I gat smol foren saen nomo we i inkludum ol leta, namba mo kala we bae yumi yusum. Naoia i gat wan total saen blong 433 evriwan we i stap long Soosl Diksonari. Nem blong Diksonari ia hemi Nasonel Saen Lanwis blong Vanuatu (NSLV) mo ol pipol we oli def nao oli jusum nem ia. Diksonari ia i stap wet long apruvol proses blong Ministri blong Edukesen mo Trening. Afta long apruvol proses bae i gat rolaot blong trening we bae i tekem tugeta ol tija, ol disabiliti ofisa, mo ol narafala ofisa blong gavman mo praevet sekta. Hop blong mifala se projek ia bambae i givim hop long evri pipol we oli def raon long Vanuatu blong save gat wan standetaes saen lanwis blong promotem inklusen mo ikwiti long kaontri blong yumi Vanuatu.

Keywords

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1   Introduction

Deaf and hard-of-hearing people in Vanuatu continue to face inequalities across community life, government services, education, employment, and health care. Although specific national population counts for hearing impairment are not well documented, publicly available data indicate that about 4.8% of adults report some hearing difficulty and 0.26% report severe hearing difficulty (Disability Data Initiative, 2023). This occurs within a broader context in which 17.7% of adults report functional difficulties in at least one domain. Reliable rural–urban disaggregation remains unavailable, but qualitative findings and national policy reviews consistently highlight greater exclusion of persons with sensory impairments, particularly in rural areas (Ministry of Justice and Community Services [MJCS], 2018; MJCS & Disability Desk Unit, 2013). Most deaf people in Vanuatu do not attend school together or have community gatherings with each other (Osugi et al., 2022). These locations are critical for the establishment of a shared sign language and for intergenerational sign language transmission. Previous efforts to identify deaf people in Vanuatu have not found cases of intergenerational transmission or sign systems shared by more than one deaf person in family or village settings. Therefore, the majority of deaf ni-Vanuatu people communicate within their family or villages through their own gesture systems called homesigns or family signs. Homesigns or family signs refer to an individual's improvised gestural communication system developed in the absence of an established sign language (Iseli, 2018). While these systems can be rich and functional for family interaction, they differ from one individual to another and are not broadly shared across communities. In some cases, homesign systems may persist across generations within a single family, but they do not constitute a national or conventionalized sign language (Goico & Horton, 2023) and no such systems have been found in Vanuatu.

Lack of access to a shared language for communication negatively affects the lives of deaf people in Vanuatu. For example, a report based upon interviews of 50 deaf individuals and 25 family members describes widespread lack of access to education for deaf children (Blyth & Brown, 2018). Families reported that when they attempted to send their deaf children to school, they were told their child could not learn because of deafness. Other families did not attempt to send their children to school due to fear that their children would be bullied or their own negative attitudes about their child's ability to learn (Blyth & Brown, 2018). While progress has been made, access to education for people with disabilities is an area that needs to continue to be developed (UNESCO, 2021). Even when deaf children have been allowed in school, lack of interpreters or education in sign language has created extreme barriers to learning (Jenkin et al., 2019; Thomas, 2024). In his personal report, Leniker Thomas describes how his mother continued to send him to school even when the teacher attempted to exclude him (Thomas, 2024). Many families in Vanuatu are unaware that their deaf children have the right to an education and would not know they could continue to send their child in this situation (Jenkin et al., 2019). The Ministry of Education and Training reports in 2023 there were 19 deaf children enrolled in schools and 1,145 students with mild hearing loss (Ministry of Education and Training, Government of Vanuatu, 2023). Comparing the 19 enrolled deaf children with the deaf population reported in the 2020 census, it is clear that the majority of deaf children are not currently enrolled in education.

