



Inclusion of persons with disabilities in political parties

Key messages

- Inclusion is a human right.
- Political parties are key players in decision-making. Therefore, it is imperative that persons with disabilities can also participate meaningfully in the activities of political parties.
- Inclusion can bring many benefits to political parties, from being more democratic to growing numbers and new viewpoints.
- Promoting equal participation needs a genuine desire to become more sensitive to different barriers and to lower them.

We may not realise that we discriminate

Demo Finland is a Finnish NGO founded by political parties, and with an aim to strengthen democracy. Among many of its activities, Demo Finland hopes to increase the inclusion of all people in the work of political parties. This is where democracy begins.

This is a theme on which Demo Finland and Finnish political parties have worked very well together, learning from each other, and also bringing valuable lessons from programmes conducted in the Global South.

In a study commissioned by Demo Finland in 2022, it was discovered that political parties in Finland do not want to discriminate against persons with disabilities—they just do not recognise the structures that create barriers to equal participation.

Persons without disabilities seldom stop to think about disability. Meetings are organised in buildings that are not accessible, and websites are updated without considering people living with visual impairments.

But this should not be the case, and luckily many individuals and political parties are realising that things should change.

Demo Finland has conducted programmes to enhance the political possibilities of persons with disabilities in Kenya, Zambia and Ethiopia, and has also worked with Finnish political parties to increase inclusivity in Finland.

In these programmes, it has been an important starting point that persons with disabilities have the right to participate in political decision-making. Representative democracy works through political parties, and therefore it is imperative that persons with disabilities are able to be active in the political parties.

While it is impossible to give a clear to-do list on how to achieve this, this policy brief compiles some lessons learnt, success stories and recommendations for political parties. This brief was compiled with the help of interviews with Disability Rights Watch, Zambia National Women's Lobby and the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, as well as key rights-holders in Kenya and Zambia.

Human rights, not charity

One of the first things to realise is that the inclusion of persons with disabilities is not about charity, it is about respecting human and constitutional rights.

In many countries persons with disabilities are not fully included in decision-making and their issues have not been sufficiently addressed.

For example, in Zambia, when Demo Finland started the programme in 2020, many people in political parties had the perception that persons with disabilities were not capable of making sound decisions and representing others. This changed gradually during discussions and training sessions, and after a while people realised that the biggest challenge that persons with disabilities face is not the impairment that they have, but the societal barriers that they need to overcome.

As mindsets have begun to change, political parties in Zambia are now able to see persons with disabilities as people that can be given leadership positions and participate in other political party processes.

The legal framework of inclusion

The main international framework of inclusion is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, commonly referred to as the CRPD. It has been ratified by 186 countries. Most countries in the world have therefore already ratified the rights of persons with disabilities.

Practically all the countries have also guaranteed equal rights of all their citizens in their constitutions, and most countries also have specific legislation localising the CRPD and guaranteeing the rights of

persons with disabilities, as well as legislation concerning political parties and elections, which tend to prohibit discrimination.

Besides international and national laws, many political institutions and parties have their own bylaws and constitutions, which may need revision if they do not guarantee meaningful participation of persons with disabilities. Political parties are, after all, where access to political power, leadership and decision-making begins.

Inclusion – it's good for you

Any political party wants to win elections. With 16 per cent of the world's population having disabilities, there are a lot of votes to be gathered – if the political parties are truly representative of the population.

Another key benefit of inclusion for political parties is a deepened understanding of human rights, disability and society itself. When political parties get pluralistic views in their decision-making, their positions and policies are stronger than without them.

"If political parties include persons with disabilities within their structures, they're tapping into knowledge that has not been tapped into previously," says project coordinator Norman Banda from Zambia National Women's Lobby.

An inclusive and representative political party is also more democratic. If a political party is seen to uphold democratic principles and seen to respect the constitution, this can be a great boost for the political party's public image.

This recognition in turn can be worth money. In some countries, such as Kenya, political parties can receive more public funding if they have persons with disabilities in their county or national assemblies. Even if this is not the case in every country, inclusive programmes and best practices in democratic representation give recognition and positive press that can be used in fundraising.

Inclusion brings numbers, knowledge, positive press and perhaps even money to your political party.

Start with sensitisation

When Demo Finland started the programmes with partners in Zambia and Kenya and its own work in Finland, it was obvious that many political parties lacked an understanding of disability. One of the first things to do was to start identifying the gaps in knowledge and the barriers to participation, and then to sensitise people in the political parties.

In Kenya and Zambia, the first activities were targeted to the political parties by identifying their needs, building their capacity, reforming their internal policies and processes and establishing cross-party engagement.

"In Kenya, the political parties are required to have persons with disabilities within their governing organs, but this was not reflected in the engagement of persons with disabilities," says Faith Odidi of Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD).

Linking organisations of persons with disabilities early

It was beneficial to include organisations of persons with disabilities in the programme early and bring them to the table.

"They managed to directly bring more understanding of issues of disability and acceptance that persons with disabilities are able to engage and participate well, and that they have valuable contributions to make," Odidi says.

