NDA Advice paper on Disability Language and Terminology

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## Contents

[NDA Advice paper on Disability Language and Terminology 1](#_Toc107232385)

[Contents 2](#_Toc107232386)

[Introduction 3](#_Toc107232387)

[Background 3](#_Toc107232388)

[Models of disability 3](#_Toc107232389)

[Person-first and identity-first language 4](#_Toc107232390)

[UNCRPD and language 5](#_Toc107232391)

[Language and the Deaf community 6](#_Toc107232392)

[Recommendations 6](#_Toc107232393)

[1. Take a contextualised, flexible approach 6](#_Toc107232394)

[2. Ask people about their preferences 7](#_Toc107232395)

[3. Avoid medicalised language 8](#_Toc107232396)

[4. Avoid stereotypes 8](#_Toc107232397)

[5. Avoid euphemisms 8](#_Toc107232398)

[6. Avoid negative language 8](#_Toc107232399)

[Glossary 9](#_Toc107232400)

[Terms not to use 9](#_Toc107232401)

[Meaning of common terms 13](#_Toc107232402)

[Annex 1: Consultation details 18](#_Toc107232403)

[Annex 2: DPO language resources 19](#_Toc107232404)

# Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide practical guidance for Departments and public bodies on the use of language with regard to disability in order to accommodate the varying preferences of persons with disabilities in a respectful manner. The paper outlines relevant background information before setting out our recommendations. The paper also includes a glossary summarising a list of terms which are not recommended for use and their recommended alternatives. It also contains a glossary of some commonly used terms.

The content of this paper is based on a review of relevant literature, the NDA’s consultation with Disabled Person’s Organisations and other stakeholders (see Annex 1), and findings from the consultation on the State Party report to the UNCRPD Committee coordinated by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

A draft version of this paper was published in April 2022. It was circulated to DPOs, other civil society stakeholders, and public officials for feedback. The revised version, published in June 2022, was developed based on the feedback received. The NDA recognises that language evolves over time. Therefore, it is intended that this paper will be reviewed periodically and updated as required.

# Background

## Models of disability

The way in which disability is understood has evolved, which has implications for the language we use. The Medical Model conceives of disability as a medical ‘problem’ located within the individual. This defines disability in terms of a person’s impairment which can be ‘cured’ by the intervention of medical science.[[1]](#footnote-1) Individuals are seen as patients or service users, rather than active agents in their own lives.[[2]](#footnote-2) The Social Model, by contrast, places an emphasis on ‘disabling barriers’ caused by economic and environmental factors and social attitudes that prevent the full participation of disabled people in society. [[3]](#footnote-3) Rooted in disability rights, this approach locates the problem within society and its lack of inclusion, rather than on what is ‘wrong’ with the individual. The social model is widely acknowledged to have played a significant role in shaping the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).[[4]](#footnote-4)

This is reflected in the preamble of the CRPD which states:

Recognising that disability is an evolving concept and that disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.[[5]](#footnote-5)

## Person-first and identity-first language

Similar evolutions have taken place with regard to language. There is no universally agreed consensus on which terminology to use in relation to disability. However, there are two main approaches which are commonly referenced both in the literature and in the consultation findings. These are often referred to as the ‘person-first’ approach and the ‘identity-first’ or ‘social model’ approach.

Person-first language places a reference to the person before the reference to the disability. Examples of person-first language include terms such as ‘people with disabilities’, ‘person with autism’ and ‘person with an intellectual disability’. This approach seeks to emphasise that a person is first and foremost a human being entitled to human rights. Person-first language is favoured by the UN[[6]](#footnote-6) and appears within the CRPD. However, it is not a universally accepted approach.

The second common approach is often referred to as identity-first or social model language. Examples of this include terms such as ‘disabled person’ or ‘autistic person’. Proponents of this approach state that person-first language reflects a medical model understanding of disability in which a person’s impairment is seen as separate from the person, and therefore something to be fixed or cured. Identity-first or social model language instead seeks to emphasise that people are disabled by barriers in the environment and in society, rather than their impairment. This shifts the focus from ‘fixing’ the individual towards creating a more inclusive society through changing attitudes and improving accessibility for all.

