

Letter to the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) From the Norwegian Deaf Association (Norges Døveforbund)

The letter concerns the voting process to be approved as one of the host countries for the WFD World Congress 2027.

In January 2023, the Norwegian Deaf Association (NDF) submitted an application to the WFD to host the WFD World Congress 2027. During the process from March 2023 to June 2023, the Norwegian Deaf Association has undergone an application process and as an applicant country, the Norwegian Deaf Association has observed and experienced several things that have not been visible to other countries.

We had planned to send these evaluation points to the WFD regardless, but now, after the unrest following the selection of the host country, NDF feels a duty to make these points public. Therefore, we choose to send this as an open letter.

We have not made this public before now because we wanted to wait for WFD's statement first. Now that the statement has been released, we will send this letter as a response to the statement, along with the information we possess as an applicant country, to other member countries regarding the application process itself.

Evaluation Report from WFD and WFD's Discrimination

It is the first time that WFD has presented an evaluation report of the host countries. The evaluation report was shared with the delegates in three rounds, via email a couple of weeks before the General Assembly, through a video just before the General Assembly, and the evaluation was also presented during the General Assembly.

Several of the evaluation points were assessed in a peculiar way.

Norway approached WFD expressing our desire to provide feedback on the evaluation report. We were informed that our feedback would be addressed during the General Assembly.

When Norway was in Jeju for the General Assembly, we contacted our contact person in WFD's evaluation committee with a question regarding how we could comment on the evaluation report. The contact person stated that it was not possible to comment until the General Assembly had started.

Norway and Nigeria contacted the evaluation committee and the Chairperson of WFD, expressing their wish to discuss the evaluation report with them. During this dialogue,

both countries strongly expressed their desire for WFD not to present the evaluation report with the recommendation of UAE as the next host country. We perceived this recommendation as unfair and believed that it could influence member countries to vote in accordance with WFD's recommendation.

During this dialogue, WFD stated: "Thank you for your feedback; we haven't considered this. We will take your feedback into consideration". WFD also mentioned during the same dialogue: "We will only present the evaluation report".

Norway understood that WFD was not supposed to include the recommendation during the presentation of the evaluation report at the General Assembly.

The evaluation report was presented, and UAE was highlighted as the recommended host country by WFD, much to Norway's surprise. Unfortunately, there was no consideration given to allowing the host countries the opportunity to comment on the evaluation report during the General Assembly.

Just before the vote, WFD stated that they were unaware that it was not safe for LGBTQIA+ individuals to travel to UAE and that they had not received information that women and LGBTQIA+ individuals were prohibited from speaking on topics related to women's rights and LGBTQIA+ rights.

It is important to emphasize that WFD is responsible for investigating whether it is safe for all representatives to travel to the host country. As an applicant country, we are aware that this is something WFD takes seriously because when WFD visited Norway in March 2023 as part of the application process, they asked questions about LGBTQIA+ rights and whether it was safe for all groups to visit the country in question. We were told that they asked the same questions to all countries.

Therefore, it is inconceivable for Norway that WFD was unaware that it was unsafe for LGBTQIA+ individuals to travel to UAE, as stated by WFD from the podium during the General Assembly.

Norway believes that WFD should have double-checked the facts before making a recommendation. Norway believes that WFD has a responsibility in the application process and the voting process. It is not acceptable to say that WFD must trust the host country. When it comes to safety, all the facts should be double-checked.

Other things that Norway has experienced during the process as an applicant country:

- There was a lack of information. Neither Norway nor Nigeria received any information about stands and other practical matters before the General Assembly began.

Neither Norway nor Nigeria received any different instructions than previous practice regarding setting up stands when the General Assembly starts. We assumed it was the same practice now. When Norway arrived at the convention center the day before the General Assembly, we saw that UAE had already set up their stand and started their campaign. Norway's and Nigeria's stands were empty.

Norway contacted our contact person and asked if we could start setting up our stands. He said yes. We asked UAE if they knew they could start the stand the day before the General Assembly began, and they said yes, and that it was something they had been informed about in advance. Neither Norway nor Nigeria received this information.