The barriers faced by ni-Vanuatu deaf individuals stretch beyond access to education. An in-depth analysis of the situation for deaf people in Vanuatu highlighted that deaf people are isolated and vulnerable to abuse (Iseli, 2018; Iseli & McKee, 2025, see companion issue). There are limited opportunities for employment and negative societal attitudes towards people with disabilities (Blyth & Brown, 2018; Eldads Vira et al., 2025a, 2025b; Iseli, 2018). Not only is there no national sign language, but knowledge about sign languages is not widespread. For example, a situational analysis by the Pacific Disability Forum included a parent report that their family doctor advised them to stop signing with their deaf child because nothing was physically wrong the child's voice box (Jenkin et al., 2019). Deaf people's access to all areas of life is further limited by the lack of certified sign language interpreters; however, before sign language interpreters can be effective, there must be a shared sign language. In line with international evidence, a shared language is a precondition for equitable participation in education and services; hence our project prioritises deaf-led corpus development and teacher-facing resources (Adam, 2015; Schermer, 2012; McKee & Vale, 2017).

There have been previous efforts to create a deaf community in Vanuatu or provide sign language to deaf children. None of these have been consistent enough over time to significantly change the situation. In 2006 Vanuatu Society for People with Disabilities (VSPD) brought a deaf-blind individual from New Zealand, Chris Farrelly, set up a New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) and Braille training program. This program continued for several years before it ended (Iseli, 2018). A school founded in 2008 enrolled two deaf sisters who used a family-based sign system. The school contacted Australian volunteers to teach AUSLAN to the deaf students and the teachers. The older of the deaf sisters passed her year 10 exam in 2024, becoming the first deaf student in Vanuatu to do so (Fairfax, 2024). In 2012, some Sanma Frangipani Association fieldworkers volunteered to support a few deaf children in school; however the volunteers did not know sign language and the support ended (Iseli, 2018). In 2017, a Deaf Camp organized by Sanma Frangipani Association with support from Vanuatu Skills Partnership hosted approximately 25 deaf people and their family members to allow them to develop their language together and to develop a network of peers (Blyth & Brown, 2018). Similarly, in 2019, VSPD and Vanuatu Disability Promotion and Advocacy Association (VPDA) hosted a social group called Talking Hands as a monthly gathering for deaf people in Santo and Port

Vila. However, the funding for the program ended, and the gathering was only able to happen two times. The most long-standing gathering of deaf people is the Jehovah's Witnesses which has several deaf members who meet regularly and sign together beginning in 2013 and continuing today. Within the past year, in Port Vila, adult members of the Jehovah's Witnesses have begun to regularly visit some deaf children who are enrolled in school. This is the first known effort with continuing recurrent meetings between deaf adults and deaf children. In 2023, the Vanuatu Deaf Association was founded to advocate for, seek, and promote self-determination through empowerment for the deaf and hard of hearing citizens and residents of Vanuatu who seek its assistance and to enhance the awareness and understanding of "Deaf Culture, Language, and Education". As for written resources, in her work with Volunteer Services Abroad, Iseli created a dictionary of the signs used by 20 deaf people in Vanuatu with the goal of distributing it so that families and could communicate with their children (Iseli, 2012). At other times dictionaries of AUSLAN and NZSL have been irregularly distributed by individual volunteers. While all of these efforts are admirable, for a shared sign language to develop, deaf people need to be interacting regularly in community. None of these have been sufficient for a national sign language to develop. Our approach therefore focuses on (i) documenting signs already in use by deaf ni-Vanuatu, (ii) carefully justifying interim borrowing only where the corpus has gaps, and (iii) planning for school-based acquisition and inclusive teacher support, consistent with best practice in sign language planning and lexicography (Fischer, 2014; McKee & Vale, 2017).

All of the reports and situational analyses referenced in this section recommend the development of a shared sign language in Vanuatu which is born locally from the ni-Vanuatu deaf community (Blyth & Brown, 2018; Jenkin et al., 2019; Osugi et al., 2022). There is no doubt that the situation for the deaf in Vanuatu will improve if there is access to language. We explicitly align our work with Vanuatu's Inclusive Education and Training Policy 2025–2030, which mandates mainstream inclusion and rejects segregated special schools, underscoring the need for teacher-facing guidance and deaf-led resources (Ministry of Education and Training, 2024).

