



Disability language guidelines

Introduction

Disability is a complex concept and its terminology has evolved substantially over recent years, in particular following the adoption of the 2006 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).¹ The present document is intended to provide staff of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) with guidelines on appropriate disability language and terminology for use in publications, presentations and other outputs. This document will be a continuous work in progress, to be regularly updated in light of any comments or suggestions received, as well as any new developments in international thinking and discourse on disability.

Definitions

The below definition is in line with the CRPD and the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF), both of which broadly define disability not simply as an impairment, injury or illness, but rather as a complex interaction between a person's health condition and environmental and other contextual factors. The World Report on Disability states that "defining disability as an interaction means that 'disability' is not an attribute of the person. Progress on improving social participation can be made by addressing the barriers which hinder persons with disabilities in their everyday lives".²

When referring to persons with disabilities, it is important to distinguish between the terms 'impairment' and 'disability'.

Impairment: Problems in body function or body structure, such as a significant deviation or loss. Body functions are the physiological functions of body systems (including psychological functions), and body structures are anatomical parts of the body, such as organs and limbs.³

Disability: Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.⁴

In other words, the term impairment refers to a person's physical, mental, intellectual or sensory condition(s), while disability is the interaction between a person's impairment and their environment. A person can have more than one impairment, and impairments are not always visible nor do they necessarily lead to disability.

¹ Adopted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 61/106, along with the Optional Protocol to the Convention. Both entered into force on 3 May 2008.

² World Health Organization and World Bank, World Report on Disability, Geneva, 2011, p. 4. Available from www.who.int/disabilities/world_report/2011/report.pdf.

³ World Health Organization, International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health. Available from www.who.int/classifications/icf/en/.

⁴ CRPD, article 1.

General guidelines

1. *Use respectful language*

As we all know, language matters and the way in which we refer to or describe things has the power to convey certain messages, values and attitudes. By using positive and respectful language when referring to disability, we are helping to promote principles such as equality, inclusiveness and respect for diversity.

2. *Use 'person-first' language*

Many people with disabilities have expressed unease at being described using person-second terminology, seeing this as devaluing them as people and implying that the most significant thing about them is their disability. As such, it is advised to adopt people-first disability terminology, e.g. persons or people with disabilities and not disabled persons or people (notable exception: deaf people or persons).⁵ In line with person-first language, there are several additional considerations to take into account, namely:

- The use of the acronym 'PWD' for persons with disabilities is not appropriate. This should always be written in full to keep the focus on people, and not as a homogenous group reduced to an acronym. In general, acronyms are to be avoided when using disability terminology.
- The disabled is also not an appropriate term. It gives a false impression of persons with disabilities as being a homogenous group, rather than a diverse and heterogeneous group with different abilities, interests, needs and voices.

Avoid the terms 'victim' and 'sufferer', for example, 'suffering from blindness' or 'victim of disability'. This implies someone is helpless or passive. The exception would be in the context of mines and explosive remnants of war (ERW), where there is broad consensus around promoting the terms 'victim' and 'survivor'. Victim assistance, as reflected in both the Mine Ban Treaty and the Convention on Cluster Munitions, refers to addressing the human rights of all individuals injured or killed by mines/ERW as well as their affected family members and communities.

3. *Avoid outdated or negative terminology*

Terms like 'handicapped', 'crippled' and 'mentally retarded' are outdated and offensive. Use instead the term 'persons with disabilities' or, when referring to a particular type of disability, use person-first language with a neutral description or clinical name for the disability, such as 'persons with physical impairments' or 'a person with Down syndrome'.

4. *Avoid euphemisms and 'normal' terminology*

Euphemisms such as 'differently-abled' and 'physically challenged' are often perceived by persons with disabilities as overly politically correct and patronizing. Instead, use person-first terms such as 'persons with disabilities' or 'a person with physical disability'. In the same vein, be careful with the word 'special', such as 'persons with special needs'. Such terms imply that accommodation is exceptional or that persons with disabilities are somehow receiving 'special treatment', when it is rather the duty of society to enable persons with disabilities to participate in society on an equal basis. It can sometimes be helpful to say 'persons with disabilities and their peers without disabilities'. This reinforces the idea of being equal in age, skill or another category. However, using 'normal' terminology (i.e. comparing or referring to normality when talking about disability) is unacceptable. Diversity is a fact of life and using these comparisons reinforces false perceptions of persons with disabilities as abnormal or outsiders. Difference is normal.

⁵ For more information, see World Federation of the Deaf. Available from www.wfdeaf.org/our-work/focus/areas/deaf-culture.

5. Do not sensationalize

While it is important to recognize the achievements of persons with disabilities, be careful not to sensationalize them. Overemphasis can be perceived as patronizing or as giving the impression that such achievements are unexpected or out of the ordinary, when most persons with disabilities have the same range of skills and abilities as persons without disabilities.

Disability terminology	
Use	Avoid the use of
Singular: A person with disability; a person with [physical/sensory/etc.] impairment/disability Plural: Persons/people with [physical/sensory] disabilities	Afflicted by/suffering from/victim of disability; the disabled; unfortunate; cripple/crippled; the physically disabled; physically challenged person; disabled people; the handicapped; invalid; incapacitated; PWD/PWDs
Singular: A person without disability Plural: Persons/people without disabilities	Ordinary people; able-bodied/normal people; the normal; people living normal lives
Impairment; disability	Problem; handicap
Singular: Person who uses a wheelchair Plural: Persons/people who use wheelchairs	Person bound/confined to a wheelchair; wheelchair person
Singular: A person with low vision; a person who is blind Plural: Persons/people with low vision or persons/people who are blind	The blind; problems with sight
Singular: A person who is hard of hearing; a deaf/Deaf person Plural: Persons who are hard of hearing/Deaf people	The deaf; the hard of hearing; deaf and dumb
Singular: A person with speech disability Plural: Persons/people with speech disabilities	Dumb; dumb person/people; mute/mute person; speech impaired person; problems with talking; the speech impaired
Singular: A person with intellectual disability Plural: Persons/people with intellectual disabilities	Mentally retarded/handicapped; mentally challenged; slow; intellectually disabled; PWID
Singular: A person with a mental health condition Plural: Persons with mental health conditions	Insanity; insane; lunatic; mentally sick; mentally imbalanced; mad person; mentally ill person; psycho; crazy people
Personal assistants	Carers (meaning paid home carers)
Accessible parking spaces, buildings, etc.	Disabled/handicapped parking spaces, buildings, etc.
Persons with disabilities; ensuring equal rights	People with special needs; accommodation of special needs

REFERENCES

- UNRWA (2013). Disability Toolkit. Available from www.unrwa.org/userfiles/file/disability%20/Disability%20Toolkit%20English.pdf.
- UNICEF. Disability Orientation. Available from www.unicef.org/disabilities/index_71294.html.
- English Federation of Disability Sport. Disability models and language. Available from www.efds.co.uk/resources/case_studies/578_disability_models_and_language.
- Feministe. Disability terminology: a starter kit for nondisabled people and the media. Available from www.feministe.us/blog/archives/2010/06/18/disability-terminology-a-starter-kit-for-nondisabled-people-and-the-media/.
- Handicap International (2009). Mainstreaming Disability into Disaster Risk Reduction. Available from www.handicap-international.org.uk/Resources/Handicap%20International/PDF%20Documents/HI%20Associations/MainstreamingDisDisasterRiskRedu_2009.pdf.