
EXTRACTS FROM ‘WORLD VISION INTERNATIONAL – GUIDELINES ADDRESSING DISABILITY’

World Vision International Disability Team

So, God created man in his own image,
In the Image of God he created him;
Male and female he created them.
God saw all that he had made, and it
was very good.

(Genesis 1: 27, 31)

The human person, the living being, beyond all exterior appearances, reflects Love who created him with the ability to love and be loved, with his being, his faculties and his freedom. Every person has in his/her constitution the honour, glory and dignity of God. Man is the being with whom God speaks intimately in the ‘*garden in the evening*’ (Gen 3:8) he is the reality which God created for himself, in order to pour into it the fullness of his own life, to be in communion with this reality, which he has given the ability and responsibility of love for others and of communion with others in freedom.ⁱ

WHY DO WE NEED TO THINK ABOUT WORDS WE USE AROUND DISABILITY?

The power of words and images to reflect and shape community perceptions of people with a disability is widely acknowledged. Language is a powerful tool which can be used to change stereotypes and attitudes.ⁱⁱ

Language both reflects and shapes our understanding of reality and can also influence the thoughts and actions of those around us. When using language to refer to persons with disabilities, if one speaks as if there is a problem with a person who has an impairment, they will probably take a different approach in their treatment of the person than if they recognise that any problems related to a person’s impairment may be problems stemming from the attitudes, systems or practices that create disabling barriers.

Negative disability language also impacts children. Language shapes the way children think of themselves and others. Negative language can adversely affect a child’s emotional development, and can become a barrier to building a healthy sense of self-esteem.

It is important to re-examine the language we commonly use and evaluate the meanings and connotations of our words, including their origins in relation to persons with disabilities. These guidelines for addressing disability do not dictate which terms should or should not be used. Rather, these guidelines are intended to help raise consciousness amongst World Vision staff and the partners we work with about the language we use and issues surrounding ‘Disability’.ⁱⁱⁱ

Most people want to be respectful of others yet may not realise how the language they use disempowers others.

We “inherit” language and often do not give it much thought, yet we do have a choice and we can make conscious choices to use words and terms that say what we mean and give power, dignity and respect to all people.

There are a number of guidelines on disability terminology developed by other organisations. Most share the basic principles of respecting dignity, rights and diversity of persons with disabilities, and ask speakers not to label. Websites of some of the guidelines are available at the end of the paper.



THREE WORDS AROUND “DISABILITY”

Before we look at different terminologies, think about how you may be using the word “disability”

Impairments include physical, sensory, neurological, intellectual, mental or any physiological long or short-term condition.^{iv} Examples would include lacking part of or all of a limb; or having a limb/organ/mechanism of the body that does not function fully, effectively and/or efficiently.

Function/functional limitation: While impairments may affect functioning of your body organs, it may not necessarily affect your ability to perform or function in certain activities.

Disability is a result of the limitations imposed on persons who have impairments by attitudinal, institutional, or environmental barriers to their participation in society.^v

World Vision International separates ‘disability’ (social issue) from ‘impairment’ (medical or individual issue) in order to clearly see each of the two issues a person may be facing. To separate the two issues also enables us to take specific actions and approaches towards focused solutions.

Let us also be aware that a person who has impairment may not necessarily have **functional limitation** but often faces disabling barriers or discrimination. Because of discrimination or assumption by others, the person’s rights may be violated and therefore the person may not be able to participate in school, community activities, meetings, leisure, or employment, to marry, or to have children.

Although we need to separate the three issues, rather than being so caught up with the use of words “impairment”, “disability”, and “functional limitation”, it is more important to be aware that everyone has different abilities and inabilities, many have impairments, and everyone is special.