1.1 *"Nothing about us without us"*

Because some may jump to the conclusion that importing a sign language from a nearby country would benefit the deaf people in Vanuatu, we explain here the basics of ethical work in language development with deaf communities and sign languages. Sign languages are not universal and are developed by communities of users in ways that reflect their culture, heritage and traditions (World Federation of the Deaf, 2023). Sign languages arise naturally out of deaf communities and are not created by hearing people. Historically, there have been cases where linguistic imperialism has been described in sign language communities, as foreign sign languages such as AUSLAN, BSL or ASL have been brought into countries and have influenced or supplanted local sign languages (for example see Braithwaite, 2018; Kusters, 2021; Reed, 2020; Vonen, 2008). Borrowing *per se* is not inherently oppressive; rather, its impact depends on who leads decision-making and how community ownership is safeguarded. We therefore frame any borrowing as a pragmatic, interim step to fill critical lexical gaps, pending deaf-led validation and eventual replacement by locally preferred forms (Rose & Conama, 2017; Fischer, 2014). To adopt an anti-imperial approach and honor the lived experience and expertise of deaf ni-Vanuatu, it is not recommended that a foreign sign language be imported into Vanuatu. Instead, a shared national sign language should be developed by the deaf themselves (Blyth & Brown, 2018; Jenkin et al., 2019; World Federation of the Deaf, 2023). Having a shared local sign language does not prohibit deaf ni-Vanuatu from interacting outside of Vanuatu or from accessing resources in a foreign sign language. Deaf individuals

are often multi-lingual, navigating life with local sign languages, foreign sign languages, and written languages. This multilingual reality is common in Deaf communities and supports a translanguaging perspective rather than a deficit view of contact and borrowing (cf. Adam, 2015; Schermer, 2012).

Furthermore, it is essential, that deaf ni-Vanuatu have decision making power and are fully consulted in any efforts to encourage a national sign language (Osugi et al., 2022). When decisions about deaf people and their languages are made by hearing people in positions of power, this reinforces oppression and audism. For example, deaf people are often treated as research participants where those in positions of power extract information from the deaf individuals and then do not inform them of results or involve them in decision making about those results (Singleton et al., 2014). Ethical language development work in sign languages must empower local deaf communities with linguistic agency, in which they are able to make decisions about their own languages. This posture toward language development works attempts to adhere to the concept of "nothing about us without us." In practical terms for this project, deaf leadership is embedded through (i) a deaf Sign Language Coordinator to select dictionary entries from the corpus, (ii) consultations with deaf adults from all six provinces, and (iii) planned, ministry-endorsed training that centers deaf expertise.

2 Project Goals

2.1 Legal conventions and frameworks

Sign language development work in Vanuatu is informed and mandated by several international and national conventions, frameworks, and policies. In this section we will give a brief overview of two international documents (both from the United Nations) as well as local policies.

In 2008, Vanuatu ratified The Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD) (UN General Assembly, 2006). Several articles in the CRPD are pertinent to sign language development for Vanuatu. The CRPD recognizes sign languages as equal in status to spoken languages and states that deaf people should have the right to express their opinions and have access to information in their preferred languages and develop their own cultural and linguistic identity (Articles 2, 9, 21, 30) (Osugi et al., 2022; UN General Assembly, 2007; World Federation of the Deaf, 2023). Furthermore, Article 4.3 states that national governments are obligated to actively consult and collaborate with national associations of deaf people for any legislation, programme, and policies related to deaf people and national sign language (UN General Assembly, 2006; World Federation of the Deaf, 2023). This explicitly grounds the principle of "nothing about us without us" in international law and affirms the legitimacy of deaf leadership in the Vanuatu project. For a more thorough discussion of the implications of CRPD on the lives of deaf people in the Pacific Islands see the full report *Deaf People in Pacific Island Countries* compiled by the Pacific Disabilty Forum (Jenkin et al., 2019).

A second pertinent document from the United Nations is the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN General Assembly, 2015). These goals can be implemented by any government or private organization as they form an agenda for development work rather than a treaty to be ratified (Osugi et al., 2022). The 17 Sustainable Development Goals explicitly mention disabilities 23 times (Osugi et al., 2022). Within the Vanuatu context, the Ministry of Education and Training has been mandated to deliver the educational aspects of the Sustainable Development Goals and international agreements such as Education for All and CRPD. We note that disability and language rights are embedded not only in Goal 4 (Quality Education)

but also in Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities), which provide a global policy basis for the national sign language project.