The same goes for other stakeholders. For example, The Office of the Registrar of Political Parties is usually mandated to regulate the formation, registration and funding of political parties. Such offices often hold

inclusion in high regard and can be good allies. It is advisable to map all public and private stakeholders and include them in the work where possible.

After a few years of interaction, Kenya now has political parties that are open to engaging and understand inclusion, says Maureen Oduori, Country Director of WFD.

Participation should also be meaningful.

“It is not about just having certain slots available. It is also ensuring that members with disabilities are fully engaged in the political party and their views are well-represented, for example in reviewing party documents,” Oduori says.

Nothing about us without us

The motto of the global disability movement – *Nothing about us without us* – is a good reminder. Most political parties already have members with disabilities, and these people should be included in discussions! It is impossible to create a working disability agenda without persons who know disabilities personally.

It is good to remember that disability is a multifaceted phenomenon, and one person can never represent all forms of disability: the needs of those with visual impairments differ greatly from the needs of those with hearing impairments, for example.

Many political parties decide to form a disability league (an organisation for persons with disabilities within the party organs) to champion the inclusion of persons with disabilities. These leagues can help the political parties to push the disability inclusion agenda, revise documents and lobby. Persons with disabilities should obviously be included, but the leagues can also have non-disabled allies.

Most political parties already have members with disabilities. Include them!

Train your members

It is likely that the political parties need to give training to their members with disabilities. Many have been sidelined, and may not be fully conversant with political party structures and decision-making.

Increased capacity will be of benefit to the political party as well. When political parties have knowledgeable persons with disabilities, it is possible to use them as facilitators and trainers as a way of enhancing meaningful inclusion in those political parties. Further, persons with disabilities training fellow persons with disabilities also upholds an important principle: from us to us, which means

that persons from a minority group train and produce information for other members of the same group.

Co-operate with OPDs

It is also good to have discussions and provide training to organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs). They may be experts in their field and they know the needs of persons with disabilities, but many are not experts in politics or in how political parties operate.

It is best to talk openly on advocacy and lobbying and provide the OPDs with the skills they need in co-operating with the political parties.

In Demo Finland’s programmes, the programme staff started talking to political parties and organisations of persons with disabilities separately, but soon they decided to form co-operating platforms, where they could interact among all interested groups and even plan advocacy campaigns together. This has been very fruitful. When all stakeholders understand each other’s value, respect also increases.

A common forum or platform also helps to bring together the voice of the OPDs. As they represent different groups, their lobby interests may vary. Through dialogue, common ground is easier to reach.

Revision of party documents

When a political party takes inclusion seriously, it usually must see whether its own documents: constitution, manifestos and conventions are up to date in terms of inclusion. These processes also ensure that all the key players in the political party are included in the discussions. Political parties can also consider whether they should create a specific equality and inclusion plan or strategy.

While the revision of party documents usually takes time and must be approved by party conferences or assemblies, it is good to realise that many things can be done while waiting, if political will is there.

Political parties can hold round table discussions and start recruiting persons with disabilities to join their political parties, party officials can attend training, secretariats can be made accessible and so on. It is best not to sit and wait for the next party congress, because then there is a risk of forgetting the inclusion agenda.

Mentoring has helped in Zambia

A good way to help persons with disabilities to participate and perhaps even rise through the ranks of a political party is mentoring. In Zambia, Disability Rights Watch and Zambia National Women's Lobby conducted a pilot initiative of 15 actors or mentees, who were mentored by seasoned politicians.

"The participants said this gave them the possibility to talk with the politicians and have a deeper understanding of what politics is, how they should negotiate it and what is expected of them," says Rodgers Musuma of Disability Rights Watch.

This is a great way to impart knowledge on what the practical side of politics is all about.

Typical barriers, top 10

Every country and political party is different, but here are a few common barriers that persons with disabilities face. These barriers do not affect all persons with disabilities in the same way.

1. Perception that persons with disabilities are not interested in politics or are not able to take leadership roles.
2. Not enough training available for persons with disabilities, and training materials not being accessible.
3. Legislation may prohibit participation and even voting for persons with disabilities.
4. Voting stations and voting systems may not be accessible.
5. Political party events and meetings are organised in physically inaccessible locations. Also public transport to get there is often not accessible.
6. The communication channels and the language used are not accessible.
7. Poverty. Many persons with disabilities do not have equal financial means for campaigning and fees.
8. Requirements to resign. In some countries, some employers require employees to resign if they start campaigning for elected positions.
9. Political violence. In many countries, persons with disabilities face physical and psychological violence.
10. Other discrimination. Many persons with disabilities face intersectional discrimination because of their gender or ethnicity, or other reasons.

A politician in the making: Alice Munala

“I am a woman with a physical disability. I am a mother, a wife, an auntie and everything else that any other woman is.”

These are the words of Alice Munala, a Kenyan politician who is the secretary of her political party’s disability league. In the last general elections in Kenya in 2022, she wanted to be nominated for the senate via the women’s list. She opted not to campaign for an elected seat in Parliament, because she would have had to resign from her employment in order to campaign. This is a common barrier in many countries.

