

Disability Inclusion Helpdesk, January 2023

Evidence digest focus issue: Disability Inclusion and Political Participation and Leadership

Contents

Guest introduction: promoting the political participation and leadership of people with disabilities in West Africa.....	2
The latest evidence and guidance on disability inclusion and political participation and leadership.....	3
The right to vote	3
Representation of people with disabilities in elected office	5
Engagement in decision-making processes.....	5
The latest evidence and guidance on disability inclusion: Other topics	6
Assistive Technology	7
Climate change	7
Employment	8
Health.....	8
Humanitarian response	9
Nutrition.....	9
Social Protection	10
Disability inclusion policy news	10
About the Disability Inclusion Helpdesk:.....	10

Guest introduction: promoting the political participation and leadership of people with disabilities in West Africa

To open this evidence digest, we spoke to Laurène Leclercq, the Global Technical Lead for Education and Social Inclusion in West Africa for Sightsavers, about their work to promote the rights of people with disabilities to participate in civic and political life in Cameroon and Senegal. Sightsavers won a Zero Project award on 3rd December 2022 for this work.



Laurène Leclercq

What was the situation for the political participation and leadership of people with disabilities in Cameroon and Senegal before the project started?

When the project began in 2017, there were very few people with disabilities, especially women with disabilities, in decision-making positions. If people with disabilities were involved in decision-making processes, often they were vaguely consulted but there were multiple barriers to their meaningful participation. We knew that we wanted the project to focus on empowering women and men with disabilities in local governance and leadership. When people with disabilities are involved in consultations and leadership

positions, it not only leads to their ideas and suggestions being taken into account, but helps people with disabilities be recognised as an important part of the community.



Sightsavers supported women with disabilities to vote for the first time in Cameroon © Sightsavers

The key barrier is stigma and discrimination. In Senegal and Cameroon, there are strong cultural norms and beliefs that lead to people with disabilities not being considered as active citizens and seen instead as victims or passive beneficiaries. These views prevent people with disabilities being invited to participate. We found this was particularly the case for women with disabilities who face double barriers due to patriarchal norms that restrict their access to public spheres.

We also found that people with different types of impairment faced different barriers and levels of exclusion. For example, Deaf people faced barriers due to a lack of accessible communications and in Cameroon, people with intellectual disabilities are not allowed to vote, which is a systemic obstacle. We sometimes found this additional exclusion based on gender, age or impairment type was replicated within organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs) so this was a learning journey. Within both Senegal and Cameroon, the subject of inclusive

governance is sensitive and faced with numerous challenges, including separatism conflicts and terrorism.

How did you promote the political leadership of people with disabilities?

We took a twin track approach – empowering people with disabilities and carrying out social and behaviour change activities at all levels to address the stigma and discrimination they face. We worked with people with disabilities, including women, men and people with a variety of impairments, to be sure they could be represented and elected in decision making groups. We then worked with community actors and local councillors to change their minds around the possibility that people with disabilities can contribute to the society. We did a lot of systems strengthening work, working with OPDs and governments, specifically around decentralisation. We continue to work with key decentralisation institutions to be sure that every local council understands inclusive local development approaches, including how to make a participatory budget at the local level that is inclusive for people with disabilities.

For the first time in Cameroon and Senegal, women and men with disabilities are represented in political leadership. Today, 204 people with disabilities are either elected local councillors, parliamentarians, senators or official representatives in local working groups, or have been included on political party lists in a position eligible for election for the first time.

There is also progress in other elements of political participation and leadership; nearly 3,500 people with disabilities received birth certificates, ID cards or voter cards, which helped them to vote in elections, and 40,000 people with disabilities are now registered in the voting lists in Cameroon. In Senegal, 30 people with disabilities were appointed part of election observers' teams. We also trained journalists, community and religious leaders, and staff from government and official bodies on disability rights and inclusion, helping to the address stigma and discrimination that restricts the rights of persons with disabilities to express themselves as voters and active citizens.



