# 24 June 2018

# Statement on the need to use the right definitions and terminology in standardisation work

“Regarding the definition of visual impairment, the European Blind Union (EBU) adopts in principle the definitions used by the World Health Organisation (WHO). The term “visually impaired” is used to indicate blind plus partially sighted persons together.

In relation to accessibility requirements, the EBU considers it particularly important that the terminology used in standards and guidelines supports the correct understanding of why a (design) measure is essential for a specific user group compared to other user groups who might also benefit from it. For this purpose it is necessary to make a clear distinction between requirements of “partially sighted persons”, who primarily use their (residual) sight, and “blind persons”, who primarily rely on audible and tactile input, although they might also have a certain amount of visual perception.

Therefore, the EBU recommends to

* include clear definitions of the terms “visually impaired”, “partially sighted” and “blind” in any document on accessibility requirements,
* whenever a required (design) measure is assigned to a specific user group, only indicate the one it is specifically essential for and
* only use the term “visually impaired”, if something explicitly applies for both, blind and partially sighted persons in the same way.”

# Background information by Doris Osseberger,

The first reason, why we (Austrian standardisation body following my suggestion) commented on this issue in relation to an EN as well as an ISO dealing with accessibility of the built environment was, that they confused “visually impaired” with “partially sighted” in many places. Therefore, these standards contain several sentences such as “… shall be provided to support blind persons and persons with vision impairments.” This part of the issue is easily solved by providing the correct terms, replacing the wrong ones and including the terms in the “terms and definitions” section of the standard(s).

The second reason, why we commented on the issue, was, that in some places it is claimed that a certain design measure provides accessibility for a group of persons, which – at least from our point of view – in fact does not or only marginally benefit from the respective design measure. To give you an example: “Sound-producing objects (such as fountains or wind chimes) can provide additional orientation support for people who are blind or have vision impairments as a supplement to tactile information.” – we think, that this applies primarily to blind persons (although it might of course as well support any other person’s orientation with or without a vision impairment). Another example: glazed walls, doors and other areas of full height glazing can be very disorientating, particularly for people with vision impairments.” – we think, that this is of negligible relevance for blind persons, while it is really essential for partially sighted persons.

Therefore, we suggested to be more precise by e.g. in the first example removing “or have vision impairments” and in the second example replacing “people with vision impairments” with “partially sighted people”. Reacting to this suggestion they (the responsible standardisation committee) are now raising two issues:

1. They are concerned about defining blind persons as persons without any useful visual perception, because in fact e.g. in the UK only 4 % of the persons registered as blind have no vision at all – therefore 96 % of the blind persons would benefit from measures such as good lighting and visual contrast, which we suggested to define as being essential for partially sighted persons in the first place.

2. They say, that there are hardly any design measures for persons with visual impairment, which do not contain any support for both, blind and partially sighted persons. For example, although tactile walking surface indicators are primarily used by (blind) persons using a white cane and perceiving them by touch, they should also have a visual contrast in order to support partially sighted persons’ orientation. Or tactile symbols and letters should also be visible, so (partially) sighted persons can read them and benefit from the information as well.

Regarding item 1., I am of course well aware, that in practice, “blind” does not mean “no sight at all” and that many blind persons do use specific visual input also for e.g. orientation. But in standards on accessibility, the reason that we mention the group of persons a design measure is supposed to support at all, is that we want to make readers understand why the measures are necessary. For this kind of explanation I think it is necessary to make a clear distinction.

For example, if a standard said “For persons with visual impairment, it is important to provide written information with good visual contrast.” in one place and “For persons with visual impairment, it is important to provide tactile or audible information.” in another place, readers might conclude that they can choose one of either measures. But in fact, it is essential to provide both - visual information for whoever can and wants to use it and an alternative (tactile/audible) format for whoever cannot perceive the visual information in each specific case and situation. I think that this is much clearer if the standard says “For partially sighted persons, it is important to provide written information with good visual contrast.” and “For blind persons, it is important to provide written information in tactile or audible format.”. It helps that all necessary measures are implemented and does of course not prevent anyone – blind, partially sighted or sighted – to use and benefit from any of the measures.

Item 2. is related to 1. in a way, but also raises another aspect: the basic assumption of Universal Design is, that everyone benefits from its implementation (and of course, for persons with disabilities it is specifically important). Therefore there are several groups of persons who benefit from every single measure we suggest in an accessibility standard. However, it is common to name only the main target group(s) of each measure – usually the one, it is most essential for. Of course it would be possible to name every single group with every single measure as well as to name no target groups at all. But again, the main reason for mentioning them in standards is to make readers understand the associated design measures according to the requirements of specific groups of persons. Therefore, I think that it is important to be as clear and precise as possible and focus on the main target group each measure is considered to support most.