In addition, local policies support the mandate for the provision of accessible language acquisition and education for deaf people in Vanuatu. First, the National Sustainable Development Goals as well as the Monitoring and Evaluation Framework for those goals (Republic of Vanuatu, 2016, 2017) pertain to deaf people in the areas of both languages and disability. For example, society goal 1.1 aims to promote and protect Indigenous languages, which should include sign languages used by deaf people. There are three goals pertinent to people with disabilities, including the deaf: Good Health and Wellbeing, Quality Education, and Reduced Inequality. For example, Society goal 2 aims for an inclusive and equitable quality education system with life-long learning for all. Society goal 4.3.3. aims for an increase in people with disabilities holding government leadership positions and 4.5 focuses on people with disabilities having access to government services, buildings, and public spaces and explicitly mentions hearing impairments in the baseline measure. The motto of the goals "leave no one behind" is a reminder that the deaf have a right to accessible information and infrastructure, including sign languages, interpreters, and other services.

Secondly, the National Disability Inclusive Development Policy specifically names lack of sign language as a major barrier to participation in school for deaf children and as an impediment to their wellbeing and prosperity as adults (Government of the Republic of Vanuatu, n.d.; Ministry of Education and Training, 2011). The policy specifically names the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) as the governmental organization to lead the effort to meet the need for sign language through the Inclusive Education Policy and Strategic Action Plan (Ministry of Education and Training, 2011).

The Inclusive Education and Training Policy 2025–2030, now formally launched, identifies sign language development as a core national priority. It directs MoET to: (i) disseminate resources in sign language, (ii) engage sign language specialists to provide tailored support for students with disabilities, (iii) produce teacher-facing guidance to ensure inclusive practice in mainstream classrooms, and (iv) lead the development of Sign Language of Vanuatu through training in selected schools and the deployment of interpreters to support deaf and hard-of-hearing learners (MoET, 2024). This policy provides an authoritative mandate for the project and ensures its integration into Vanuatu's broader inclusive education strategy.

Taken together, the current state of deaf persons in Vanuatu (Section 1) and the legal mandates for access to language and education described here form the foundation for the project which will be described in the remainder of this report.

2.2 Project overview

The current project was taken up by the Curriculum Development Unit (CDU) of the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) of Vanuatu. This project is in line with the commitments of the MoET outlined in section 2.1. The end goal of the project is to promote the creation of a national sign language in Vanuatu through necessary materials such as dictionaries and curricula to support language acquisition and education for deaf children. We clarify here that the present article focuses specifically on lexical documentation and acquisition planning, not on grammatical description. Grammatical analysis is an important next step for future research but is outside the scope of the current study.

The project is firmly committed to adhering to the philosophy of self-determination and empowerment of people with disability, "nothing about us without us." Broadly construed, the project began by locating and gathering the signs used by deaf homesigners in each province

in Vanuatu. Next, signs were selected from this corpus by a deaf ni-Vanuatu sign language specialist with CDU who is also the team leader for the Vanuatu Deaf Association to be included in an official dictionary. The decision-making on which signs to include was therefore deaf-led, ensuring that the dictionary reflects community preferences rather than top-down imposition.

Author positionality is an important part of transparency in this work. Angelinah Eldads Vira, a PhD candidate and the lead author, is a ni-Vanuatu hearing researcher who works as the Inclusive Curriculum Coordinator at the MoET's Curriculum Development Unit. She oversaw the institutional coordination and approval processes. Leniker Thomas, co-author, is deaf, from Vanuatu, and currently undertaking a Master of Arts in Linguistics and American Sign Language; he served as the Sign Language Coordinator for this project, overseeing corpus selection. Rachel Miles, co-author, is a hearing linguist from the United States who has provided technical advice to the MoET in Vanuatu and is completing her PhD in sign language linguistics. Together, this mixed team of deaf and hearing researchers, insiders and outsiders, combine linguistic expertise, community leadership, and educational policy knowledge. This collaborative approach ensured that the project remained rigorous, culturally grounded, and responsive to both community and institutional contexts.

