

Definitions of Impairments/Disability

International Labour Organisation (ILO)

The ILO defines disability as:

"An individual whose prospects of securing, retaining and advancing in suitable employment are substantially reduced as a result of a duly recognised physical, sensory, intellectual or mental impairment."

Explanation

This definition focuses on employment, vocational rehabilitation, and workplace inclusion.

Reference (Vancouver):

International Labour Organization. *Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (Disabled Persons) Convention, 1983 (No. 159)*. Geneva: International Labour Organization; 1983.

Nagi's Disablement Model (1965)

According to Nagi:

"Impairment is an anatomical, physiological, mental, or emotional abnormality or loss."

Explanation

Nagi regarded impairment as the direct consequence of pathology and distinguished it from functional limitation and disability.

Reference:

Nagi SZ. Some conceptual issues in disability and rehabilitation. In: Sussman MB, editor. *Sociology and Rehabilitation*. Washington (DC): American Sociological Association; 1965. p. 100–13.

According to Nagi,

"Disability refers to limitations in the performance of socially defined roles and tasks expected of an individual within a sociocultural and physical environment."

Explanation

Nagi differentiated:

- Active pathology
- Impairment
- Functional limitation
- Disability

His work laid the foundation for later disablement models.

Reference:

Nagi SZ. Some conceptual issues in disability and rehabilitation. In: Sussman MB, editor. *Sociology and Rehabilitation*. Washington (DC): American Sociological Association; 1965. p. 100–13.

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990)

According to the ADA,

"A disability is a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities of an individual."

Explanation

Major life activities include:

- Walking
- Seeing
- Hearing
- Speaking
- Learning
- Working
- Self-care

This legal definition is primarily used for anti-discrimination and accessibility legislation.

Reference (Vancouver):

Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, Pub L No. 101-336, 104 Stat. 327 (1990).

National Centre for Medical Rehabilitation Research (NCMRR)

The NCMRR describes impairment as:

"A loss or abnormality at the tissue, organ, or body system level."

Explanation

This definition emphasises impairment as a pathological change affecting body systems, distinguishing it from functional limitation and disability.

Reference:

Brandt EN Jr, Pope AM, editors. *Enabling America: Assessing the Role of Rehabilitation Science and Engineering*. Washington (DC): National Academies Press; 1997.

The NCMRR defines disability as:

"Limitations in performing socially defined roles and tasks expected of an individual within a sociocultural and physical environment."

Explanation

This definition emphasises the relationship between functional limitations and societal expectations.

Reference:

Brandt EN Jr, Pope AM, editors. *Enabling America: Assessing the Role of Rehabilitation Science and Engineering*. Washington (DC): National Academies Press; 1997.

World Health Organisation (WHO) – International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF, 2001)

The WHO defines impairment as:

"Impairments are problems in body function or structure such as a significant deviation or loss."

Explanation

In the ICF framework, impairments refer to abnormalities or losses in physiological functions (including mental functions) or anatomical structures. They may be temporary or permanent and vary in severity.

Reference:

World Health Organisation. *International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF)*. Geneva: World Health Organisation; 2001.

The World Health Organisation defines disability as:

"Disability is an umbrella term for impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. It denotes the negative aspects of the interaction between an individual with a health condition and that individual's contextual (environmental and personal) factors."

Explanation

This definition emphasises that disability is not merely a medical condition but results from the interaction between a person's health condition and environmental barriers. It forms the basis of the **biopsychosocial model**.

Reference:

World Health Organisation. *International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF)*. Geneva: World Health Organisation; 2001.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006)

The UNCRPD defines persons with disabilities as:

"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."

Explanation

This definition highlights:

- Human rights approach
- Equal participation
- Removal of social and environmental barriers

Reference (Vancouver):

United Nations. *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. New York: United Nations; 2006.

Institute of Medicine (IOM)

The Institute of Medicine defines impairment as:

"A loss or abnormality in body structure or physiological or psychological function."

Explanation

The IOM recognises impairment as one component of the disablement process, which may or may not lead to disability depending on personal and environmental factors.

Reference:

Institute of Medicine. *The Future of Disability in America*. Washington (DC): National Academies Press; 2007.

The Institute of Medicine describes disability as:

"Disability is the expression of a physical or mental limitation in a social context."

Explanation

This definition recognises that disability cannot be understood solely by examining disease or impairment but must include environmental influences.

Reference:

Institute of Medicine. *The Future of Disability in America*. Washington (DC): National Academies Press; 2007.

World Report on Disability (WHO & World Bank)

The World Report states:

"Disability is complex, dynamic, multidimensional, and contested."

Explanation

The report emphasises that disability is influenced by health conditions, personal factors, and environmental barriers, supporting the ICF framework.

Reference (Vancouver):

World Health Organisation, World Bank. *World Report on Disability*. Geneva: World Health Organisation; 2011.

Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, India (2016)

The RPwD Act defines a person with disability as:

"A person with long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment which, in interaction with barriers, hinders his or her full and effective participation in society equally with others."

Explanation

The Act recognizes **21 categories of disabilities** and adopts the UNCRPD framework.

Reference (Vancouver):

Government of India. *The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016*. New Delhi: Ministry of Law and Justice; 2016.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

The CDC defines disability as:

"Any condition of the body or mind (impairment) that makes it more difficult for the person with the condition to do certain activities (activity limitation) and interact with the world around them (participation restrictions)."

Explanation

This definition is consistent with the WHO ICF framework and emphasises public health perspectives.

Reference (Vancouver):

Centres for Disease Control and Prevention. Disability and Health Overview. Atlanta (GA): CDC; 2024.

WHO ICF (2001) and UNCRPD (2006) definitions are generally considered the current international standards.

References

- Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, Pub L No. 101-336, 104 Stat. 327 (1990).

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