



# Strengthening participation of people with disabilities in leadership roles in developing countries

---

Roz Price  
Institute of Development Studies  
04 May 2018

## Question

*What evidence is there on promising strategies/pathways for strengthening people with disabilities' leadership in political and public life, at all levels of governance (formal and informal)?<sup>1</sup>*

## Contents

1. Overview
2. Participation in political and public life
3. References

---

<sup>1</sup> This report is part of a series of helpdesks on approaches to reducing stigma and discrimination for people with disabilities in developing countries

---

*The K4D helpdesk service provides brief summaries of current research, evidence, and lessons learned. Helpdesk reports are not rigorous or systematic reviews; they are intended to provide an introduction to the most important evidence related to a research question. They draw on a rapid desk-based review of published literature and consultation with subject specialists.*

*Helpdesk reports are commissioned by the UK Department for International Development and other Government departments, but the views and opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of DFID, the UK Government, K4D or any other contributing organisation. For further information, please contact [helpdesk@k4d.info](mailto:helpdesk@k4d.info).*

# 1. Overview

People with disabilities have often been excluded from playing an active part and leadership roles in the political and social life in their own countries. There remain serious gaps in the literature on successful strategies for increasing and promoting leadership roles of persons with disabilities in developing countries. Information gaps also remain on how best to provide support within the context of promoting inclusive leadership for persons with disabilities, and there is a need for additional research to understand how far people with disabilities have moved "beyond tokenism" and into authentic leadership roles (Beckwith et al, 2016). Strategies are poorly documented and much of the existing literature is highly descriptive in nature, with little data on the effects of the legislation or programmes applied. Up to now, the different research projects have been rather isolated and often focused on specific subject areas or geared towards physical disabilities. The need for rigorous and timely evaluations of strategies implemented to improve political participation and inclusion of people with disabilities cannot be over stated. Without such evidence, this review cannot draw any definitive inferences on which strategies work effectively (as found in systematic reviews such as Virendrakumar et al, 2018 and Jolley et al, 2017).

Key findings<sup>2</sup>:

- There are various barriers to political participation faced by people with disabilities; these are complex and multifaceted. Barriers include societal stigma, discriminatory legal frameworks and infrastructure, and positive rhetoric unsupported by political action (tokenism) (IFES and NDI, 2014: 34). Other factors, such as low educational levels and poverty, further undermine participation and inclusion (Virendrakumar et al, 2018: 533).
- Inclusive electoral and political processes can be supported through: empowering persons with disabilities; supporting government institutions; including Disabled Persons Organisation (DPO) partners in civil society organisation (CSO) coalitions; and assisting political parties in conducting outreach to persons with disabilities (IFES and NDI, 2014).
- A number of documents noted that empowering people with disabilities led to increased political participation, in particular the empowerment of women and girls. There are a number of programmes aimed at increasing the leadership capacity within the disability community, especially among women with disabilities (see MIUSA, WEI and IFES).
- Capacity building and leadership training programmes are key for increasing political participation of people with disabilities and helping to overcome the challenge of convincing election management bodies, NGOs and political parties to hire persons with disabilities (IFES and NDI, 2014). A number of training modules, guides and frameworks have been developed to identify barriers and help stakeholders overcome these.
- DPOs and the disability movement in developing countries is important for encouraging political participation, and states must create an enabling environment for the establishment and functioning of these. Irvine (2014) links successful disability movements to three components: organisation, inclusiveness and political awareness.
- Affirmative action and quotas for people with disabilities has been argued to be effective at bridging existing disparities in a given state (Thomas 2007 in Sackey, 2015: 376). However, there is no unanimous position on the success of affirmative action.

---

<sup>2</sup> It is important to bear in mind that country context is important for understanding how government, civil society, media, and disabled people think and relate to each other, which will have an impact on policy and programme design and implementation.

- Disability-inclusive election observation may provide opportunities to address barriers to political participation and to empower men and women with disabilities to serve in leadership roles (Atkinson et al, 2017).
- Other efforts have focused on increasing the visibility of people with disabilities to increase participation in public life.

Overall, the majority of the documents included in this review did not report the impact of the approaches and interventions described, and were weak in describing their theory of change, replicability and sustainability. This report did not undertake a systematic review; evidence and analysis was identified by searching in sources such as academic journal indexes, websites of organisations known to work on the subject in question, general search engines (e.g. Google and Google Scholar) and relevant databases (e.g. HeinOnline).

## 2. Participation in political and public life

Political participation is often defined as the actions of private citizens by which they seek to influence government and politics (Inclusion International, 2015a in Virendrakumar et al, 2018). According to UNDESA (2016b: 3), “participation in political and public life is a critical element of socially inclusive development, along with the realisation of human rights”. Citizens may take part in the conduct of public affairs by exerting influence through public debate and dialogue with their representatives or through their capacity to organise themselves (OHCHR, 2011: 4). The right to vote is arguably the most important political right; others include the right to be elected, the right to participate in the conduct of public affairs, and the right to have access to public service (OHCHR, 2011: 4). The UN Human Rights Council (2016: 8) highlights that participation in itself can be a transformative tool for social change. In the case of persons with disabilities, participation in political and public life enables one to take part and have a voice in decisions that affect oneself and one’s community and country (UNDESA, 2016b). Efforts to actively involve persons with disabilities in decision-making processes are important not only because they result in better decisions and more efficient outcomes, but also because they promote agency and empowerment (UN Human Rights Council, 2016: 8). However, persons with disabilities are frequently denied their right to political participation (UNDESA, 2016b: 3).<sup>3</sup>