The NDA recognises both person-first and identity-first/social model language. In our 2021 consultation with Disabled Person’s Organisations (DPOs),[[7]](#footnote-7) there was a preference for identity-first language among most, but not all, who gave feedback. In particular it is noted that stakeholders with an intellectual disability had a preference for person-first language. They highlighted that ‘person with an intellectual disability’, rather than ‘intellectually disabled person’ is the preferred term. In addition, consultation findings from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage found that many people with a mental health difficulty or psycho-social disability prefer person-first language.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The Report from Public and Stakeholder Consultations[[9]](#footnote-9) on Ireland’s draft State Party Report on the UNCRPD outlined that there was mixed feedback on the terminology used in the Draft State Report, with some preferring the term ‘disabled people’ and some preferring ‘people with disabilities.’ A summary report on the submissions received by DCEDIY on the Draft State Party Report also highlighted that there were varied opinions on the language used in the State Report.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The NDA also acknowledges that some disabled people/people with disabilities do not identify with either term. For example, some older people with a disability, some people with non-visible disabilities (including mental health difficulties), and members of the Deaf community don’t necessarily identify as disabled.

## UNCRPD and language

The language used in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities reflects the person-first approach, with the term ‘persons with disabilities’ used throughout. However, ratification of UNCRPD does not prevent countries from choosing their own approach to language. For example, a review carried out by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage found that the England, Wales and New Zealand use ‘identity-first’ language (e.g. ‘disabled person’) in their national disability strategies. The UN accepts these alternative uses of language.[[11]](#footnote-11)

## Language and the Deaf community

There are particular considerations to be aware of with regard to language and the Deaf community which were highlighted in our consultation with the Irish Deaf Society. The Irish Sign Language Act 2017 recognised the right of ISL users to use ISL as their native language. Members of the Deaf community who use ISL as their preferred language identify as a cultural and linguistic minority group, rather than as persons with a disability. There are also deaf and hard-of-hearing people who do not use Irish Sign Language, who may or may not identify as disabled. Deaf is sometimes spelled with a small ‘d’ (deaf) or a capital ‘d’ (Deaf) to make a distinction between those who use ISL and those who do not.

Deaf with a capital ‘D’ refers to all people who are Deaf or hard of hearing who identify culturally as Deaf, including some people who have cochlear implants or hearing aids. This group uses Irish Sign Language as their preferred language. When spelled with a lowercase ‘d’, this refers to those who have other preferences of communication including English, lip-reading, and writing, and may not use Irish Sign Language or be involved in the Deaf community. In some cases, the term ‘d/Deaf’ is used. The use of both the lowercase and uppercase ‘d’ in this instance refers to all those who identify as culturally Deaf and those who do not.[[12]](#footnote-12) The NDA acknowledges that preferences vary among individuals.

# Recommendations

## Take a contextualised, flexible approach

The NDA recognises both ‘person with disability’ and ‘disabled person’ as valid and legitimate terms. In recognition of varying preferences, the NDA intends to adopt a flexible approach, using both terms interchangeably. The NDA will continue to use the term ‘persons with disabilities’ when directly referencing the UNCRPD.

Departments and public bodies may consider adding a statement to their documents explaining their choice of language. Below are examples of statements the NDA will insert into its reports:

Example 1: In this report, the terms “people with disabilities” and “disabled people” are used interchangeably. The term ‘disabled people’ is recognised by many within the disability rights movement in Ireland to align with the social and human rights model of disability, as it is considered to acknowledge the fact that people with an impairment are disabled by barriers in the environment and society. However, we also recognise that others prefer the term “persons with disabilities” because of the inherent understanding in the term that they are first and foremost human beings entitled to human rights. This also reflects the language used in the UNCRPD. We recognise that many people with an intellectual disability, people with a mental health difficulty or psycho-social disability prefer person-first language. We also recognise that some people don’t identify with either term. You can find our full statement on language here [link].

