

TRANSFORMATIVE LANGUAGE GUIDE – DISABILITY

Why it matters

Language is powerful. In our communication at Light for the World, we strongly encourage colleagues to think carefully and critically about the impact of the terms and phrases we use. We use respectful, inclusive language that reflects our values as an organisation and accurately represents the individuals and communities we work alongside. This guide focuses on disability. Transformative language guides are also available on **sex and gender** and **anti-racism and decolonisation**. We are conscious of intersectionality¹ and that people may be subject to multiple forms of discriminatory language based on their various social and political identities.

Key Principles

Rights-based approach

Light for the World endorses a social and human rights-based model of disability which should be reflected in our language. This approach differs from the charity or medical models, which view people with disabilities with pity and disabilities as a “problem” to be “fixed”. Referring to people with disabilities with positive language recognises they have the same human rights and control over their lives as non-disabled peers.

If in doubt, ask

Whenever possible, ask people with disabilities how they want to be referred to – they are the rights holders. In the spirit of disability participation principle “nothing about us without us”, people with disabilities should have a voice over how they are represented in our communications. People with disabilities are individuals and should be treated as such – there is no one-size-fits-all approach.

There are two valid perspectives on self-definition:

1. Person-first language (person/people with a disability). In placing the person ahead of their disability, it emphasises they are not defined by it. This language is typically used by Light for the World.
2. Identity-first language (disabled person/people). Some people with disabilities prefer this approach, which emphasises that their disability is an inseparable part of their identity and/or that they are disabled by a society that is not equipped to allow them to participate.

Distinguish between disability and impairment

The terms “disability” and “impairment” should not be confused or used interchangeably. Disability refers to the loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in society on an equal level with others due to social and environmental barriers. It is an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations and participation restriction. Disability is not only a health condition, but also reflects the interactions a person with a disability has with their environment and society. Impairment refers to an injury, illness or congenital condition that causes or is likely to cause a loss or difference of physiological or psychological function.

Avoid euphemisms and stereotypes

Euphemistic expressions such as “differently abled”, “challenged” and “special needs” may be patronising, condescending or offensive to people with disabilities. Such euphemisms are based on outdated ideas that talking about disabilities should be softened and reinforces the notion that disabilities are something to be ashamed of. Be wary of sensationalising stories of people with disabilities by portraying them as inspirational solely or in part based on their disability.

Mention specific disabilities when essential to the story

A person’s specific disability can be mentioned when it is necessary for clarity. The word “impairment” can be mentioned in a medical context (“prevention of visual impairment”). For social contexts, it is best to use “disability”.

Consider context

A person’s understanding of inclusive language will be influenced by several factors, including cultural context. We should respect the terms people choose to describe themselves but also use our judgement to communicate as inclusively as possible. If someone describes themselves with a term we don’t use, consider if/how it should be used in our communications.

The below glossary is not exhaustive but gives guidance on some of the most common words and phrases we strongly advise to use (and avoid) in Light for the World’s communications. If you have questions, please contact the Global Communications team.

1 Intersectionality refers to the ways in which different aspects of an individual’s identity can expose them to several overlapping (or “intersecting”) forms of discrimination and marginalisation.

ENGLISH GLOSSARY OF TERMINOLOGY

In addition to this English glossary of some of the most common terms, a **glossary for multiple languages** is available. It was developed by the Rights & Advocacy team, which can also be contacted for more information.

Do use	Don't use	Why
Disability	Handicap	Handicap, in English, carries a connotation of being incapable and/or dependent on charity and welfare instead of being entitled to the same rights as all other members of society.
People with disabilities A person (living) with a disability A person (living) with ... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • an intellectual disability • a learning disability • a mental health disability/issue 	Handicapped The disabled Crippled Suffering from/being afflicted by	We generally prefer the language of the UN Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and recommend using person-first language. However, we typically use “people with disabilities” rather than “persons with disabilities” except in certain cases, for example referring to the CRPD. Some individuals and Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) prefer identity-first language (“disabled person/people”) to emphasise that people are being disabled by society and a range of barriers. If this is how someone refers to themselves, we should respect their preferred language in our communications. “Impairment” can be used in medical contexts (e.g. prevention of a visual impairment).
A woman/man/person with albinism	Albino	As above, we prefer person-first language and a person should not be referred to solely based on their condition.
Non-disabled A person who is non-disabled	Normal Healthy Able-bodied	“Non-disabled” is a neutral term which does not imply superiority over a person with a disability.
Person with an intellectual disability People with learning disabilities	Mentally retarded	Some people with specific intellectual disabilities may also prefer “learning disability” to reflect the challenges they face in learning within non-inclusive educational settings. If in doubt, ask. “Retarded” is an outdated and offensive term.
Deaf Hard of hearing Person who is deaf or hard of hearing Deafblind	Deaf and dumb Mute Deaf-mute Hearing impaired	Please refrain from using the term “hearing impairment” and instead use “Deaf/person who is Deaf and hard of hearing”. This is the preferred language of many Deaf communities and the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD). Use capital “D” when referring to someone from the Deaf culture and community and when they capitalise when referring to themselves. Deafblindness is a combination of vision and hearing loss. “Mute”, describing a person without verbal speech, is inaccurate and should be avoided. Person with a speech disability is an acceptable alternative.
Blind Blind person Person who is partially sighted Person with visual impairment	The blind The visually impaired	To avoid reducing people to one characteristic (“the blind”), we prefer using: blind person, person who is partially sighted, person with visual impairment, etc. The World Blind Union’s (WBU) preferred language is “blind or partially sighted”.
Wheelchair user Person who uses a wheelchair Person with a mobility impairment	Wheelchair-bound Confined to a wheelchair	Using a wheelchair means mobility, independence and freedom so we should use language with a positive connotation.
Accessibility Accessible	Disabled-friendly Fully accessible	Accessibility is not limited to the physical environment (buildings, public transport, etc) but also refers to communication, access to information and general participation in social life. A building, for example, may be physically accessible but not necessarily “friendly” for a person with a disability.