- During the General Assembly, the contact person went to UAE's stand multiple times and provided them with information. We don't know what information he gave them; neither Norway nor Nigeria received that information. On at least one occasion, he gathered UAE in a circle, provided them with information, and asked if they had received an email from him. This happened openly in front of UAE's stand. Norway stood nearby and expected to receive some information, but the contact person just passed by Norway and Nigeria's stand without giving us any information. We don't know what this information was about; it is more a matter of principle where we felt ignored during the exhibition days. Norway had to constantly ask for information and felt that we were a step behind in the information flow as an applicant country.

General Assembly Voting

- The General Assembly process was largely arranged so that it went against Norway and Nigeria. For example, there was no open discussion or question session in which the applicant countries could participate.

Only three questions were allowed, which the member countries had to agree upon. Naturally, these questions were discussed when the applicant countries were outside the General Assembly. All three countries had to answer the same three questions.

There was no real discussion, and it was not possible to ask many critical questions. Fortunately, one critical question regarding LGBTQIA+ rights was accepted, but there were several critical questions and comments that the General Assembly did not have the opportunity to ask.

There was also no opportunity to complain about the meeting process. Norway and several other countries wanted to file a complaint and informed about this both beforehand and during the voting point but were not given the opportunity.

- When UAE won the vote with 40 votes against Norway's 32 votes, there was jubilation from UAE, who said "thank you for the support" to the contact person of the congress committee while embracing him. This did not happen publicly during the General Assembly, but out of sight for the delegates. Norway observed this as we were nearby.

Unfair Congress Committee in Geographic Allocation

- As part of the application process, Norway became familiar with the evaluation committee, and one of the requirements was that the applicant countries had to pay for flights for all members of the evaluation committee. Financing was therefore not an issue. However, WFD chose to have an evaluation committee that included members from Iceland and Denmark, along with a representative from WFDYS.

It is very strange that two individuals from the Nordic region would evaluate for the entire world. As a country in the Nordic region, Norway feels that this is unfair as it may have systematically put Norway at a disadvantage due to the fear of criticism that Nordic countries support each other.

The evaluation committee should have been replaced once WFD received applications from member countries. People from a different continent than Europe, Africa, and Arabia should have been included. In any case, it is the applicant country that must pay for WFD's flight tickets.

- One of the criteria is the financing of the congress, and WFD gave a high score to UAE because they had state funding in place. This is considered an unfair criterion as Norway and several other countries cannot secure state funding until a few years before the event. In Norway, it is customary for such a process to be approved approximately two years before an event, with some exceptions being three or four years, but not five and six years as WFD wished. This is due to factors such as the democratic process that takes place in democratic countries. A government must consider elections and potential changes in government.

Norway believes that WFD should take into account different procedures and regulations to secure public state funding in applicant countries. We also believe that financing should not outweigh human rights.

- Norway also wants WFD to address how they evaluate member countries as applicant countries. WFD should inform a potential applicant country if they have minimal chances of being selected as a host country due to, for example, unrest in the country. This would allow the applicant country to withdraw their application before paying the congress fee to WFD to enter the application round. Norway sees this as unfair to countries that have to pay a high price only to receive a low score from WFD. Norway believes that WFD should function as an advisory body during the application process.

We hope that WFD takes these points seriously. We hope that WFD realizes that much of the process has been unfair. Norway will submit feedback on WFD's evaluation criteria, and we ask WFD to review how the evaluation process can be made as fair as possible in the future.

Most importantly, what astonishes Norway is that one of the applicant countries does not meet WFD's requirements as a host country and that the country's laws contradict WFD's work for human rights, yet they went through the entire application process and were recommended as a host country.

Norway requests that WFD takes responsibility for not double-checking the facts more thoroughly before making a recommendation. Norway expects a public apology for WFD's failure to take that responsibility.

Thank you in advance,
Norwegian Association of the Deaf
(Norges Døveforbund)