### UNCRPD

The majority of countries (177 as of end of April 2018) have ratified the UNCRPD, Article 29 of which requires State parties to guarantee that persons with disabilities have political rights, as well as the opportunity to enjoy them on an equal basis with others (UNDESA, 2016b: 4). The UNCRPD specifies certain measures – although it does not limit State parties to these alone - to be taken to ensure that persons with disabilities can effectively and fully participate in political and public life on an equal basis with others, directly or through freely chosen representatives, including the right and opportunity to vote and be elected. Article 29 further requires State parties to promote an environment in which persons with disabilities can effectively and fully participate, without discrimination, in the conduct of public affairs and to encourage their participation in public affairs (UNDESA, 2016b: 4). Furthermore, the UNCRPD requires State parties to ensure that persons with disabilities and their representative organisations take part in law reform and

---

<sup>3</sup> See [GSDRC Topic Guide on Disability Inclusion](#) for more in-depth background information.

policy development (see Article 3s and 4) (UNDESA, 2016a: 13). In its broadest sense, participation is a theme that runs throughout the whole UNCRPD, and participation in political and public life is closely related to and dependent upon the implementation of other UNCRPD provisions (OHCHR, 2011: 6).

### **The right to stand for elected office and participate in public service**

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR, 2011: 3) prepared a study on the participation of persons with disabilities in political and public life, in consultation with relevant stakeholders, including States, United Nations agencies, civil society organisations and international human rights institutions. The study highlighted the main issues concerning the effective realisation of the rights of persons with disabilities to participate in political and public life (OHCHR, 2011: 7-13):

- **Universal suffrage:** This consists of the extension of the right to vote to adult citizens as a whole. However, only a small number of countries have lifted all restrictions on the political participation of persons with psychosocial or intellectual disabilities. In many countries, the right to political participation continues to be linked to the legal capacity of the individual.
- **Right to stand for elections and to effectively hold office:** In many countries, the right to be a candidate in elections continues to be linked to the legal capacity of the individual. Consequently, persons under full or partial legal guardianship lose both the right to vote and the right to be elected. Only in a limited number of countries can persons with psychosocial or intellectual disabilities participate as candidates in elections on an equal basis with others.
- **Accessible elections:** The UNCRPD lists a number of measures that States parties are required to take in order to ensure that persons with disabilities can exercise their right to vote on an equal basis with other citizens. The aim of these measures is to remove the barriers that prevent persons with disabilities to exercise their right to vote and participate in elections
- **Participation of persons with disabilities in political and public life:** The measures adopted and procedures followed to facilitate the participation of persons with different forms of impairment vary from one country to another. For example, some countries' national strategies or programmes on disability have included measures to support political and public life participation.

Examples of the measures adopted by the respondent States to implement the right of persons with disabilities to participate as candidates in elections were given in replies to the OHCHR (2011: 11) study. These measures include the identification and elimination of obstacles to physical accessibility, the development and implementation of minimum standards and guidelines for the accessibility of public buildings, the provision of information in accessible formats in buildings and other facilities open to the public, and the promotion and use of new technologies suitable for persons with disabilities. Some States have taken steps to ensure that information on political affairs is available in various forms, and largely disseminated in advance. Some States reported media advertising, guides and awareness-raising initiatives to sensitise persons with disabilities to participate in political and public life (OHCHR, 2011: 12-13). In some countries, disabled people's organisations (DPOs) have advocated positive measures to ensure that their interests are effectively represented in their legislatures (UNDESA, 2016b: 12).

International cooperation is important in supporting national efforts for the full realisation of the rights of persons with disabilities. At the time of the OHCHR (2011: 14) study, only a limited number of States had developed specific cooperation programmes aimed at promoting the participation of persons with disabilities in political and public life. For example, Australia had provided direct support for more inclusive elections in a number of countries, including Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and the Philippines. The majority of donors, however, did not support any specific cooperation programmes relating directly to the political participation of persons with disabilities. In the time available for this review, evidence of sustained engagement by donors to encourage leadership of people with disabilities in developing countries was not identified.

## **Barriers to political participation and leadership**

Although participation of people with disabilities in political processes is increasingly recognised as a human rights issue, little is known about how the key UNCRPD principles are translated into day-to-day practice, particularly in low and middle-income countries (World Health Organisation and World Bank 2011 in Virendrakumar et al, 2018: 512). It is also unclear how factors such as the prevailing local environment and individual characteristics that interact with impairments to create a disability may promote or hinder an individual's political life. In a systematic review of political participation of people with disabilities in Africa, Virendrakumar et al (2018: 527)<sup>4</sup> conclude that there are various barriers to political participation and most sources agree that the barriers faced by people with disabilities are complex and multifaceted. The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) developed a framework describing the three dimensions leading to political exclusion as societal stigma, discriminatory legal frameworks and infrastructure, and positive rhetoric unsupported by political action (tokenism) (IFES and NDI, 2014: 34). The same document suggested that barriers to political participation may occur at any stage of the election cycle, including pre-election, election and post-election stages, and often (IFES and NDI, 2014: 34). Other factors, which often correlate with disability, such as low educational levels and poverty, further undermine participation and inclusion (Virendrakumar et al, 2018: 533).