Mme Gueye was elected as 9th Deputy Mayor in Louga © Sightsavers

The latest evidence and guidance on disability inclusion and political participation and leadership

The right to vote

The 2021 report on Disability Inclusion in Latin America and the Caribbean by the World Bank contains a chapter on the [exclusion of people with disabilities from political participation in Latin America and the Caribbean](#). It found that there are restrictions on legal capacity that block the rights of people with disabilities to vote in 19 countries in Latin America and the

Caribbean. It found that voting rates for persons with disabilities in Chile and Ecuador have been increasing, and identified examples of best practice that enable this, including assistive vote options, availability of braille templates, and working with OPDs and transport associations to provide free transportation to voting centres. The report is available in English and Spanish, with summaries also available in French and Portuguese.

In 2021, Human Rights Watch published a report titled **“No One Represents Us”: lack of access to political participation for people with disabilities in Iraq**. Drawing on interviews with people with disabilities, a legal expert and government representatives and review of relevant laws, the report found that people with disabilities are being deprived of their right to vote because of discriminatory legislation, and inaccessible voting procedures, facilities and election materials. The report is available in **Arabic, English, Sorani** and **easy read** versions.

Inclusive elections

A **guide to disability inclusive elections in Burkina Faso** was produced in 2021 by the Ministry of Women, National Solidarity, Family and Humanitarian Action, Comud Handicap with the support of Light for the World. The guide aims to support the national election body to facilitate the full participation of persons with disabilities throughout the election processes. The guide is available in English and French.

In 2017, Sightsavers published a **qualitative systematic review of disability-inclusive elections in Africa**. The authors found a limited number of quality documents to include in the systematic review, highlighting a need for increased documentation of interventions. The review found that whilst the majority of African countries ratified important disability-focused legislation, the implementation of this legislation varied greatly between countries so that people with disabilities face exclusion and discrimination despite progressive laws and policies being in place. The report also includes data on the barriers and enablers of political participation, as well as the strategies to support inclusive political processes, including inclusive legislation and adjustments of physical infrastructure of registration and polling stations.

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association held a webinar on the **barriers people with disabilities face to electoral and parliamentary engagement** in 2022. The webinar discussed the electoral and political participation of people with disabilities in Commonwealth jurisdictions and how to overcome the barriers that people with disabilities face. Learning from projects implemented by Sightsavers on electoral participation are also shared. Captions are included.

In 2018, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems published the **Election Access Observation Toolkit**, which provides a methodology for conducting standalone observations on accessibility, as well as questions for mainstream observer groups to incorporate disability inclusion into their missions. The publication is currently available in English, Spanish and Ukrainian.

A 2021 query from the Disability Inclusion Helpdesk on **disability inclusion, open societies and human rights**, summarises progress made towards disability inclusion, open societies

and human rights over recent years. It presents evidence from research and programmes on democratic governance and political empowerment in low and middle income countries. The report highlights emerging best practice on addressing barriers to participating in democratic processes, including introducing tactile ballot guides, ensuring voting premises are accessible, promoting voter registration through home visits and developing accessible communications materials.

Representation of people with disabilities in elected office

Evans and Reher (2022) **identified and analysed the barriers to elected office faced by people with disabilities**, who are under-represented in politics at different levels of government. The report provides an overview of the state of political representation of people with disabilities in the UK and around the world. It identifies the barriers to achieving and holding elected office faced by people with disabilities, including venue accessibility, lack of interpretation, inaccessible formatting of materials, lack of facilities, and cultural barriers. The study found the nature of barriers varied between individuals and depends on a person's impairment, political experience, and the level of support they receive from their party. The interviews all highlighted the importance for reducing the barriers and improving access to increase the presence of people with disabilities in politics.

A study by Kramer et al., (2022) explored the **experiences of people with disabilities who were electoral candidates in Indonesia's 2019 general election**, the first national legislative election since Indonesia's disability law passed in 2016. Interviews with electoral candidates highlighted that their reasons for entering the electoral race, the strategies adopted over the course of their campaigns, and their ability to overcome barriers during campaigning, were often shaped by their prior involvement in the disability rights movement. The study found that candidates were often motivated to run for office to make sure people with disabilities had a voice within parliament, and to use their election campaign to raise awareness of disability rights within their communities.

