Sightsavers inputs for the Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities report on equal participation of persons with disabilities in political life.

Introduction

Sightsavers welcomes the opportunity to provide input for the Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities report on equal participation of persons with disabilities in political life. Sightsavers is an international non-governmental organisation which works with partners to eliminate avoidable blindness and promote equity of opportunity for persons with disabilities in Africa and Asia.

Based on Sightsavers' experience in policy, research and programmes, this submission provides an outline of the challenges and best practices on ensuring equal political participation of persons with disabilities, and subsequent recommendations for the Guidelines.

Monitoring and data collection tools

Globally, there remains a lack of reliable and comparable data on the political representation of persons with disabilities in local and national elected bodies. This gap limits governments' capacity to fulfil CRPD Article 29 and to design evidence-based policies promoting inclusive political participation[1].

Data on political participation should also go beyond quantitative measures which count the number of people with disabilities in formal seek to understand participation in a more wholistic way. To identify ways of doing this, Sightsavers[2], in partnership with Ministries of local government and Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs), developed and piloted a toolkit for measuring the participation of persons with disabilities in local elected bodies. The toolkit promotes both participation and institutional learning in local government[3]. The toolkit uses a Levels of Participation Framework defining six progressive stages of inclusion, measured across three criteria: access to information and engagement opportunities;

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[1] CRPD Article 29 Participation in political and public life

[2] Funding through Irish Aid's Inclusive Citizenship projects in Senegal and Cameroon

[3] Sightsavers (2022) Guide to inclusive local development

contribution and consultation in decision making; and participation in inclusive policies and plans.

In 2024, the toolkit was piloted in 27 local councils (10 in Cameroon, 17 in Senegal) with 323 participants (47% persons with disabilities, 44% women, 25% youth). While participation levels were generally low, through using the participatory approaches councils identified innovative practices and developed inclusive local decision-making plans[4]. This approach demonstrates the value of taking a participatory approach to monitoring participation. **Sightsavers urges governments to embed participatory monitoring in local systems, making disability inclusion a standard indicator in governance. Institutionalising these frameworks enables OPDs to co-design and validate data collection and conception, ensuring inclusive evidence informs local planning, decision-making, and accountability, in line with Article 4.3 of the CRPD.**

At the global level, the International Disability Alliance has advanced complementary data collection through its Global Surveys on OPD participation. A 2021 survey of 1,341 participants from 136 countries reported some progress since 2018, with 55% noting improved OPD influence in international forums. However, dissatisfaction with government engagement increased, accessibility declined since 2018, and persons with psychosocial and intellectual disabilities remained largely excluded[5]. **These findings underline the need for intersectional monitoring approaches that capture the experiences of women, youth, and people from more marginalised impairment groups.**

Discriminatory laws

Recent evidence shows that 67% of countries retain constitutional or legal exceptions restricting the right to vote for persons with disabilities[6], and 91% restrict eligibility to stand for election[7]. Among these, 73% of voting exclusions and 65% of candidacy restrictions specifically target persons with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities[8].

Guardianship laws and legal capacity restrictions continue to remove political rights from individuals deemed “incapable,” disproportionately affecting persons with intellectual disabilities and mental health conditions. Such frameworks remain in

[4] Sightsavers, Ireland’s Civil Society Partnership (ICSP) Citizenship and political participation baseline report for inclusive local decision-making (ILD) indicators, 2025 (report currently not available externally)

[5] International Disability Alliance (2022) ‘Not just ticking the disability box? Meaningful OPD participation and the risk of tokenism: Findings from the 2nd IDA Global Survey on the Participation of Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs)

[6] UN DESA (2024) Disability and Development Report 2024

[7] UN DESA (2024) Disability and Development Report 2024

[8] UN DESA (2024) Disability and Development Report 2024

place in countries including Ghana and Malawi, which conflict with Articles 12 and 29 of the CRPD.

Some countries have made important progress. Constitutional and legislative guarantees for representation exist in parts of Africa. For example, Uganda's Local Government Act mandates two councillors with disabilities (one woman, one man) per district council[9], and Kenya's 2010 Constitution reserves seats for persons with disabilities in the National Assembly and Senate[10].