Example 2: In this report, the term ‘Deaf’ with an uppercase ‘d’ is used when referring to those who are Deaf or hard-of-hearing who identify culturally and linguistically as part of the Deaf community and who use Irish Sign Language as their first or preferred language. A lower case ‘d’ is used to refer to those who are deaf or hard-of-hearing and who do not identify culturally and linguistically as a member of the Deaf community. The term ‘d/Deaf’ is used to refer to both groups. You can find our full statement on language here [link].

## Ask people about their preferences

Disabled people are not a homogenous group and may choose to identify in various ways. Furthermore, language changes and evolves over time. DPOs are the organisations best placed to advise with regard to the most up to date language. Many national DPOs have guidelines on language on their websites which were developed collectively with their members (see Annex 2). The views of some DPOs may differ from others. A flexible approach which is respectful to all can be adopted.[[13]](#footnote-13) If engaging with a disabled individual in a consultation or meeting, it is always best to ask a person their preference with regard how to refer to them.

## Avoid medicalised language

Disability is not a health condition that needs to be fixed or cured. Unless in a relevant setting, medical language should not be used. For example, people with disabilities should not be described as “patients” unless under medical care. Neither should disabled people be labelled by a diagnosis. For example, the term “Autism Spectrum Disorder” is offensive to many in the autism community. Instead you can say “autistic person”.

There are some settings in which medical language may be appropriate. For example, in a clinical setting or in reference to specific legislation. However, the use of medical language should be limited to those contexts in which it serves a specific and relevant purpose.

## Avoid stereotypes

The NDA is aware that for many disabled people, using words such as “inspirational” or “courageous” to describe a disabled person doing day-to-day activities, while well-meaning, can imply that it is unusual for people with disabilities to be successful or live a fulfilling life. Similarly, describing someone as having “overcome” their disability can be patronising. Disabled people can and do have the same interests, abilities and achievements as non-disabled people.

Disabled people are often included in the category of “vulnerable groups” in policy frameworks and strategies both internationally and nationally. However, it is important not to depict disabled people as inherently vulnerable. People with disabilities become vulnerable because of the disabling barriers in society, rather than because of an individual’s ‘impairment’. This approach shifts the perspective from paternalism and protection towards empowerment and the recognition of disabled people as rights-holders.

## Avoid euphemisms

Euphemisms such as “differently abled” and “dis-ABILITY” (with ‘ability’ emphasised in capital letters or bold text) can be seen as condescending by some disabled people. While the intention may be to focus on an individual’s strengths, it can result in taking the focus away from the social and environmental barriers that create a disabling environment for an individual.

## Avoid negative language

It is important not to depict people with disabilities as objects of pity. Terms such as “suffers from”, “afflicted with” or “wheelchair bound” are inappropriate. They depict disabled people as powerless and suggest a poor quality of life. It also directs the focus towards the individual’s impairment instead of highlighting the lack of inclusion or accessibility within the environment or society. Instead, you can say that a person “is disabled”, “has a disability” or “uses a wheelchair”. Similarly, describing a person’s disability in terms of a “disorder” has negative and stigmatising connotations and should be avoided.

# Glossary

## Terms not to use

While there are varying preferences regarding disability terminology, there are some terms which are not recommended as they are not respectful of disabled people. The below is not an exhaustive list, but is meant to provide some practical guidance and explanation for terms not to use and a recommended alternative (Table 1).

Please be advised that the below table contains stigmatising and potentially triggering language.