A study on the **barriers preventing persons with disabilities in participating in public affairs in Zambia** was published in *Development in Practice* in 2022. The study found that there are few people with disabilities that have access to public decision-making structures in Zambia, despite the right to participation. The study focused on the General Elections of 2021 and examined testimonies of activists, politicians, and persons with disabilities. The findings showed that even though the political parties are supportive of diversity, the persistent negative attitudes around the capabilities of persons with different impairments continues to be the greatest barrier to political participation.

Engagement in decision-making processes

Chand and Uprety (2022) looked into the **participation of people with disabilities in decision-making process in Nepal**. This qualitative study explores the participation of people with disabilities, particularly in the different phases of policy formulation (such as consultation and participation) at the municipal level, and calls for crucial actions for ensuring meaningful

participation of people with disabilities in democratic processes in Nepal in the current federal context. Barriers to the meaningful participation of people with disabilities in leadership and decision-making processes, social stigma, discrimination, and inaccessible physical facilities have excluded people with disabilities from freely exercising fundamental rights such as voting. The paper found there is a dearth of data regarding disability, which has created further challenges for policymakers and planners in understanding the needs of people with disabilities.

A 2022 paper in the British Journal of Learning Disabilities considered **how to address the limited involvement of people with intellectual disabilities in setting the priorities for initiatives and activities in their local communities**. Robinson et al. researched what kind of initiatives were being implemented and what people with intellectual disabilities felt was important about these activities in their local communities in Australia. They explored how the involvement of people with intellectual disabilities shaped the outcomes of the review and implications for research and practice. The data showed that people with intellectual disabilities wanted to share their deep, rich insights and questions about the things that drive inclusion and exclusion, not only their views about the effectiveness of particular kinds of activities. The paper concluded that future policy and practice consultations should invite people with intellectual disabilities into conversations about change-making at community and societal levels to open up new opportunities to respond to priorities of people with intellectual disability into local-community building.

King, Edwards and Watling (2022) undertook a series of in-depth interviews that explored **the approach of women with disabilities from Tanzania, Ghana and Kenya to leadership**. The paper found that African disability activists and leaders play a key role in addressing the pervasive stigma, discrimination, and exclusion that is encountered by people with disability. The findings indicated that although the participants had experienced significant discrimination and pain as women with disabilities, they had been able to draw strength and conviction from their trauma and use their experiences to connect with other women with disabilities. The participants described leadership as the service to others and they understood the importance of unity, hope, participatory leadership, and a commitment to a common goal and purpose. Through their leadership, they sought to empower individual women with disabilities, as well as shape a united disability movement with a strong political voice. These findings demonstrate the importance of understanding the role women can play in disability leadership.

The latest evidence and guidance on disability inclusion: Other topics

The UN Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities have released **situational analyses of the rights of people with disabilities in a wide range of countries globally**. The Situational Analyses are key to understand each country's main bottlenecks and priorities related to fulfilling the CRPD and to develop evidence-based joint programme to support CRPD implementation. The findings presented focus on the essential preconditions for disability inclusion and will guide the implementation of a joint UN programme to support the

realisation of the rights of persons with disabilities and the achievement of inclusive SDGs. A summary of key findings can be found in the [Global Report](#).

The London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine hosted the webinar **“Towards disability inclusive development: A Journey on What Works”** to mark the International Day for Persons with Disabilities. The webinar shared evidence from FCDO’s disability inclusive programmes on what works in low- and middle- income countries, to support and strengthen policy decision-making and more impactful programming interventions. The webinar provides insights on gathering evidence and turning it into products, as well as applying evidence in business and the labour markets, scaling up lessons learnt in FCDO’s Inclusive Futures programme. Sign language interpretation and captions are available.