Sackey (2015: 375) highlights that there is a general consensus that education plays a fundamental role in political socialisation, interest articulation and interest aggregation, which are crucial for political engagement. Even though the attainment of formal education is not a legal prerequisite for contesting political office, persons with significant levels of education are likely to perform better as politicians. A report by the Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities (UN Human Rights Council, 2016: 13) emphasised structural challenges as a major obstacle to the participation of persons with disabilities in public decision-making. Education systems often fail to adequately include persons with disabilities, and their opportunities and capacities to become successfully involved in public decision-making are limited.

Jolley et al (2017: 1) undertook a literature review as part of a social inclusion program supported by the international NGO Sightsavers, and funded by Irish Aid. The purpose of the review was to gain an understanding of the current situation regarding education and social inclusion of people with disabilities in five West African countries: Cameroon, Liberia, Mali, Sierra Leone and Senegal. The limited resources available in these settings coupled with the lack of knowledge on

---

<sup>4</sup> This review was conducted as an integral part of the Political Participation project implemented by the international non-governmental organisation (NGO) Sightsavers.

disability have limited governments' capacity to invest in social inclusion, leaving this group increasingly marginalised and vulnerable. Efforts to improve the lives of people with disabilities in many African settings have traditionally fallen on faith-based organisations and charities. The main challenge identified in the reviewed documents was a gap between policy formation and policy implementation, often due to the lack of resources available to the governments (Jolley et al, 2017: 3). The review showed that people with disabilities experienced significant disadvantages in accessing schooling, engaging in the labour force and actively participating in society; the evidence on the degree of exclusion varied. The review also found that while the documents identified suggested improvements for people with disabilities in terms of policies and programmes, the evidence of the quantifiable impact of these efforts was almost non-existent.

The study by Virendrakumar et al (2018: 533) found that although several interventions have been piloted in African countries to address some barriers they have not been evaluated and so their effect on the ability of people with disabilities to participate in elections remains unknown. In general, no documents were identified that described the impact of any intervention on the participation of people with disabilities in political processes. This current review found similar results, and few evaluations of the impact of identified strategies were found, hence judgement of efficacy is not possible.

## **Strategies to support inclusive electoral and political processes**

IFES and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) (2014: 35-36) released a manual on how to include people with disabilities in elections and political processes. They highlight four mutually supportive strategies to support inclusive electoral and political processes:

1. *Empowering Persons with Disabilities:* In order to be effective, many DPOs can benefit from training on different aspects of the electoral system and government structure and capacity building to develop basic organisational skills. Electoral and political processes will also be strengthened if international donors and implementing partners hire persons with disabilities as employees, particularly in leadership positions.
2. *Supporting Government Institutions:* Programmes providing support to government institutions such as legislatures and electoral monitoring bodies (EMBs) provide an opportunity for increasing the political participation of persons with disabilities. Building awareness among decision-makers is a key step in enabling the full participation of persons with disabilities in political life by changing exclusionary laws and policies.
3. *Including DPO Partners in CSO Coalitions:* Democracy strengthening programmes around elections often include technical and financial support to networks and coalitions conducting activities, such as domestic election observation or voter education. These efforts are critical in helping citizens have a more informed voice and in promoting credible election processes. Including DPOs in these networks and coalitions allows DPOs to gain experience and skills from fellow CSOs, and encourages other coalition partners to take a more active approach to supporting the disability community.
4. *Assisting Political Parties in Conducting Outreach to Persons with Disabilities:* Development assistance directed at political parties also provides openings to promote inclusion of persons with disabilities. In programmes designed to assist political parties in activities such as developing platforms, training party members/candidates for office or creating election campaign strategies, democracy assistance organisations can link parties with DPOs to promote outreach to persons with disabilities on issues that affect them.

## **Women's empowerment**

Generally, policy makers fail to recognise the intersectional and multiple dimensions of the lives of women (and girls) with disabilities. Women with disabilities experience unique discrimination resulting from the interaction between their gender and disability, and are at a higher risk of facing multiple forms of discrimination (WEI, 2016: 17). However, it needs to be recognised that women with disabilities are also not a homogenous group. Research in the area of women with disabilities and leadership is also relatively new.

### **Patriarchy and empowerment**

Majiet and Africa (2015: 101) explore the experiences of women with disabilities in leadership positions in DPOs in Zimbabwe. Their article focuses on the core themes that emerged during discussions in 2011 with eight women with disabilities, who were in positions of authority in their DPO. Discussion of their challenges and experiences reveals the complexity of the interface between disability and culture, which created dynamic intersections between patriarchy and the gendered power relations experienced by the participants. Their experiences suggest that patriarchy continues to restrain full participation of women in leadership in DPOs in Zimbabwe, which is consistent with the global trend.

The findings revealed that leadership development is a complex process, and understanding the possible implications of gender and disability on this is multi-layered. The complexity is fundamentally about change in power relations and leadership in DPOs, focusing on the importance with which women with disabilities as leaders attach to access to development opportunities, social action, and the need for support from other women within the disability movement and mainstream women's movements (Majiet and Africa, 2015: 104). Healthy self-esteem seems to be paramount for effective leadership. Participants described how through the gaining of confidence through the leadership development process, they were able to project a positive self-image to counteract the dominant media image of women with disabilities as being needy, weak and in constant need of assistance (Majiet and Africa, 2015: 105). Family responses to their disability were believed to have shaped their later experiences in leadership, serving as an added challenge to participants' attempts to engage in successful leadership. Thus, early responses from families and communities play a role in facilitating disabled women's access to leadership positions (Majiet and Africa, 2015: 106). The study highlights the fact that empowerment is not obtainable through access to opportunities and support alone. Nor is access to opportunities a guarantee of empowerment (Majiet and Africa, 2015: 110). The intersection between culture, gender and disability confirmed the complexity of how patriarchy and the male-dominated culture in DPOs actively undermine women with disabilities as leaders in reaching their full potential, and act as binding constraints. The study further highlights the importance that women with disabilities as leaders themselves attach to access to development opportunities, social action, and the need for support from other women within the disability movement and mainstream women's movements (Majiet and Africa, 2015: 110).