Table 1: Terms not to use and suggested alternative terms

| Term not to use | Why | Recommended alternative term |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **The disabled** | Catch-all phrases such as 'the blind', 'the deaf' or 'the disabled’, do not reflect the individuality, equality or dignity of people with disabilities. | Disabled people; people with disabilities |
| **Handicapped** | This is a stigmatising term. | Disabled person; person with a disability |
| **Wheelchair-bound; confined to a wheelchair** | Wheelchairs offer mobility, freedom and independence. Using negative language perpetuates harmful negative stereotypes. | Wheelchair user; person who uses a wheelchair |
| **Suffers from (e.g. asthma)** | This is a negative term. | Has (e.g. asthma) |
| **Victim of…** | This is stigmatising language which places an individual in a passive role as an object of pity. | Disabled person; person with a disability |
| **Normal; normally developing** | Using this term to refer to non-disabled people implies that being disabled is abnormal which is stigmatising. | Non-disabled person. |
| **Able-bodied person** | This term suggests that every disabled person does not have an ‘able body’.  It places the focus on an individual’s ‘impairment’, rather than society’s lack of inclusion for disabled people.  It can erase the experience of disabled people who don’t have a physical impairment. | Non-disabled person |
| **Special** | This is a euphemistic term and can be patronising. | Disabled person; person with a disability |
| **‘Special’ in an education context e.g. special school, special class, SEN (Special Educational Needs) student** | This term can be patronising towards disabled children and students and can have the effect of ‘othering’ them.  Language which ‘others’ disabled children and students can perpetuate ideas of separate or segregated education systems instead of supporting the progression towards inclusive education as envisaged by UNCRPD.[[14]](#footnote-14)  However, we recognise that this term is used in legislation e.g. the EPSEN Act 2004[[15]](#footnote-15) which means its use is unavoidable in some circumstances at present. | There is currently no consensus regarding an alternative for the word 'special’ in an education context. Some people use the word ‘additional’ e.g. ‘additional educational needs’. However, it is not fully satisfactory from an inclusive education perspective, as all children and students have individualised needs and no one’s needs are ‘additional’.  Further consultation is needed in order to establish acceptable alternative terminology. The NDA is aware that this language may be examined as part of the review of the EPSEN Act. |
| **Service user** | This term can be dehumanising and can frame people as passive recipients of services. | Client; person who uses our services |
| **High functioning; low functioning**  **Mild; Moderate; Severe; Profound** | These terms are often used with regard to autism. Simplifying autism into categories can perpetuate negative and untrue stereotypes.  Autism is such a diverse spectrum of traits and differences that no two people will experience being autistic the same way, or have exactly the same access needs. | Autistic people each have their own strengths and weaknesses and autism is considered as a spectrum. Some may require more support in some areas of their development than others.[[16]](#footnote-16) |
| **Autism Spectrum Disorder** | ‘Autism Spectrum Disorder’ is offensive to many in the autism community as it implies there is something wrong with autistic people, rather than recognising neurodevelopmental differences as part of human diversity. See term “Neurodiversity” in table 2 below. | Autism; Autism spectrum |
| **Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Unit (as used in education settings)** | “Unit” is a medical term which should not be applied to a classroom setting. | Autism class |
| **Cripple; spastic** | These terms are stigmatising. | Disabled person; person with a disability |
| **Epileptic** | This identifies someone in terms of their medical diagnosis. | Has epilepsy |
| **Midget** | This is a derogatory term for a person with dwarfism. | Little person; person of short stature |
| **Mental handicap** | This is a stigmatising term. | Intellectual disability  In the UK, the term ‘learning disability’ is commonly used. |
| **Schizo; mad** | These are stigmatising terms. | Person with a mental health difficulty; person with a psycho-social disability |
| **Hearing impaired** | Deaf people are proud of their identity as a cultural and linguistic group and do not see it as an impairment. | Deaf; hard of hearing |
| **Partially Deaf / partially hearing** | The terms deaf/Deaf can include people with some or no hearing. | Deaf; hard of hearing |
| **Shortening Irish Sign Language to “sign language”** | There are many different sign languages around the world which are distinct from each other. If referring to Irish Sign Language, it’s important to name it in full. | Refer to Irish Sign Language in full or abbreviate to ISL |
| **Helper** | Some disabled people hire a Personal Assistant to assist them to live independently. Using terms such as ‘helper’ places the disabled person in a passive role and also devalues the work of Personal Assistants. | Personal Assistant |

Sources: NDA consultation (see Annex 1), DPO language resources (see Annex 2)

## Meaning of common terms

Below are some commonly used terms which are in use but which may require explanation (Table 2).

