



What you need to know about:

## Disability and development cooperation – 10 facts or fallacies?


gtz

Persons with Disabilities



On behalf of

Federal Ministry  
for Economic Cooperation  
and Development



Because **disability** is a new topic for many people working in development cooperation, a few questions are bound to crop up.

We've put together a list of **10 arguments** we frequently hear in our work

– and our own responses.

1.

“Disability only affects a minority of people.”



## 1. "Disability only affects a minority of people."

Going by the latest estimates, ca. 10% of humanity, at least **650 million people** worldwide, live with some kind of disability – around 80% of them in developing countries. This explains why persons with disabilities are often called the “biggest minority on the planet”. Bringing family members into the equation, 2 billion persons or **one third of the human race are directly or indirectly affected by disability.**

In developing countries, official statistics tend to understate the proportion of persons with disabilities. This is partly due to the costs of conducting methodologically sound surveys, and partly because there is no standardized international definition of disability. As a matter of fact, **in many societies persons with disabilities are ,invisible‘** even though they make up a significant share of the population – as high as 20% in post-conflict states.

2.

“There’s no such thing as a  
universally accepted definition of disability.”



## 2. "There's no such thing as a universally accepted definition of disability."

It's certainly true that no universal definition of disability exists. In the new UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, a legally binding definition was deliberately avoided, and the preamble recognizes **that disability is an evolving concept.**

Nevertheless, internationally the definition from WHO, the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF), has become a key methodological instrument for describing disability. According to the ICF framework, disability is not primarily a medical dysfunctionality but a **socially constructed phenomenon that depends on factors in the environment.** By this definition, disability is seen as the outcome of the interaction between a person with a certain health status and his or her environment. So people are not inherently disabled but are being disabled by external circumstances.

The UN Convention expresses it in these terms: "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."

3.

“Disability is primarily a medical problem.”



### 3. "Disability is primarily a medical problem."

For a long time, disability was perceived as a purely medical problem. But the inclusive approach to development is based on a **social model of disability** and the altered perspective that disability does not originate from personal factors (e.g. a physiological impairment) but from environmental barriers, which prevent people with certain impairments from playing a full and equal part in society. From this model, it is an obvious step to see disability as a human rights issue, and accept that persons with disabilities have the same rights as everyone else.

The exclusion of persons with disabilities is not a medical matter but a matter of human rights, as demonstrated by the fact that **disability often occurs as a consequence of human rights violations**, e.g. torture, war and genital mutilation for example.

The medical component to disability is that **50% of all health impairments leading to disability could be prevented**. Most disabilities in developing countries can be traced back to unsafe living conditions and harmful pollutants in the environment. Both could be prevented with an inclusive infrastructure policy. So inclusive development cooperation makes a major contribution towards prevention.

4.

“Persons with disabilities are a homogenous group.”

A large, stylized number '4.' is positioned on the left side of the slide. To the right of the text, there are several thick, red, hand-drawn scribbles that appear to be pointing towards the text.

#### 4. "Persons with disabilities are a homogenous group."

The famous wheelchair pictogram used worldwide as a symbol for persons with disabilities is misleading, at least in one respect: locomotor disabilities are not the only possible impairments. Other kinds include **hearing, visual or intellectual impairment** – or combinations of different functional impairments.

Gender adds a further nuance to the implications of disability: for instance, **girls and women with disabilities often face multiple discrimination.**

All in all, the category of "persons with disabilities" is incredibly broad, especially considering that disabilities can also change over time. Some disabilities may be temporary and gradually fade away, while others deteriorate and become more and more limiting. In old age most of all, new disabilities can arise – a challenge for our rapidly ageing societies.

Given the sheer heterogeneity of people's real lives, with different disabilities, genders and degrees of impairment, development cooperation can only meet such a wide range of needs with an equally heterogeneous response. **Inclusion will be feasible when we stop automatically tailoring society and development programs towards the mainstream "healthy young man".**

5.

“Poverty reduction and disability are two separate policy hats.”

A large, hand-drawn red arrow pointing downwards, positioned to the right of the text.

## 5. "Poverty reduction and disability are two separate policy hats."

Poverty and disability are closely related. Anyone living in poverty is exposed to higher health risks which often result in disability – and **individuals as well as families with a member with disability tend to be poorer**. The lack of access to decent employment, the higher costs of living, the opportunity costs of caring for disabled relatives – households affected by disability are multiply disadvantaged, which puts them at risk of poverty. These disadvantages and costs could be **significantly reduced by improving the accessibility of infrastructure, products and services**.