### **Mobility International USA (MIUSA)**

Dunn and Sygall (2014: 49) explore successful strategies of Mobility International USA (MIUSA), a national NGO led by a woman with a disability, for bridging the gap between the disability and humanitarian communities and increasing the leadership capacity within the disability community, especially among women with disabilities. An informal survey of MIUSA's international network of

176 disabled women leaders in 2012 highlighted that MIUSA alumni are a powerful and largely untapped resource for the humanitarian sector (Dunn and Sygall, 2014: 51).

As a key strategy for promoting disability inclusion, MIUSA has been building leadership capacity within the disability community with a specific focus on the empowerment of women with disabilities. Its signature international women's leadership training is the Women's Institute on Leadership and Disability (WILD) programme. This programme brings up to 30 women with disabilities together for an intensive 21-day leadership programme. Part of this programme is the four-day Gender, Disability and Development Institute (GDDI), in which representatives of international development and humanitarian agencies meet with WILD delegates to focus on inclusion of women with disabilities in development and humanitarian efforts (Dunn and Sygall, 2014: 52).

MIUSA also provides technical assistance on disability inclusion to development and humanitarian agencies. A critical component of MIUSA's inclusive development technical assistance work was to utilise the expertise of local women leaders with disabilities who were alumni of the WILD programme. For example, in Colombia, MIUSA reached out to Beatriz Satizabel, who participated in the 2003 WILD training, after which she went on to work for international NGOs in her country. In 2009, Satizabel, in collaboration with a law university, persuaded the Colombian government to amend laws to protect the rights of people with disabilities displaced by the civil conflict.

Dunn and Sygall (2014: 56-57) make the following recommendations for including women with disabilities in emergency response, which are also relevant for broader inclusion:

- Reach out to women with disabilities. Working directly with DPOs and disabled women's groups is vital. MIUSA has an online searchable database of over 1,000 DPOs as well as personal contacts through its alumni network.
- Promote professional development opportunities for women with disabilities.
- Take action to be included in existing programmes. Women with disabilities are catalysts for change. Encouraging women with disabilities to take a proactive approach to inclusion, rather than waiting for the programmes to change, will accelerate inclusion.

### **Women Enabled International (WEI)**

WEI is a global not-for-profit organisation that advocates for the rights of women and persons with disabilities. WEI undertook a Survey and Mapping Project between 2015 – 2016 with a goal to foster a greater understanding of human rights advocates, both from within and outside the women's rights and disability rights movements, on the rights of women and girls with disabilities (WEI, 2016: 6). WEI produced a comprehensive mapping report of the field of advocates. The project includes data and analysis of the leaders and locations where women's disability rights advocates and organisations are especially active, where the gaps are, and where there are opportunities for collaboration, helping to achieve greater collective impact. It enables networking between identified groups in different countries and regions, enabling an exchange of experiences and knowledge, fostering the empowerment of women and girls with disabilities and their networks (WEI, 2016: 6). WEI's Survey and Mapping project illustrates the scope and depth of the growing global field of disabled women's rights organisations and advocates, and serves as an empowering organising tool to share strategies (WEI, 2016: 10). The survey found that the majority of organisations working on the rights of women and girls with disabilities had relatively



low budgets, presenting a serious barrier to their effectiveness, and national government support for this work was needed (WEI, 2016: 6-7). To strengthen global advocacy for the rights of women and girls with disabilities, WEI has developed an advocacy Toolkit for international engagement that contains information on the various international system mechanisms before which one can advocate (see [WEI's accountability Toolkit](#)).

### **IFES Power to Persuade platform in Kenya**

IFES and Women Challenged to Challenge (WCC), a DPO run by women in Kenya, are implementing the “Power to Persuade: Empowering Women with Disabilities to Influence Public Policy” initiative, with support from Global Affairs Canada, to amplify the voices of Kenyan women with disabilities to participate in political life (see <https://www.ifes.org/news/creating-policy-platform-advocate-rights-kenyan-women-disabilities>). In July 2017, 40 women disability rights advocates from across the country gathered in Nairobi to create a platform on policy priorities. The document, an advocacy tool to enhance access of women with disabilities to policy development, outlines guiding legal frameworks and actions to be taken by civil society and government stakeholders. IFES and WCC reconvened participants of Power to Persuade in November 2017 to present the platform to 15 government officials with disabilities from Parliament, the Senate and county assemblies. Civil society and government participants of the meeting collaborated to create strategies to implement existing laws and policies that support the rights of women with disabilities, such as advocating for the adoption of the policy platform by county governments. No further information on its effectiveness was found.

### **Capacity building and training**

The Special Rapporteur (UN Human Rights Council, 2016: 12) highlights the importance of capacity building as another key component for the effective and meaningful participation of persons with disabilities. Advocacy is more likely to be successful when organisations work strategically, have a clear understanding of policy processes and invest in people skills. The empowerment of persons with disabilities involves the development of technical, administrative and communication skills, as well as the facilitation of access to information and tools concerning their rights, legislation and policymaking. IFES and NDI's *Equal Access* manual (2014: 64) highlights how increased support of leadership training programmes can help overcome the challenge of convincing election management bodies (EMBs), NGOs and political parties to hire persons with disabilities, and help to develop strong leaders with disabilities.