Table 2: Meaning of common terms

| Term | Meaning / use |
| --- | --- |
| **Impairment** | The term impairment is appropriate in some contexts, but not in others. It is used by some to describe a diagnosis or level of functioning. For example, a person may say they have a vision impairment, speech impairment, or physical impairment. The term ‘disability’ is then used to describe the social experience of having an impairment. For example, the social, environmental and attitudinal barriers which result in discrimination against a person with an impairment.  The Deaf community, which identifies as a cultural and linguistic group, does not use the term ‘impairment’. Therefore, the term ‘hearing impairment’ is not recommended in reference to this community. However, it may be acceptable to some deaf or hard-of-hearing people who do not identify culturally as Deaf. |
| **Non-visible disability / hidden disability** | Non-visible or hidden disability refers to a disability which is not immediately obvious or visible to others. This can include, for example, epilepsy, some chronic illnesses, neurodiversity, and others. It is important to emphasise that although the disability isn’t visible, it does not mean it doesn’t exist.  Some people don’t like to use the term ‘hidden disability’ as it may imply that a disabled person is hiding their disability on purpose. Non-visible disability can be used as an alternative. |
| **Disclose or share** | ‘Disclose’ is a term often used in the context of an individual telling an employer or educational provider about their disability.  For some people, this term can suggest a person is revealing something secret or shameful. ‘Share’ is an alternative term that could be used which does not carry these potentially negative connotations. |
| **Neurodiversity** | Neurodiversity is a term which recognises neurodevelopmental differences as a natural part of human diversity. Autism as well as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Dyspraxia, Dyslexia, Dyscalculia, and Tourette’s Syndrome, among other differences or disabilities, are examples of neurodiversity. |
| **Neurotypical** | Neurotypical is a term used to describe a person who thinks and experiences the world in ways that society considers to be typical. |
| **Deafblind** | Deafblindness is a combined vision and hearing impairment. The term can refer to people who may have some residual vision and/or hearing. |
| **Irish Sign Language** | Irish Sign Language is a visual and spatial language native to Ireland with its own linguistic and grammatical structure. It is not a signed version of English or Irish, but a separate language in its own right. |
| **Signed English** | Signed English is a language support system which uses English language grammar and not the grammar of Deaf sign languages. It is comprised of handsigns and fingerspelling. It is not the same as Irish Sign Language and is not preferred by, and may not be understood by, members of the Deaf community. |
| **Lámh** | Lámh is a manual sign system used by children and adults with intellectual disability and communication needs in Ireland. Lámh uses speech with signs in which key words in a sentence are signed. |
| **Irish Sign Language interpreter** | An Irish Sign Language interpreter is a hearing person who translates spoken or written information from English to ISL. The Sign Language Interpreting Service (SLIS) keeps a register of accredited ISL interpreters in Ireland. |
| **Deaf interpreter** | A Deaf interpreter (Deaf person) works in tandem with an ISL interpreter (hearing person). They have native proficiency in ISL and provide an in-depth knowledge of Deaf culture and the Deaf community which supports a hearing ISL interpreter to translate. For example, the skills of a Deaf interpreter may be required when working with Deaf foreign nationals or Deaf individuals who may not be familiar or comfortable working with ISL interpreters. |
| **Blind person / person with a vision impairment / partially sighted person** | The term ‘blind’ can refer to a person with no vision or with some vision. The term ‘person with a vision impairment’ can also refer to someone with no vision or with some vision.  The term ‘partially sighted’ refers to a person who has some vision.  Therefore the phrase ‘blind or partially sighted’ is recommended instead of ‘blind or visually impaired’ as the terms ‘blind’ and ‘visually impaired’ are synonymous. |
| **Disabled Persons Organisation (DPO)** | A Disabled Persons Organisation (DPO) is a particular kind of civil society organisation which is distinct from a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) or a disability service provider. UNCRPD outlines specific criteria in order for an organisation to be considered a DPO. DPOs are organisations led by disabled people themselves, and with a clear majority of their membership made up of disabled people, and which are underpinned by a human rights approach to disability. Organisations which work on disability issues or provide disability services which are not led by persons with disabilities are not considered a DPO.[[17]](#footnote-17) |
| **Representative organisation** | When the term “representative organisation” is used in the UNCRPD it is used to refer to a DPO only, rather than an organisation providing services, or an organisation comprising a majority of non-disabled persons advocating for people with disabilities.[[18]](#footnote-18) |