GUIDELINES WHEN ADDRESSING A DISABLED PERSON:

- 1 Uphold dignity and respect.** We want to put the person first, and not label the person with her or his physiological condition (e.g. mobility impairment or learning difficulty), the cause (e.g. polio or Down's syndrome), or assistive devices the person uses (e.g. wheelchair or eye glasses).
- 2 Do not assume on behalf of the person.** For example, one cannot know if someone who lost a leg due to traffic accident is currently suffering or feeling challenged. Perhaps the accident happened thirty years ago, and the person might not be suffering from the trauma any longer. It is inappropriate to assume and address the person as sufferer or as being challenged.
- 3 Victimising vocabularies are disempowering.** A person who was just injured by a landmine may be considered a victim. But it is an insult to continue regarding the person as victim because she/he might have overcome the emotional trauma, disabling discrimination, or her or his mobility difficulty, and have regained confidence and independence.

4 Do not generalise and assume that persons with disabilities are 'unhealthy' or in need of medical support (e.g. surgery or therapy). A person who has difficulty walking or seeing may be perfectly healthy. Conversely, addressing non-disabled persons as 'healthy' or 'able bodied' could be inappropriate and inaccurate. Many non-disabled people do have health problems.

5 Consider what is normal to you may not be normal to others, because of our personal, cultural or other differences or backgrounds. People may fall into the category of majority or average, but everyone is normal and abnormal in one way or the other.

6 The word "defect" is unfortunately sometimes used in referring to a person in some parts of the world. A machine can have a defect but a person cannot be defective because we are all made in the image of God. In the same manner, **no one is incomplete or complete, while everyone is complete and incomplete.** We are fearfully and wonderfully made.

7 Acknowledge all persons have the same basic needs as well as different needs. All persons have different abilities and inabilities. For example, someone who uses eyeglasses would not want to be referred as "eyeglasses", "someone with special needs" or "differently abled". To address someone as a "person with special needs" would put the person in a separate category and therefore could discriminate or isolate her or him from the mainstream population. In the same way, everyone is special and gifted, and has different abilities and inabilities. **Do not label a person with "special needs or gifts", or "differently able".**

WEBSITES FOR DISABILITY TERMINOLOGY

Clark, L. and Marsh, S. (2002) *Patriarchy in the UK: The Language of Disability*.

<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/disability-studies/archiveuk/archframe.htm>

Disability Awareness in Action Definitions of Disability – a Briefing Paper

www.daa.org.uk

The Disability Rag The Problem with Challenge

<http://www.raggededgemagazine.com/archive/challenge.htm>

Disability Services Queensland, Queensland Government (2006) *A way with words: Guidelines for the portrayal of people with a disability*

http://www.disability.qld.gov.au/community/communication/way-words/documents/way_with_words.pdf

European Disability Forum Adopt a disability attitude
<http://www.1million4disability.eu/adopt.asp?langue=EN>

Kids Together, Inc. People First Language: A commentary by Kathie Snow

<http://www.kidstogether.org>

Mobility International USA Respectful Disability Language

<http://www.miusa.org/ncde/tipsheets/respect/>

United Spinal Association *Disability Etiquette: Tips on Interacting with People with Disabilities*

<http://www.unitedspinal.org/pdf/DisabilityEtiquette.pdf>

World Health Organisation Disability and Rehabilitation Team (June 2001) *Rethinking Care from the Perspective of Disabled People*

<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/disability-studies/archiveuk/archframe.htm>

- i Committee for the Jubilee Day of the Community with Persons with Disabilities The Person with Disabilities: The Image of God and a Place of His Wonders. http://www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/jubilevents/jub_disabled_20001203_scheda1_en.htm
- ii Community Disability Alliance, Queensland Government (1995) *A Way with Words: Guidelines for the Portrayal of People with a Disability*.
- iii Clark, L. and Marsh, S. (2002) *Patriarchy in the UK: The Language of Disability*, <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/disability-studies/archiveuk/Clark,%20Laurence/language.pdf>
- iv World Vision International Disability Working Group (2006) *Disability Position Paper*.
- v World Vision International Disability Working Group (2006) *Disability Position Paper*.
- vi Illustration from Werner, D. (1999) *Disabled Village Children*. <http://www.dinf.ne.jp/doc/english/global/david/dwe002/dwe00201.htm>