Beckwith et al (2016: 11)<sup>5</sup> undertook a literature review as part of the National Beyond Tokenism Research Study in the US on how people with complex and high support needs are engaged in leadership development, public policy advocacy, and community activities. They found that people with complex needs could successfully engage in leadership roles when adequate attention is paid to their individual support needs. However, they highlight that research and training materials to date have focused primarily on identifying supports and adaptations that enhance the capacity of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities to more fully

---

<sup>5</sup> Beckwith et al (2016: 11) created a model that includes five essential elements felt to be necessary for the successful inclusion of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in leadership roles that will result in both individual and organisational transformational outcomes. These include authentic membership, deliberate communication, full participation, meaningful contributions, and true influence, although it must be emphasised that this research was based on a literature review of US publications.

participate. However, training for fellow board or committee members needed to ensure their overall commitment to diversity and the continuation of supports provision has yet to be viewed as an integral element of board and organisational development.

### **BRIDGE training module on disability**

IFES has created the first Building Resources in Democracy, Governance and Elections (BRIDGE Project) training module on disability rights and elections. BRIDGE is a modular professional development programme with a particular focus on electoral processes. The module, which uses BRIDGE's interactive adult learning methodology, includes lessons on access of persons with disabilities throughout the electoral cycle as voters, candidates, election officials and observers (see <http://www.ifes.org/news/ifes-launches-new-training-module-disability-rights-and-elections>). The curriculum development for the new "Disability Rights and Elections" BRIDGE module was supported by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and by USAID. The module has been piloted by IFES with support from DFAT, USAID, UK DFID and Global Affairs Canada in Bangladesh, Egypt, Fiji, Haiti, Indonesia, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Ukraine and Washington, D.C. Through these pilot trainings, IFES used lessons learned to refine the module's contents and activities. Lessons are designed to increase knowledge on how to conduct inclusive elections and can be targeted to different types of stakeholders, including election officials, DPOs, election observation groups and media.

### **IFES Intersectionality Assessment Framework**

The intersection of different social identities compounds barriers to meaningful political participation; however, how such barriers manifest at individual and societal levels is not fully understood. IFES has developed a new assessment framework to identify intersectional barriers and opportunities related to political participation of people with multiple social identities, such as gender, disability and age (see <https://ifes.org/news/new-intersectionality-assessment-framework>). The tool is adapted from the IFES Monitoring, Evaluation and Survey Research team's Participatory Assessment Methodology, which has been implemented in countries around the world. The IFES Intersectionality Assessment Framework is a participatory methodology that can be tailored to focus on different aspects of political participation, such as leadership, political violence and access to elections. The methodology allows people who identify with multiple social identities to share ways they currently participate civically and politically, prioritise identified solutions to barriers, and share their opinions in a targeted survey.

With USAID support, IFES piloted the framework in January 2018 to gauge barriers to political leadership for youth with disabilities in the Dominican Republic (the assessment report is not yet published). Results indicate that youth with disabilities experience legal, physical, attitudinal and informational barriers to participation in political life. These barriers are compounded for young women (with and without disabilities) who also encounter barriers resulting from societal norms that inhibit their participation in political life. Young men and women with disabilities were less likely to identify themselves as a leader in their community compared to adults with disabilities and young people without disabilities. IFES will refine the methodology based on learning from this pilot and pilots in Armenia and Tunisia, in Latin America, Europe and North Africa.

## Role of disability movements and DPOs

A report by the Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities (UN Human Rights Council, 2016: 11) highlights the importance of promoting the creation of organisations of persons with disabilities in order to encourage their participation in civil society. DPOs provide a pre-existing platform for mobilising persons with disabilities and representing their interests (IFES & NDI, 2014: 35-36). A review by Young et al (2016) on the roles and functions of DPOs in low and middle-income countries, found that DPOs can produce significant, positive outcomes for persons with disability in terms of factors such as employment rates, access to microfinance, accessibility of housing, involvement in civil society, development of friendships and networks, and participation in training programmes. Although the studies under review largely did not investigate the long-term impact of the reported DPO functions and outputs, some of the short-term outputs may be considered proximal indicators of outcomes such as increased empowerment and wellbeing.

The Special Rapporteur emphasises that states must create an enabling environment for the establishment and functioning of representative organisations of persons with disabilities as part of their obligations to uphold the right of freedom of association (UN Human Rights Council, 2016: 11). The promotion of an enabling environment for organisations of persons with disabilities to flourish remains a challenge in many countries. This demands not only a strategic response, but also a shared responsibility between a broader range of stakeholders that includes Governments, national human rights institutions, international cooperation agencies and the private sector<sup>6</sup>. States must also refrain from interfering in the decisions and activities of these organisations (UN Human Rights Council, 2016: 12). Securing sustainable funding is one of the main challenges faced by DPOs. Networking and coalition building are essential instruments for increasing collective influence of DPOs, in terms of both organisational and advocacy capacity.