The Disability Inclusion Helpdesk published a query on **disability inclusion in the work of International Financial Institutions** (IFIs). It covers the strategic focus of IFIs on disability inclusion, considers how this relates to the FCDO’s Disability Inclusion and Rights Strategy. The query closes with recommendations for fostering greater disability inclusion across the work of IFIs, including the need to support the development of disability inclusion specific strategies, hold partners to account through commitments made at the Global Disability Summits, and fostering more equitable and empowering relationships with OPDs.

UNICEF have **produced an evidence and gap map on inclusive interventions for children with disabilities in low- and middle-income countries**. 155 studies assessing the effectiveness of inclusive interventions in improving outcomes for children with disabilities living in LMICs were included in the mapping. The mapping found that research is lacking in many critical areas, including awareness and non-discrimination, protection, adequate standard of living, family and community life, and empowerment. These represent critical areas of policy and programming in need of robust evidence to improve inclusion and participation.

Assistive Technology

The World Health Organisation launched the **Training in Assistive Products** (TAP) on 10th November 2022. The training is a practical tool to support countries to respond to the recommendations in the [Global Report on Assistive Technology](#). The online TAP aims designed to prepare primary health and other personnel to fulfil an assistive technology role. This may include identifying people who may benefit from assistive technology; providing simple assistive products such as magnifiers and dressing aids; or referral for more complex products and other services. Appropriate to a broad range of contexts, TAP is targeted at primary health care and community workforce, as well as those providing services to people who need assistive products within other sectors. Modules are available in Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Georgian, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Swahili, and Ukrainian.

Climate change

CBM have published **stories of persons with disabilities from the Global South who are missing in Climate Action**. It tells the story of the people, the individuals and communities affected by climate change, yet absent from key conversations and actions on climate. Its

purpose is to amplify the perspectives of persons with disabilities and their representative organisations and by doing so make a small contribution into an under researched area.

The Disability Inclusion Helpdesk published a query on disability inclusion in **nature-based solutions programming**. There is an increasing focus on Nature-Based Solutions (NbS) to address the climate crisis. Whilst there is increasing awareness of the importance of disability inclusion in climate action, there is limited evidence available on disability inclusion and nature-based solutions programming. This report provides a rapid review of the emerging evidence on best practice of disability inclusion in nature-based solutions programming.

Employment

Bailik and Mhiri (2022) explored **barriers to employment for people with intellectual disabilities in low- and middle-income countries** from self-advocate and family perspectives. They highlight that despite the growing focus on disability-inclusive employment and livelihoods, people with intellectual disabilities and their families remain underrepresented in both the literature and in employment programming. The paper identifies the key barriers to inclusive employment through six focus groups made up of people with intellectual disabilities and their family members in Kenya, Uganda, Nigeria and Bangladesh. Self-advocates and families report stigma, denial of access to education, safety and security concerns, pressure to engage in self-employment, and discrimination as key barriers. Their experiences can contribute to more inclusive cross-disability perspectives on employment and provide guidance for practitioners aiming to design responsive disability-inclusive employment programmes.

Health

The World Health Organisation published a **Global report on health equity for persons with disabilities** in December 2022. The report finds that whilst there has been some progress made in ensuring persons with disabilities are able to exercise their right to the highest attainable standard of health, the world is still far from realising this right for many persons with disabilities. The report documents available evidence on health inequalities and identifies the factors that contribute to this inequality. It found that persons with disabilities are three times more likely to be denied health care, and four times more likely to be treated badly in health facilities. The report makes evidence-based recommendations for country-level actions to address these gaps and calls on WHO Member States to take urgent action to advance health equity for persons with disabilities.