The project is described in detail in Section 3 (completed stages) and Section 4 (ongoing stages) below.

3 Completed Project Stages

3.1 Stage 1: Collection of extant signs

Vanuatu has six provinces: Torba, Sanma, Penama, Malampa, Shefa, and Tafea. The first stage of the current project was to collect the signs being used by deaf individuals in each of these provinces. Inclusion of deaf people from all provinces was a key tenet of the project design because, as described in Section 1, deaf people have little contact with each other. This sociological situation leads to high levels of variation between signers. This project design ensured that the signs were representative of deaf people across the country.

A list of target categories for signs was created by the CDU and given to various organizations which aided with the collection of the signs in the various provinces. The list was divided into ten subcategories with a range of 5-40 items per category. Because deaf individuals are spread throughout various islands in Vanuatu, working with multiple organizations was the best method to obtain the broadest representation of deaf individuals. Table 1 shows which organizations were responsible for the collection of signs for each province.

Table 1. Responsible party for locating deaf individuals and collecting signs by province

Province	Organization
Torba	Vanuatu Skills Partnership
Sanma	Vanuatu Disability Promotion Advocacy and Ministry of Education and Training
Malampa	Ministry of Justice and Community Services
Tafea	Ministry of Health
Penama	Ministry of Education and Training
Shefa	Vanuatu Society for People with Disabilities and Curriculum Development Unit

Organizations were instructed to locate deaf individuals in the province. Each organization was then to take the list of categories and use items in the environment, pictures, or family interpreters to elicit signs from the deaf participants. These signs were collected as videos which were labeled with the name of the item that the organization was attempting to elicit. The media files with the signs and item labels were then given to the CDU. In total, signs were collected from thirty deaf individuals across the six provinces.

Consent was first requested using each individual's homesign system with the assistance of the local interpreter and carers to the deaf participants. Carers were also informed of the activity. Disability officers in the provinces were all involved in this collection in collaboration with the partners. The signed consent forms were returned and stored at CDU.

Because the data collection relied on locally relevant and rooted organizations rather than a central team, methods of data collection were not carefully controlled. Each organization had different equipment available to them to take the videos. Many videos were taken on cell phones. The videos were from various angles and distances because of the nature of data collection in remote locations without a large budget for video equipment and training. Organizations used whatever methods available to them to communicate with the deaf individuals. Recall, that the majority of deaf persons in Vanuatu use their own created homesign systems to communicate and have not received formal education. Furthermore, proficiency in a sign language is highly correlated with literacy rates (Chamberlain & Mayberry, 2008). This means that use of a trained interpreter or of a written language translation to elicit signs for items has limited success. The teams used creative and spontaneous processes involving pictures, pointing and assistance from hearing family members. While this produced some inconsistencies in elicitation, such multimodal methods were culturally appropriate and consistent with participatory data collection in low-resource contexts (cf. McKee & Vale, 2017). It is possible that sometimes the deaf individual's signs did not match the target elicited item from the team. However, in stage 2, all of the signs were reviewed by the deaf ni-Vanuatu sign language expert.

3.2 Stage 2: Corpus creation and review

The videos from each organization were then added to a central database. The software chosen for this task was SooSL from SIL International (SooSL version 0.9.3, 2024). This software is free to download and was developed for the creation of sign language dictionaries. These dictionaries can include information about dialects, multiple senses, multiple glossed languages and allow for searching by sign parameters and not only by gloss (Figure 1). Furthermore, SooSL allows for web publishing either in a public site or a private site which is accessible only to registered users with permission. While not all features of SooSL were used