Irvine (2014: 161) discusses the desirable characteristics of a disability movement to maximise its influence on policy development in a post-conflict society. She highlights three crucial components that seem to make a difference in a movement's successful introduction of policy changes:

- *Organisation*: A successful social movement needs to be well organised in order to speak with a unified voice, able to mobilise, able to manage limited resources.
- *Inclusiveness*: Making the movement accessible to all is an important factor. In a post-conflict country, the inclusion of disabled veterans and victims is key to a successful disability movement. For example, in Mozambique and Palestine, disabled veterans are held in high regard by the current governments and meetings with government officials are granted whenever requested (Irvine, 2014: 163). The movement also needs to be reflective of the entire population, including people from different socio-economic backgrounds, geographies, ages, genders etc. Historically, in most disability movements the emphasis has been on the involvement of people with physical and sensory

---

<sup>6</sup> The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) held the first Conference on Disability for Commonwealth Parliamentarians in August/September 2017, bringing together over 30 Commonwealth Parliamentarians with disabilities, carers and parliamentary officials from eight of the nine regions of the CPA (see [http://www.cpahq.org/CPAHQ/Main/News/News\\_Items/Disabilities\\_Conference.aspx](http://www.cpahq.org/CPAHQ/Main/News/News_Items/Disabilities_Conference.aspx)).

disabilities, meaning people with intellectual disabilities and mental illnesses have been under-represented. Support mechanisms need to be put in place for the inclusion of more marginalised groups (such as children, those with multiple disabilities etc.).

- *Political awareness*: Importance of political opportunities for a campaign and the types of activities engaged in, identifying who to contact and when, how to apply pressure to government, and how to represent the constituency. The development of political skills can be particularly challenging for many people with disabilities, as they are often as a social and economic disadvantage. The inclusion of people who acquired disabilities in later life can be helpful, as they are likely to be better educated, and possess stronger social networks.

Majiet and Africa's (2015: 109) study on women DPO leaders in Zimbabwe highlights the WHO empowerment component in the Community Based Rehabilitation Guidelines (WHO, 2010) as reinforcing the strategic role of DPOs in facilitating the empowerment of disabled people in general, and disabled women in particular. The kinds of interventions and training opportunities resulting in empowerment often occur through exposure to new growth opportunities and election into leadership positions. Participants elaborate how they drew on these opportunities to assist them in challenging the barriers to their advancement, engaging in as many of the opportunities for training and support that they could.

## **South Africa**

Irvine (2014: 166) explains how the South African disability movement was able to establish a well-organised, inclusive and political movement during the transition from apartheid. The formation of Disabled People South Africa (DPSA) in 1984 was instrumental in the development of the disability movement in South Africa and served as the coordinator of various organisations that comprised the movement. The movement decided to prioritise the mainstreaming of disability issues and identified a subject specialist on every issue. The movement was extremely political, and developed formal links with the ANC. By the early 1990s, it had become apparent that the ANC would form the next government and the disability movement took advantage of the opportunity to shape the party's policies and cemented disability as a priority within the new government. The ANC's commitment was further reflected in selecting a number of candidates with a disability to stand in local and national elections and to sit on the boards of statutory agencies. The formal relationship between the movement and the ANC was successful in terms of policy development, but it did present challenges at the implementation stage (Irvine, 2014: 166).

## **Affirmative action and quotas**

Affirmative action usually involves a national legislation or state policy that seeks to grant specified quotas in relation to socio-economic and political opportunities to specific subgroups in order to bridge existing disparities in a given state (Thomas 2007 in Sackey, 2015: 376). Affirmative action is usually regarded as an inclusive policy that compensates for past discrimination and bridges inequality gaps between various groups. However, there is no unanimous position on the success of affirmative action. Opposition to affirmative policies has been based on the argument that they may serve as another form of discrimination against those excluded from affirmative quotas while sacrificing competence and efficiency for political expediency (see Thomas, 2007 in Sackey, 2015: 377).

## Uganda

Uganda is internationally recognised for its extensive legal and constitutional provisions for ensuring the rights of the disabled (Owens and Torrance, 2013: 1). Uganda has been among the African countries with affirmative political seats for persons with disabilities and women. Representatives from the disabled and youth hold a fixed number of seats in parliament and local assemblies. In parliament the two groups have five seats each, one of which has to be held by a woman. At the various local levels, four seats are reserved for youth and the disabled, and two of these seats must be filled by women. The representatives of the disabled and youth are elected through electoral colleges (from within the National Union of Disabled Persons of Uganda and the National Youth Council) at all levels of governance (Muriaas and Wang, 2012: 312). It is often stated that Uganda has the highest number of disabled people represented in government in the world – a total of 47,000 at the local, regional and national government – which is attributed to the Local Government Act 1997 (Lwanga-Ntale, 2003 in Owens and Torrance, 2013: 10). Members of Parliament with disabilities have served on a variety of Parliamentary committees. Serving in the Parliament is more accessible now that rules have been changed to permit guide dogs and sign language interpreters in meetings and parliamentary sessions (UNDESA, 2016b: 13).

Muriaas and Wang (2012: 309) examine the impact of reserved seat quota policies in Uganda on the continued dominance of the National Resistance Movement (NRM) political party. The quota system was adopted in Uganda in 1989, thus, Uganda provides an opportunity to examine how the quota system has developed over time, including after the introduction of a multiparty system. The analysis reveals that the incumbent NRM has employed the reserved seat policy strategically to maintain its dominant position, and that strategies for using the quota system have evolved gradually over time in response to key political events, and the interests of group activists at the local and national levels with vested interests in its survival. Abimanyi-Ochom and Mannan (2014: 4) further highlight that although Uganda has excelled in developing a comprehensive body of legislation that uphold disability rights particularly through affirmative action, many of these have not been implemented. The government's commitment to disability compared to other crosscutting issues like gender remains low in terms of implementation.