The Journal of Adolescent Health published a study on **anxiety and depression signs among adolescents in 26 low- and middle-income countries** and explored the extent to which these are associated with difficulties across other functional domains. The study analysed randomly selected, nationally representative data from 26 countries with a total sample size of 123,975 adolescents aged 10-17 years. Data on functional difficulties, including signs of depression and anxiety, were collected by the Washington Group Child Functioning Module, an instrument validated to identify the population of children with disabilities through

household surveys. The study found that 5.5% of adolescents were reported to have had signs of anxiety, 3.1% signs of depression, and 2.3% co-occurring signs of anxiety and depression. Adolescents with functional difficulties in all domains analysed, across different contexts, are more likely to experience depression and anxiety signs than those without such difficulties. The study concludes that increasing the availability of population-level data on adolescent functional difficulties, including those related to depression and anxiety, is important in promoting inclusivity, participation, and the right of children to equal opportunities.

Humanitarian response

A 2022 paper shared [examples on how the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland promotes inclusion of persons with disabilities in humanitarian action](#) and explores the challenges that need to be resolved by stakeholders. There is a recognition that people with disabilities are excluded from humanitarian assistance. The research discusses how the primary means for donors to promote disability-inclusive humanitarian action are funding and advocacy. Trade-offs between flexible and earmarked funding for disability inclusion are challenging when reporting on results is inadequate.

An article written by La Vecchia in November 2022 [proposed ways in which our understanding of disability may inform the interpretation and application of international humanitarian law](#). The article also showcases how the interaction between disability and other characteristics, such as gender and age, will shape this interpretation and application. This is following the major shifts in understanding of and approach to disability brought about by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and its implications for other frameworks of international law. However, the article finds that despite this, people with disabilities in practice often do not benefit from the same degree of protection as others who find themselves in situations of armed conflict, for example the war on Ukraine. These can also be exacerbated by age, gender and type of impairment.

Haque et al., (2022) published [a study on the human toll and humanitarian crisis of the Russia-Ukraine war from the first 162 days, including a focus on mental health](#). They extracted and analysed data resulting from Russian military attacks on Ukrainians between 24th February 2022 and 4th August 2022. The data tracked direct deaths and injuries, damage to healthcare infrastructure and the impact on health, the destruction of residences, infrastructure, communication systems and utilities services, all of which disrupted the lives of Ukrainians. Through the disruptions, they concluded that the devastation, trauma and human cost of war will impact generations to come. The study highlighted the past war experiences have included post-traumatic stress disorders, which affect veterans and civilians. Additionally, the lack of mental health services before the war, which are now minimal, are likely to further exacerbate the mental health needs for Ukrainians.

Nutrition

USAID's launched a [Feeding and Disability Resource Bank](#) in November 2022. The bank is an online repository of materials to encourage disability inclusion in nutrition programmes.

It aims to help nutrition and disability programme managers, government leaders, and donor agency staff design and implement effective nutrition programmes for children with disabilities. The Resource Bank sections focus on identifying feeding difficulties, managing feeding difficulties, identifying disabilities, supporting children with disabilities and their families, and promoting disability inclusion.

Social Protection

UNICEF published a [statistical overview of the wellbeing of children with disabilities in the Middle East and North Africa](#) in October 2022. The report recognised the significant barriers that children with disabilities experience when accessing their rights, because of stigma, lack of accessible services, institutionalisation and physical barriers. Data gaps are being addressed, with development of new data collection tools that result in substantial increase in the availability and quality of data on children with disabilities. The report includes internationally comparable data from four countries in the Middle East and North Africa, covering 18 indicators of child well-being – from nutrition, health and education to protection from violence, exploitation and discrimination. The report aims to promote the use of these data to make children with disabilities in the region more apparent, bringing about a fuller understanding of their life experiences. It offers evidence crucial to decision-making to fulfil obligations, both moral and legal, to give every child an equal chance in life.

Disability inclusion policy news

On 11th November 2022, the 46 member states of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) adopted the [Buenos Aires Commitment](#) to “recognize the importance for persons with disabilities of their individual autonomy and independence, including the freedom to make their own choices.”

About the Disability Inclusion Helpdesk:

The Disability Inclusion Helpdesk provides research and technical assistance on disability inclusion to the UK Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office as part of the Disability Inclusive Development Programme. All our published reports are available on [our website](#). Contact us via: enquiries@disabilityinclusion.org.uk