in this project (Bickford et al., 2016), the ability to input all of the variants for each sign from the different signers as dialects was particularly helpful in organizing the sign corpus. The software also allows for individual signs to be marked as the primary sign without deleting the other variants. This will allow for flexibility if the deaf community in Vanuatu begin using variants which were not predicted to be the most common sign. If the phonological information about each sign is coded, the webpage and software will also allow users to search for the meaning of a sign they have seen using these parameters as well as look up a spoken language word to see the corresponding sign. However, at the current project stage, phonological information has not yet been coded, so this search function is not yet available. This feature will be added in a later stage once phonological coding is complete.
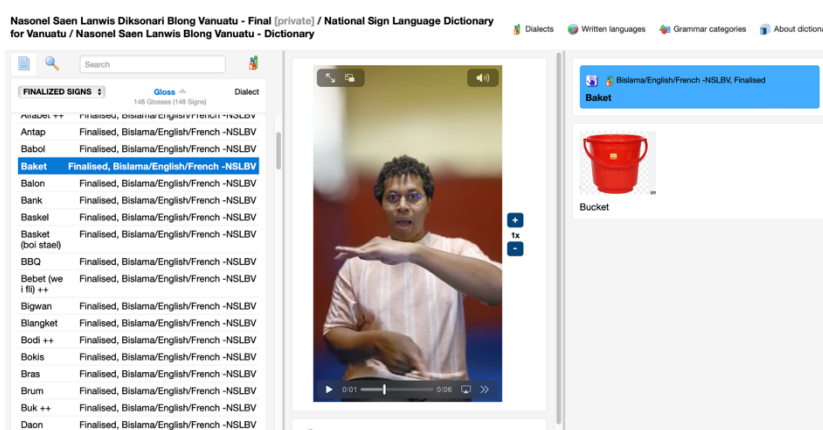

Figure 1. Screenshot of SooSL entry

Leniker Thomas of the Vanuatu Deaf Association was hired as a Sign Language Coordinator to oversee the selection of signs to be included in eventual dissemination. More than 2,000 individual signs had been gathered in stage 1. Mr. Thomas reviewed all of the signs present in the corpus. For each targeted elicitation item, sign variants in the corpus included signs from multiple signers throughout the provinces of Vanuatu. For each targeted item, Mr. Thomas selected the variant of the sign with the highest frequency from the corpus. For many of the elicited items, signers would not merely produce a lexical sign for the pictured item, but would use a more complex description which included the context in which the item was used or located. For example, in a picture designed to elicit a sign for mother, the signer may describe instead or in addition, the types of clothing the woman is wearing or whether she was seated or standing. In these cases, the Sign Language Coordinator had to identify the sign for the target concept amidst the longer description. After one variant of each target item was selected, a deaf signer created new videos of the selected variant. This was to ensure that the video quality was consistent when the signs are later published and because some of the signers did not want their videos to be made publicly available. These videos will be used in the final publication of the signs to be used by teachers and disability organizations.

3.3 Stage 3: Sign creation

In order for the final published collection of signs to be effectively used in educational settings there were specific items that were especially targeted. While the majority of signs were taken from deaf people around Vanuatu, there were some targeted lexical items which were missing from the collected corpus because they were not existent in the homesign systems of the deaf people who participated. Approximately thirty percent of the signs included in the final dictionary were borrowed from AUSLAN because they were not present in the collected

corpus. Specifically, a fingerspelling system, signs for colors and numbers as well as technical terms requested by government ministries were borrowed from AUSLAN to be included in the final dictionary. This borrowing responds to immediate functional needs in education and service provision, while recognising that borrowed items may be indigenised, adapted, or replaced over time by locally preferred variants (Fischer, 2014). International scholarship affirms that borrowing in sign language development can serve as a pragmatic bridge while ensuring that long-term planning remains community-driven (Rose & Conama, 2017). These signs are already in use with the few deaf children who are currently enrolled in school due to previous efforts to spread sign language in Vanuatu (see Section 1.1).

3.4 Stage 4: Selected signs put into database for acquisition planning

The signs selected in Stage 2 along with those from Stage 3 were then put into a new database on SooSL. Although SooSL was originally chosen partly because it stores all variants or dialects of a sign, the video quality needed to be consistent for dissemination to the public. Therefore, the newly signed videos were used. The quality video recording of a deaf person signing the sign, along with an image and translation in Bislama and English are present in the corpus which is housed in SooSL.