The World Bank estimates that 20% of people belonging to the world's poorest populations live with some sort of disability. Effectively, one in five of all people surviving on less than one US dollar a day and lacking access to clean water, food and clothing is a person with a disability. James Wolfensohn, the former President of the World Bank, commented as long ago as 2002 that **it will not be possible to achieve the Millennium Development Goals without an inclusive development policy**. Effective poverty reduction should always bear in mind that a large section of the target group is directly or indirectly affected by disability. In other words, poverty reduction and inclusion of persons with disabilities are inextricably linked.

6.

“When the majority are better off, persons with disabilities will automatically reap the benefits.”



## 6. "When the majority are better off, persons with disabilities will automatically reap the benefits."

In most cases, persons with disabilities are **simply not reached by traditional development cooperation measures**. This is partly because they number among the poorest of the poor, a group that is invariably hard to reach. But also, because they are stigmatised and discriminated against, persons with disabilities are often excluded from participating in development projects. They are the last people to benefit – or even miss out completely.

Persons with disabilities will not be able to participate in projects until development cooperation everywhere actively takes account of their concerns, rights and specific needs. **Unfortunately, an automatic trickle-down effect does not exist.**

The converse argument comes into play: **when persons with disabilities are better off, the majority will automatically reap the benefits** – of more generally accessible social and physical infrastructure, and the valuable contribution that persons with disabilities can make to the economy and civil society.

A large, light blue number 7 is positioned on the left side of the slide. To its right, a red arrow points downwards, indicating a transition or continuation. The text is centered horizontally between these two elements.

“It’s better to focus our limited resources on the healthy.”

## 7. "It's better to focus our limited resources on the healthy."

Social inclusion is **not an act of charity but a human right** – as the new UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities clearly states. Participation and equality of access for all persons are not by-products of effective development cooperation – they are its preconditions.

What's more, the benefits of inclusion are not limited to people with disabilities. They make life easier for lots of other people, too. If development policy measures in an area like, for example, emergency aid are designed to be inclusive and barrier-free from the outset, then other social groups also benefit, e.g. old people, pregnant women and parents of small children. There are all kinds of barriers which obstruct children, people with luggage, people with injuries, even people who have just lost their glasses; in short, anyone who (temporarily or permanently) deviates from the anthropometric norm. By removing these barriers, society as a whole can be made more accessible – for everyone.

8.

“Accessibility in developing countries is too expensive.”

A large, stylized red brushstroke graphic on the right side of the slide, consisting of several overlapping, diagonal strokes that form a shape reminiscent of a checkmark or a stylized arrow pointing downwards and to the left.

## 8. "Accessibility in developing countries is too expensive."

The costs of an accessible environment for disabled people are often overestimated. Installing appropriate access for persons with disabilities as part of a new construction project costs **only 1-2% of total building costs**. If the needs of persons with disabilities are considered during the planning phase, expensive adaptations and conversions can be avoided later on.

In any case, there is no reason why accessibility measures have to be high-tech or luxury solutions. Amazing improvements can often be achieved with a little creativity and local resources.

In contrast, it is wrong to downplay the macroeconomic costs of failing to address accessibility – effectively denying persons with disabilities their right to participate in society on an equal basis. ILO studies have shown that **the exclusion of persons with disabilities on the labor market alone causes a 1-7% loss of gross domestic product**.

9.


“Accessibility means access for wheelchair users.”



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Wheelchair access to buildings is one important element, but there is much more to barrier-free design than a few ramps and doorways. Accessibility means **designing all environmental features in a way that will not exclude persons with disabilities.**

This includes presenting information accessibly, e.g. for persons with intellectual disabilities, or enabling communication with blind and deaf people. Furthermore, discriminatory attitudes and behaviors need to be changed. In this respect, **development co-operation projects can act as a model**, e.g. by hiring persons with disabilities as project staff.



# 10.

“There simply should be more programs for persons with disabilities!”



## 10. "There simply should be more programs for persons with disabilities!"

German development cooperation follows a twin-track approach: on the one hand, it supports projects specifically for people with disabilities. On the other hand, the concerns of persons with disabilities should be **considered as part of all mainstream projects.**

By ratifying the new UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, **Germany has made a commitment to inclusive development cooperation.**

Any attempt to reach the more than 650 million persons with disabilities worldwide with special programs and facilities is doomed to failure from the outset. Their right to social participation can only be realized by ensuring that mainstream programs are accessible. As much as anything, it is a question of efficiency: specific services to persons with disabilities cost a lot more and reach fewer people than inclusive universal programs.

**Persons with disabilities are part of every target group.** Or to put it another way: inclusion is not a task to be addressed by special projects, but should be a goal throughout all areas of development cooperation.



Do you want to make it easier for persons with disabilities  
to access your projects?

For more information, please contact [ingar.duering@gtz.de](mailto:ingar.duering@gtz.de)

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