States should repeal or amend constitutional, electoral, and guardianship laws that limit political participation based on disability, replacing substitute decision making with supported decision-making frameworks recognising the legal capacity of all persons with disabilities. National laws should mandate consultation with OPDs in all electoral reforms and embed temporary special measures, such as representation quotas and waived candidate fees, to promote equal participation in political and public life.

Stigma and ableist attitudes

Stigma and ableist attitudes remain significant barriers preventing persons with disabilities from standing for election and effectively holding public office[11]. In Uganda, Nigeria, and South Africa, stigma has been linked to reduced political participation and increased poverty among people with severe mental illnesses[12],[13],[14],[15].

Sightsavers' study in Senegal found that candidates with disabilities are often perceived as less capable leaders, and disability rights are frequently absent from

[9] UNICEF et al. (2025) Global Disability Inclusion Report Accelerating Disability Inclusion in a Changing and Diverse World

[10] Kenya Government (2020) The Constitution of Kenya

[11] Sightsavers (2021) Disability-related stigma and discrimination in sub-Saharan Africa and south Asia: a systematic literature review

[12] Audu IA, Idris SH, Olisah VO, Sheikh TL (2013) Stigmatization of people with mental illness among inhabitants of a rural community in northern Nigeria. The International journal of social psychiatry.

[13] Ssebunnya J, Kigozi F, Lund C, Kizza D, Okello E (2009) Stakeholder perceptions of mental health stigma and poverty in Uganda. BMC International Health and Human Rights.

[14] Botha UA, Koen L, Niehaus DJ (2006) Perceptions of a South African schizophrenia population with regards to community attitudes towards their illness. Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology.

[15] Koschorke M, Padmavati R, Kumar S, Cohen A, Weiss HA, Chatterjee S, et al. (2014) Experiences of stigma and discrimination of people with schizophrenia in India. Social Science & Medicine.

electoral debates[16]. In Ghana, for example, stigma is often driven by local religious beliefs, tradition and customs, which prevent and discourage political engagement. Candidates with disabilities face unfair treatment during campaigns, leading many to withdraw. Once elected, they may encounter resistance from non-disabled peers who question their leadership and policy influence[17],[18]. **Governments should implement disability awareness training for elected representatives and promote inclusive leadership programmes to ensure full participation.**

Persons with intellectual disabilities are among the most marginalised. In Cameroon, focus group participants reported feeling excluded, confined to their homes, and denied opportunities to express themselves[19]. **Inclusive political participation programmes should prioritise persons with intellectual disabilities, incorporating supported decision-making mechanisms and accessible civic education.**

Women and young persons with disabilities experience compounded stigma due to intersecting gender, age, and disability biases. Studies in Sierra Leone, Cameroon, and Senegal show these attitudes undermine confidence, limit participation, and reinforce exclusion[20]. **States should adopt gender and youth responsive disability inclusion measures, including mentorship for women and youth with disabilities, targeted campaign funding, and anti-stigma initiatives [21],[22].**

Additional barriers to political participation

Structural inaccessibility remains a fundamental barrier to political participation for persons with disabilities. Polling stations, party offices, and government facilities often lack ramps, tactile signage, or accessible communication tools. Voter registration, candidate lists, and campaign materials are rarely provided in

[16] Sightsavers (2025) Persons with disabilities' voice and participation after being elected in local political office: exploring the institutional and social contexts in Senegal [pending publication]

[17] Mensah Osman WJ, Atta-Ankomah Richmond, Mjomba Mboje (2008) Contextual analysis of the disability situation in Ghana. JMK Research Consulting: 2008

[18] Sackey E (2014) Disability and political participation in Ghana: an alternative perspective. Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research.