At this stage, public access to the database is limited. While SooSL enables online publication, the current corpus remains internal until approval processes are finalised through the MoET. This ensures both quality control and cultural safety, preventing premature dissemination of unapproved signs. Once the MoET approval process is complete, the plan is to make the corpus available on a secure online platform, alongside teacher-facing resources.

3.5 Stage 5: Review, feedback and finalization

The selected signs were then presented to various stakeholders for feedback and comment. Stakeholders included CDU coordinators, Ministry of Education and Training Inclusive Team, and ni-Vanuatu deaf individuals. Feedback included requests for the final corpus to include Bislama, French, and English as well as pictures of the items signed. In addition, the stakeholders requested that background and high-quality video be consistent for all items in the corpus. Crucially, deaf participants from the six provinces were central to this review. Their feedback guided adjustments to glossing, cultural appropriateness, and selection of the dictionary name. The ni-Vanuatu Deaf community chose the name National Sign Language blong Vanuatu (NSLV) for the final dictionary. This step reinforces the principle that authority over the emerging language lies with its users. The final corpus includes 433 selected signs. This corpus is intentionally framed as a "living resource," with the expectation that future updates will reflect community uptake and evolving language use.

4   Future Project Stages

4.1 Official presentations and approvals

The completed signs are now in the process of official approval. There are several levels of approval before they can be released for public use. First, they must be presented to and approved by the Director of Education Services of the Ministry of Education and Training. The Director of Education Services will then present them to the Director General of the Ministry of Education and Training who will then make the final approval. This multi-step approval process is essential in Vanuatu's education governance structure: it legitimises the work, ensures integration with other MoET initiatives, and provides an institutional mandate for

future training and dissemination. Without such approval, materials cannot be officially used in schools or teacher professional learning.

4.2 Training and dissemination

Training is planned for three stakeholder groups: teachers of deaf students, disability organizations, and disability desk officers of the Ministry of Justice and Community Services. The first training phase, to be completed in 2025, will focus on teachers. A teacher guide to support inclusive education of deaf students has already been developed by the CDU and is currently in the layout stage. This guide is essential because in Vanuatu there are no separate special schools; inclusive education is the national policy and practice (MoET, 2024). Teachers therefore require practical strategies for teaching deaf students in mainstream classrooms, going beyond the provision of signs alone. The guide covers classroom strategies, communication approaches, and ways to ensure participation of deaf students across the curriculum. Six schools in two provinces have been selected for the first phase of training. The initial training will not be entirely on sign language, but it will cover strategies teachers can use to teach students who are deaf in various academic subjects. Once the MoET approval process is finalised, the training will also include dissemination of the official Sign Language of Vanuatu corpus and teacher guide. Beyond teachers, training will extend to provincial disability officers, health workers, and other frontline staff in line ministries. These groups frequently interact with the public and play a key role in ensuring accessibility. Training them in National Sign Language of Vanuatu will help deaf citizens access health, justice, and community services.

The specific timing and plan for training teachers in sign language is still to be determined because the CDU recognizes that the process should be led by a deaf expert. The final corpus will be made available online at a future date for people throughout the country to access. The interface will allow people to pick a sign based on its written language translation. Phonological information of the signs has not yet been coded, so searching for a sign based on the sign's phonology is not yet available; however, it is possible to add this feature at a later date.

5   Reflection and Looking Ahead

The project described in this paper aims to create a corpus of signs used by the deaf in Vanuatu for the purpose of acquisition planning and building a shared signing community. Simply having a corpus of signs does not ensure acquisition. Because the majority of deaf people are born to non-signing hearing parents (Mitchell & Karchmer, 2004), sign language acquisition for deaf children often occurs in schools or community gathering spaces. The project described here is housed within the Curriculum Development Unit of the Ministry of Education and Training of Vanuatu. It is natural then that schools are an important focus for the project. However, the training plan includes not only teachers, but also line ministries and organizations to have a broader impact. These line ministries consist of the government offices providing services to the public such as the Ministry of Justice and Community Services, Ministry of Health. The ministries concerned and organizations have already been informed of the upcoming training and have responded with technical terms they would like to have included in a sign language corpus and that they would like their staff to learn during the training phase. This high level of institutional involvement and interest is promising for the future of the project. For sustainability, it is important that the corpus and associated resources are treated as "living documents". Language change and variation are natural processes, especially in emerging national sign languages (Adam, 2015; Schermer, 2012). Regular cycles of deaf-led