## Ghana

Sackey (2015: 366) explores the participation of persons with disabilities in Ghanaian politics, which has been very low and they rarely attain political positions<sup>7</sup>. Sackey (2015: 366) argues that this relates more to the scenario of people with disabilities as candidates contesting for political position than the mere participation as voters. Findings linked the inadequate political representation of people with disabilities in Ghana to multiple factors, including (Sackey, 2015: 366): (1) stigmatisation and negative social perception regarding the capabilities of people with disabilities; (2) lack of resources, including financial and logistical support, required for effective campaigning; (3) accessibility challenges relating to the built environment, communication and information access; and (4) educational background of people with disabilities. Flowing from

---

<sup>7</sup> In 2013, Dr Henry Seidu Danaa, a lawyer with visual impairment, was the first person with disabilities to be appointed to parliament as Minister for chieftaincy and traditional affairs. Following the appointment, some local chiefs protested against the nomination maintaining that aspects of the tradition and customs in some traditional areas did not allow persons with disabilities to hold such high offices. Prior to this appointment, no person with a disability had ever been appointed as minister of state nor a District Chief Executive (Sackey, 2015: 366).

these outcomes, the prospect of affirmative political action as a 'gap-bridging' alternative was examined. Ghana currently has no affirmative policy or any other system that promotes people with disabilities' political participation at the local and national levels. However, Sackey (2015) shows that various legal challenges would have to be overcome if an affirmative political action was to become a reality in Ghana.

## Election observation

Atkinson et al (2017: 390) explore how disability-inclusive election observation provides the opportunity to address barriers to political participation and to empower men and women with disabilities to serve in leadership roles. Their paper explores the extent to which international electoral observation missions (IEOMs) are inclusive, using a case study from Indonesia and its 2014 Presidential elections. Atkinson et al (2017: 390-391) conclude that in order to integrate a disability rights lens into election observation, IEOMs would benefit from the expertise of persons with disabilities and their organisations. Recruiting 15% of observers with a disability would reflect the proportion of people with disabilities in society. Furthermore, including observers with disabilities as part of IEOMs demonstrates leadership of persons with disabilities. The active engagement of leaders with disabilities in roles such as chief observers breaks down stereotypes and models inclusion. Lessons learnt from stand-alone election access observations demonstrate how inclusion of detailed questions on disability and recruitment of observers with disabilities can lead to tangible changes in electoral policies and procedures. When inclusive, election observation can increase the political participation of people with disabilities.

## Increasing the visibility of people with disabilities

Other efforts have focused on increasing the visibility of people with disabilities to increase participation in public life. For example, 'IDEAS: Inclusive Decision-Making For Equal And Accountable Society' was a three-year European Commission co-financed project led by the British Council running from 2013-2016. It focused on increasing disabled people's active involvement in decision-making processes and supporting government, civil society, and media to apply a disability lens in the context of their work in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine, Lebanon, and Jordan (British Council, 2016). In Jordan, the IDEAS project engaged strongly with the media. Disability coverage became more comprehensive and tied to policy development issues. Due to the activities of IDEAS, Asia Yaghi, president of I am Human Association for People with Disabilities, the British Council's local partner, was asked to participate on a talk show alongside one of the main national figureheads on television. Having a female disabled person on national television raised the profile of the inclusivity agenda and presented a challenge to many viewing members of the public on their own beliefs and understandings, which surround disability. The response was largely positive but there was also some negative comments. Asia continued to speak twice a week on 'Donya ya Donya' Ro'ya TV, which reaches approximately 90,000 people, and now has a regular slot – making her the first television presenter in Jordan with a disability (British Council, 2016: 29).

## 3. References

Abimanyi-Ochom, J., & Mannan, H., (2014). Uganda's disability journey: Progress and challenges, *African Journal of Disability*, 3:1, Art. #108, 6 pgs.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ajod.v3i1.108>

Atkinson, V., Aaberg, R. & Darnolf, S. (2017). Disability Rights and Election Observation: Increasing Access to the Political Process. *Nordic Journal of Human Rights*, 35:4, 375-391, DOI: 10.1080/18918131.2017.1400348. <https://doi.org/10.1080/18918131.2017.1400348>

Beckwith, R.M., Friedman, M.G., & Conroy, J.W. (2016). Beyond Tokenism: People with Complex Needs in Leadership Roles: A Review of the Literature. *Inclusion*, 23266988, 4:3. <http://www.aaidjournals.org/doi/abs/10.1352/2326-6988-4.3.137?code=aamr-site>

British Council. (2016) *IDEAS: Inclusive Decision-Making For Equal And Accountable Society: A case study on how a disability lens was applied to an international project on inclusive decision-making*. UK: British Council. [https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/g110\\_ideascasestudybrochure\\_final\\_web.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/g110_ideascasestudybrochure_final_web.pdf)

Dunn, S., & Sygall, S. (2014). Women with disabilities leading the way toward inclusive emergency response. In D. Mitchell & V. Karr (Eds.), *Crises, Conflict and Disability: Ensuring Equality*. (pp. 49-57). London: Routledge. <https://www.routledge.com/Crises-Conflict-and-Disability-Ensuring-Equality/Mitchell-Karr/p/book/9780415811651>

IFES & NDI. (2014). *Equal Access: How to Include Persons with Disabilities in Elections and Political Processes*. Washington, D.C.: International Foundation for Electoral Systems. [http://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/equal\\_access\\_how\\_to\\_include\\_persons\\_with\\_disabilities\\_in\\_elections\\_and\\_political\\_processes\\_2.pdf](http://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/equal_access_how_to_include_persons_with_disabilities_in_elections_and_political_processes_2.pdf)