[19] Sightsavers (2025) **Acknowledged but not engaged: people with intellectual disabilities continue to be left behind**

[20] Sightsavers (2024) Citizenship and political participation of young people with disabilities: a summary of studies from Sierra Leone, Cameroon and Senegal

[21] UN Women (2024) Women with disabilities stigma inventory (WDSI) 1.0

[22] UN (2025) Progress on the sustainable development goals: Gender Snapshot 2025

accessible formats[23],[24],[25]. **States should establish legally binding accessibility standards for all electoral stages and allocate budgets for their implementation. Election commissions should conduct regular accessibility audits, drawing on models like the Philippines, where OPDs audited[26] [27].**

Financial and institutional barriers further reinforce exclusion. Persons with disabilities face higher campaign costs, limited public funding, and inadequate institutional support. **Governments should provide funding mechanisms to cover disability related campaign expenses and offer targeted mentorship, leadership, and skills building programmes. Nepal's 2017 elections, where 20% of poll workers were persons with disabilities, demonstrate how inclusive staffing can promote visibility and leadership development[28].**

Limited access to education and civic learning restricts political participation for persons with disabilities, especially youth. Sightsavers and Irish Aid's 'Leave No One Behind' guide has helped to train youth with disabilities to engage politically[29]. One participant is now a Youth Senator in Cameroon and credits the training with empowering him to drive change locally and globally[30]. This demonstrates the potential that even relatively small initiatives can have in supporting leadership and participation, **governments should invest in similar youth-led, disability-inclusive leadership programmes, and ensure civic education is inclusive.**

Intersectional forms of discrimination

Multiple intersecting forms of discrimination including gender, age, and socio-economic status, compound barriers that persons with disabilities face to political participation. In Cameroon, women with disabilities are less likely than men to vote, join political parties, or participate in local committees[31]. Recent research shows that 44% of 160 countries with elected local bodies have gender quotas for local

[23] International Disability Alliance (2023) 'IDA's Compilation of CRPD Committee's Concluding Observations: Article 29 CRPD (participation in political and public life)'
[24] UNICEF (2025) Global Disability Inclusion Report Accelerating Disability Inclusion in a Changing and Diverse World
[25] UN DESA (2024) Disability and Development Report 2024
[26] International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 'Project EASE Increases Election Access in the Philippines', IFES, Arlington, VA, 2013
[27] UNICEF (2025) Global Disability Inclusion Report Accelerating Disability Inclusion in a Changing and Diverse World
[28] UNICEF (2025) Global Disability Inclusion Report Accelerating Disability Inclusion in a Changing and Diverse World
[29] Sightsavers (2017) Disability inclusion elections in Africa: A qualitative systematic review
[30] Sightsavers 2025, internal project report
[31] Sightsavers (2022) The participation of men and women with disabilities in political life in Cameroon: Endline report November 2022

elections[32]. However, only Uganda and Zimbabwe explicitly mandate the inclusion of women with disabilities in electoral lists or elected bodies, highlighting a major gap in disability-inclusive political representation[33].

Sightsavers' work in Cameroon demonstrates ways of addressing these challenges. By facilitating connections between women with disabilities and women politicians, the Irish Aid funded project has fostered mentorship, built confidence, and supported election preparedness. This led to the historic election of Cameroon's first municipal councillor with a visual impairment[34]. The Council enables her participation by providing accessibility assistance with official documents and seeking her guidance on infrastructure accessibility. In line with CRPD General Comment No. 3, 2016[35], CRPD General Comment No. 8 (2022)[36] and CEDAW General Recommendation No.18, 1991[37], **States should embed similar intersectional approaches in all electoral and governance frameworks, ensuring persons with disabilities from particularly marginalised groups are supported to participate and lead in political life.**

[32] UN Women (2022). Women's representation in local government: a global analysis

[33] UN Women (2022). Legislated gender quotas for local governments. Available at: https://localgov.unwomen.org/access-quota-information. Accessed 14 April 2024.

[34] Missing Perspectives (2023) All eyes on me – being a woman with a disability in politics in Cameroon

[35] CRPD (2016) General comment No. 3 on women and girls with disabilities

[36]UNCRPD (2022) General comment No. 8 on the right of persons with disabilities to work and employment https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/general-comments-and-recommendations/crpdcgc8-general-comment-no-8-2022-right-persons

[37] CEDAW Committee (1991) General Recommendation No. 18 Disabled women