# Annex 1: Consultation details

The NDA carried out meetings with five national Disabled Persons Organisations between June 14th and June 25th 2021 to inform the update of our publication “Ask Me: Guidelines for Effective Consultation with People with Disabilities”. The DPOs who took part in the consultation meetings included As I Am, Irish Deaf Society, Voice of Vision Impairment, Independent Living Movement Ireland, and the National Platform of Self Advocates.

Language was one of the themes on which DPOs provided feedback. Three DPOs outlined their preference for ‘identity-first’ language (e.g. ‘disabled person’) as opposed ‘person-first’ language (e.g. people with disabilities). One DPO had mixed views amongst its members in this regard with some members preferring either ‘disabled person’ or ‘people with disabilities’ and some preferring ‘people with disabilities’ only. One DPO offered feedback on language regarding the Deaf community. The consultation report and updated guidelines will be published later in 2022.

# Annex 2: DPO language resources

Some national DPOs have resources on their website which outlines their approach to language. The below list was current at time of writing.

| **DPO name** | **Link to resource** |
| --- | --- |
| As I Am | <https://asiam.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Autism-Language.pdf> |
| Disabled Women Ireland | <https://www.disabledwomenireland.org/disabilityisntadirtyword> |
| Independent Living Movement Ireland | <https://ilmi.ie/our-vision-mission-and-values/> |
| Irish Deaf Society | <https://www.irishdeafsociety.ie/about/press-information/?cn-reloaded=1>  <https://www.citizensinformationboard.ie/en/services/accessibility/deaf-awareness-training.html> |
| Voice of Vision Impairment | <https://vvi.ie/category/disability/> |

1. NDA (2016) http://nda.ie/Publications/Disability-Supports/Disability-Services/Research-on-engagement-and-participation-of-people-with-disabilities-in-developing-services-policy-and-practice-1.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. HSE Transforming Lives Working Group 3, https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/publications/effective-participation-in-decision-making-final.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. NDA (2016) http://nda.ie/Publications/Disability-Supports/Disability-Services/Research-on-engagement-and-participation-of-people-with-disabilities-in-developing-services-policy-and-practice-1.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Anna Lawson & Angharad E. Beckett (2021) The social and human rights models of disability: towards a complementarity thesis, The International Journal of Human Rights, 25:2, 348-379, DOI: 10.1080/13642987.2020.1783533 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. UN (2006) UNCRPD [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. UN https://www.ungeneva.org/sites/default/files/2021-01/Disability-Inclusive-Language-Guidelines.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See page 10 for an explanation of the term ‘DPO’. See Annex 1 for details of the consultation. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See: National Housing Strategy for Disabled People pg. 1 ‘Disability Terminology’. https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/60d76-national-housing-strategy-for-disabled-people-2022-2027/ [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. CES (May, 2021) Ireland’s Draft State Report under the UNCRPD: Report from Public and Stakeholder Consultations. https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/75e45-irelands-first-report-to-the-united-nations-committee-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/ [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. ACE Communications report [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See the UN’s examination of the UK’s compliance with the Convention in 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Source: Irish Deaf Society consultation. See also: https://www.citizensinformationboard.ie/en/services/accessibility/deaf-awareness-training.html [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See: National Housing Strategy for Disabled People pg. 1 ‘Disability Terminology’. https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/60d76-national-housing-strategy-for-disabled-people-2022-2027/ [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See UNCRPD Article 24 ‘Inclusive Education’; See also UNCRPD ‘General Comment 4 (2016) on the right to inclusive education.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004: https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2004/act/30/enacted/en/html [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. As I Am language guidelines [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See UNCRPD General Comment 7, Part II (A). “Definition of ‘representative organisations’” [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)