Irvine, R. (2014). Getting disability on the post-conflict agenda: the role of a disability movement. In D. Mitchell & V. Karr (Eds.), *Crises, Conflict and Disability: Ensuring Equality*. (pp. 161-167). London: Routledge. <https://www.routledge.com/Crises-Conflict-and-Disability-Ensuring-Equality/Mitchell-Karr/p/book/9780415811651>

Jolley, E., Lynch, P., Virendrakumar, B., Rowe, S., & Schmidt, E. (2017). Education and social inclusion of people with disabilities in five countries in West Africa: a literature review. *Disability and Rehabilitation*, DOI: 10.1080/09638288.2017.1353649 <https://doi.org/10.1080/09638288.2017.1353649>

Majiet, S., & Africa, A. (2015). Women with disabilities in leadership: The challenges of patriarchy, *Agenda*, 29:2, 101-111. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2015.1055879>

Muriaas, R.L. & Wang, V. (2012). Executive dominance and the politics of quota representation in Uganda. *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 50:2, 309-338. DOI: 10.1017/S0022278X12000067. [https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/E87B4AA4FFE1861C6A60042916916712/S0022278X12000067a.pdf/executive\\_dominance\\_and\\_the\\_politics\\_of\\_quota\\_representation\\_in\\_uganda.pdf](https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/E87B4AA4FFE1861C6A60042916916712/S0022278X12000067a.pdf/executive_dominance_and_the_politics_of_quota_representation_in_uganda.pdf)

OHCHR. (2011) Thematic study by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on participation in political and public life by persons with disabilities. Human Rights Council, Nineteenth session, Agenda items 2 and 3. <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G11/175/27/PDF/G1117527.pdf?OpenElement>

Owens, T., & Torrance, S. (2013). "I know my rights, but am I better off?": Institutions and disability in Uganda, CREDIT Research Paper, No. 13/03. <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/credit/documents/papers/cp13-03.pdf>

Sackey, E. (2015). Disability and political participation in Ghana: an alternative perspective. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, 17:4, 366-381, DOI: 10.1080/15017419.2014.941925. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15017419.2014.941925>

UNDESA. (2016a). Module 7 - Legislating for disability rights. In *Toolkit on Disability for Africa*. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Division for Social Policy and Development (DSPD). <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/disability/Toolkit/Legislatingfordisabilityrights.pdf>

UNDESA. (2016b). Module 11 – Participation in Political and Public Life. In *Toolkit on Disability for Africa*. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Division for Social Policy and Development (DSPD). <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/disability/Toolkit/Participationin-Political-Publiclife.pdf>

UN Human Rights Council. (2016). *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities*, 12 January 2016, A/HRC/31/62. <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G16/004/48/PDF/G1600448.pdf?OpenElement>

Virendrakumar, B., Jolley, E., Badu, E. & Schmidt, E. (2018). Disability inclusive elections in Africa: a systematic review of published and unpublished literature. *Disability & Society*, 33:4, 509-538, DOI:10.1080/09687599.2018.1431108. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2018.1431108>

WEI. (2016). *Enabling a global human rights movement for Women and girls with disabilities: Global Disabled Women's Rights Advocacy Report*. Washington, D.C.: Women Enabled International. <https://www.womenenabled.org/pdfs/mapping/Global%20Disabled%20Women's%20Rights%20Advocacy%20Report%20March%2020th%202016.pdf>

Young, R., Reeve, M., & Grills, N. (2016). The Functions of Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs) in Low and Middle-income Countries: A Literature Review. *Disability, CBR & Inclusive Development*, 27:3, 45-71. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5463/dcid.v27i3.539>

## Acknowledgements

We thank the following experts who voluntarily provided suggestions for relevant literature or other advice to the author to support the preparation of this report. The content of the report does not necessarily reflect the opinions of any of the experts consulted.

- Virginia Atkinson, International Foundation for Electoral Systems
- Brigitte Rohwerder, Institute of Development Studies
- Stephen Thompson, Institute of Development Studies

## Key websites

- Election Access: <http://electionaccess.org/en/>
- Inclusion International: <http://inclusion-international.org/>
- International Foundation for Electoral Systems: <http://www.ifes.org/>
- Women Enabled International (WEI), WEI Survey and Mapping Project of Advocacy Groups: <https://www.womenenabled.org/mapping.html>



## Suggested citation

Price, R.A. (2018). *Strengthening participation of people with disabilities in leadership roles in developing countries*. K4D Helpdesk. Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies.

## About this report

*This report is based on five days of desk-based research. The K4D research helpdesk provides rapid syntheses of a selection of recent relevant literature and international expert thinking in response to specific questions relating to international development. For any enquiries, contact [helpdesk@k4d.info](mailto:helpdesk@k4d.info).*

*K4D services are provided by a consortium of leading organisations working in international development, led by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), with Education Development Trust, Itad, University of Leeds Nuffield Centre for International Health and Development, Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine (LSTM), University of Birmingham International Development Department (IDD) and the University of Manchester Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute (HCRI).*

*This report was prepared for the UK Government's Department for International Development (DFID) and its partners in support of pro-poor programmes. It is licensed for non-commercial purposes only. K4D cannot be held responsible for errors or any consequences arising from the use of information contained in this report. Any views and opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of DFID, K4D or any other contributing organisation. © DFID - Crown copyright 2018.*