review and revision will ensure that the official corpus continues to reflect actual usage across Vanuatu's provinces. If prescribed signs are not taken up, the materials should be adapted rather than enforced. This participatory cycle aligns with the principle of "nothing about us without us" embedded in the CRPD (UN General Assembly, 2006) and reiterated in Vanuatu's Inclusive Education and Training Policy 2025–2030 (MoET, 2024).

As more signs are being requested, it is key to continue the conversation with deaf individuals in Vanuatu so that the signs are coming from and used by the deaf community and not invented by hearing people outside of the community or imported from other sign languages in a manner that continues linguistic imperialism. Furthermore, it is important to raise awareness with hearing stakeholders that given the current situation of the deaf in Vanuatu, it should not be expected that deaf individuals already know all of the signs in the corpus. Dynamic multimodal communication will continue to be key to connecting deaf individuals with government services. For the corpus created by this project to be useful, it must be used for acquisition of language by deaf children and must be continually revised to reflect the deaf community's actual language practices. International experience shows that community-driven sign language planning is most effective when embedded in both education policy and grassroots Deaf leadership (McKee & Vale, 2017; Goico & Horton, 2023). Vanuatu is well positioned to model this approach regionally.

As stated above, the primary location for acquisition of language among deaf children in Vanuatu is schools. In considering educational setting for deaf children in Vanuatu, the small number of deaf people and the distribution of those deaf individuals across many islands must be considered. Therefore, if each deaf child simply attends the geographically closest school to their home, it is likely they would be the only deaf student. Hence, it is recommended that each province identify a school to establish a deaf unit. These schools would be the focus of resources outlined in the local policies for supporting sign language and education for deaf people. They would have teachers for the deaf and interpreters. While separate special schools are not part of Vanuatu's inclusive education policy, designated inclusive units within mainstream schools can serve as hubs for peer interaction, teacher expertise, and resource allocation. For this to be effective and sustainable, the deaf teachers and interpreters would need to be employed by the Ministry of Education and Training.

We hope that as the signs in the corpus begin to be used by the community, a second project will create material that can be used in classrooms. Bloom (2024) books have already been used by the CDU in partnership with Global Partnership for Education, Save the Children, and SIL Global to provide books in many Vanuatu languages through the *Vanuatu Literacy Nasara* online platform (Curriculum Development Unit, Government of the Republic of Vanuatu, 2024). This same platform can be used to create and provide sign language books for use across the country. It is important that the development of these books follows the signing used by the deaf community and does not impose foreign sign language or spoken language grammar. Therefore, an analysis of the grammar being used by ni-Vanuatu deaf will be a prerequisite for creating further curricular materials. We expect that grammar will arise naturally as deaf people interact with each other.

Looking ahead, disseminated materials should undergo a review process led by ni-Vanuatu deaf people every few years. Materials should be adjusted to reflect signs being used in the community. If the prescribed signs are not used, the materials should be revised with signs that reflect the language of deaf ni-Vanuatu. At that future time the dictionary could also be expanded to include more signs that the communities are using, based on what they are needing to communicate about.

We conclude that this project alone cannot fulfill all of the agreements of CRPD, SDGs, and the Inclusive Education and Training Policy 2025–2030. However, by establishing an evidence-based, community-driven foundation for Sign Language of Vanuatu, it creates a pathway for long-term systemic change. Continued collaboration between the Deaf community, MoET, and partner organizations will be essential for realising the rights of deaf ni-Vanuatu in education and beyond. It will take efforts by stakeholders and organizations across ni-Vanuatu society to achieve these goals. These efforts must be deaf-led and recurring rather than intermittent. While it is beyond the scope of the current project, we encourage any organization to help create spaces where deaf can gather and socialize. This will develop the sign language of Vanuatu as well as the deaf culture and sense of identity (Blyth & Brown, 2018).

Acknowledgements

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