

FIVE TIPS

for Communicating with and about Persons with Disabilities

1 USE EMPOWERING LANGUAGE AND IMAGES¹

- Use language that empowers. Persons with disabilities are a part of human diversity and humanity, and the equals of others in society.
- Avoid terms that imply suffering, disease, sickness, or abnormality, that imply persons with disabilities need to be “cured” of their disabilities or that frame disability using euphemistic or patronizing terms such as “special,” “challenged,” or “differently abled.”
- Avoid group designations such as “the disabled.”
- Use images that reflect persons with disabilities as active participants in society and not passive recipients of aid. Images, including photographs and icons, should celebrate the diversity among persons with disabilities and not reinforce stereotypes.

2 INCLUDE PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN THE MIX

- Include empowering images of persons with disabilities as part of your representation of other diverse groups in photos, public service announcements, and success stories; remember that persons with disabilities are at least 15 percent of any population, with 80 percent estimated to live in developing countries.
- Be sure to follow all relevant guidelines with respect to obtaining informed consent from photo subjects for use of images.²
- Remember to ensure that your communications materials are *accessible* to people with different disabilities, utilizing large print, plain language, Braille, video captioning, sign languages, audio description, and other accessible formats as appropriate.³

3 EMBODY THE PHRASE, “NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US,” IN ALL USAID COMMUNICATIONS

- Include persons with disabilities in conversations about USAID’s work on an equal basis with other stakeholders—focus on them and their views, not their personal assistants, caregivers, or interpreters.
- Create opportunities to highlight the perspectives and stories of persons with disabilities by inviting their co-authorship and review of USAID communications materials prior to publication.

- Reach out to Disabled People’s Organizations (DPOs) and invite them to share their views to inform your work. Cultivate relationships with DPOs who can advise on tone and terminology used in communications materials that reference persons with disabilities.

4 KNOW APPROPRIATE EMPOWERING LOCAL TERMINOLOGY IN ALL LANGUAGES

- Learn and use appropriate, empowering disability terminology in the local language in every country; seek guidance from local DPOs—they can help you!
- Consider working with local DPOs to adapt a version of the following “Easy Reference Guide” in the local language to serve as a resource for USAID Communications materials produced in local languages.

5 RESPECT PEOPLE’S SELF-IDENTIFICATION PREFERENCES

- Be aware that some people prefer **person-first** language, for example, *a person with a disability, a woman who is blind, a man with Down Syndrome*. At the same time, be aware that some individuals and communities of persons with disabilities prefer **identity-first** language (such as “autistic person” or “deaf person”) over person-first language (such as “person with autism,” “person who is deaf”).
- **WHEN IN DOUBT, ASK:** It is OK to ask a person who self-identifies as a person with disabilities what language is most appropriate for a given context. Remember too that most people would prefer to be known by their name than by a label.

¹ The USAID [Guide for Strengthening Gender Equality and Inclusiveness in Teaching and Learning Materials](#) provides guidance on promoting empowering and respectful representation of persons with disabilities in Education materials.

² See, e.g. USAID [Photo Guide for USAID Partners](#).

³ See USAID [ADS Chapter 551](#) (especially section 551.3.2.5 on multimedia) on compliance with accessibility requirements of Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act.

EASY REFERENCE GUIDE: This list is not exhaustive. When in doubt, ask persons with disabilities!

Suggested Phrases	Phrases to Avoid
a person with a disability; persons with disabilities	the handicapped, the disabled, PWD(s),* crippled, invalid, retarded, physically challenged, differently abled, impaired
has [name of condition or impairment]	afflicted by, suffers from, victim of
disability prevalence	disability burden
a person with a significant disability; significant disabilities	a person with a severe disability, severe disabilities
a non-disabled person; a person without a disability	able-bodied; normal; typical
a person who uses a wheelchair; a wheelchair user; a wheelchair rider	confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair-bound
a person with a learning disability**	slow, slow learner, special needs, retarded, below average
a person with a cognitive disability; a person with an intellectual disability	mentally handicapped, mentally defective, retarded, slow, below average
a person with cerebral palsy	spastic
a person with a psychosocial disability; a person with a mental disability	mental patient, insane, mad, crazy
a person who is deaf***	deaf and dumb; deaf-mute; hearing impaired
a person who is blind, partially sighted, or has low vision	the blind; visually impaired
a person who is deafblind	deaf and blind
a person who has epilepsy	an epileptic; a person who has fits, spells, attacks
a person of short stature; a little person	midget

* USAID recognizes that persons with disabilities may self identify in many different ways, including in some cases as “PWDs.” USAID respects individuals’ authentic self-identification. However, out of deference for those members of the disability community who do not support use of the acronym, we spell out “persons with disabilities” in official USAID publications.

** Here used to include a person with, e.g. dyslexia, dysgraphia, etc. Note that in some cultural contexts the term used is “learning difficulty,” and “learning disability” is instead used in the way that “cognitive disability” or “intellectual disability” is used on this list. Work with persons with disabilities to learn what is appropriate for your context.

*** Note that ‘deaf’ is an umbrella term that includes people who are deaf, hard of hearing, deafblind, and deaf people with multiple disabilities. Also, deaf people are diverse. It is important to note that deaf people who use sign languages consider themselves to be part of a linguistic minority and members of the Deaf Community, and as with other people may or may not self-identify as persons with disabilities.

“First of all, we are people...

...My name is Bárbara Alessandra Ventura Castillo. I'm from Perú and am 32 years old. I was born with Arthrogyrosis Multiplex Congenita (a physical disability that causes decreased flexibility in one's joints), but it hasn't been an obstacle to defending and promoting the human rights of people with disabilities in different spaces. I have sent positive messages about people with disabilities in the media since 2010, and I can actually see changes in the appropriate language.”

–BÁRBARA VENTURA from Perú,
*Participant in the USAID-funded Women's Institute on
Leadership and Disability (WILD), Founding Partner and
President of La Asociación Luchando Contra Viento y Marea
(Association for Struggling Against All Odds)*

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