She works in an organisation for persons with disabilities, running campaigns on the political participation of women with disabilities.

Education for children with disabilities

Munala wants to become a law-maker because she would like Kenyan legislation to be disability-inclusive. She would especially like to advance education for children with disabilities.

Munala believes that law-making requires people who come from the disability movement.

“Sometimes you find that persons with disabilities are being represented by people who do not have disabilities and they do not even understand disability issues,” she says. “Or a person maybe was involved in a road accident a few years ago and walks with a limp but has never been in the disability movement and does not understand disability issues.”

Big aspirations

As for herself, she did not get the nomination. Her political party colleagues changed her from the women’s list to the disability list against her will, and the political party was not large enough to secure a nomination. But the dream lives on.

“I would want to see myself in a decision-making position, in either the National Assembly or the Senate, where I am able to participate in making policies that favour persons with disabilities.”

Motivations of persons with disabilities

A group of researchers surveyed Finnish political parties and persons with disabilities active in them in 2022, for a study commissioned by Demo Finland.

According to the study, the data suggests that at least at the European level, persons with disabilities are members of political parties more actively than the population on average. In a study by Pew researchers in the USA, persons with disabilities were also found to be slightly more interested in the elections than the general population.

This may not be true all over the world. Alice Munala says that in Kenya and many African countries, persons with disabilities follow politics but may be afraid of joining politics because of the many challenges that are involved, from stigmatisation to violence and the membership fees.

“Also, many family members discourage them from joining politics,” she says.

All over the world, persons with disabilities are rarely encouraged or supported to join politics, which is a missed opportunity. With encouragement and the gradual removal of barriers, the political parties would gain active and interested new members and voters.

Not only disability issues

It is commonly thought that persons with disabilities join politics to influence policies related to disability. This was found to be partly true in the study in Finland: some of the interviewees said that they got involved in political parties to influence the position of persons with disabilities in society. For some, the reason for getting involved was a more general desire to influence society and an interest in social issues.

A few of the Finnish respondents said that at some point in their political activities they had tried to prove their credibility by avoiding disability-related topics. For some, the role of a candidate or politician with disabilities was not disagreeable at all, as they had come to politics to defend the rights of persons with disabilities.

Two respondents wondered how well they, as individual politicians with disabilities, could represent all persons with disabilities, or even their own disability group. They wondered whether this is even possible, given that persons with disabilities are such a diverse group.

Some persons with disabilities enter politics to influence disability issues – others want to work in politics in other sectors.

Minimum Standards on Inclusion

In Kenya, the political parties, together with WFD and Demo Finland, have elaborated a list of Minimum Standards on the inclusion of persons with disabilities in political parties. The standards are written for the Kenyan context and may not be 100 per cent applicable in other countries.

Minimum standards on the inclusion of persons with disabilities in political parties

1. Compliance with key disability legislation, policies and guidelines providing for the participation of Persons with Disabilities in Political Party processes.
2. Disability-inclusive Party policies, manifesto, constitution and Nomination Rules.
3. Inclusive Party leadership and governance structures (party committees, disability leagues etc.).
4. Access to information, communication, premises and services.
5. A fair and transparent Party primary nomination list process put in place for persons with disabilities.
6. An Inclusive Party Complaints and Resolution Mechanism is in place for party disputes.
7. Inclusive participation of persons with disabilities in party processes and campaigns.
8. Inclusive financing and accountability for PWD activities.
9. Data and monitoring participation of persons with disabilities.
10. Recruitment and retention of persons with disabilities as members.

Source: www.wfd.org

Overcoming internalised discrimination

The researchers also found evidence of internalised discrimination: the persons had accepted that some venues and activities just are inaccessible, and nothing can be done to change them. These included, for example, the inaccessibility of the council meeting hall podium and the chairperson's seat.

Many persons with disabilities had also decided that excursions or other free time activities were not for them. In general, persons with disabilities, spontaneously and without making a big deal of it, skipped many activities where informal interaction was prevalent, because they did not want to be a burden to the people without disabilities.

Political parties working better together

In Kenya, Demo Finland's programme created a co-operating space for cross-party dialogue on and around key inclusion policy issues. This minimised the short-term political point-scoring and led to longer-term considerations in decision-making. By focusing on inclusion, the programme managed to increase interpersonal and inter-party trust and confidence.

Promoting cross-party dialogue and consensus on cross-cutting non-partisan issues helped to avoid the potential for conflict, tensions and disputes, thereby helping to consolidate and strengthen multi-party democracy and political dialogue.

"Political parties have different manifestos and dreams for the country," says Faith Odidi of Westminster Foundation for Democracy. "The unifying aspect was inclusion. Once every political party understood this objective, then

the focus and attention were removed from their own individual party beliefs and manifestos.”

Inclusion was a theme that all political parties could easily align with because it is also in the country’s constitution. The disability leagues formed in Kenyan political parties in particular are now sharing ideas and co-operating well, including issuing joint media press-releases.

“Constructive dialogue on issues of inclusion of persons with disabilities and the learning that has gone on between political parties has encouraged even other political parties which are not within the programme to include persons with disabilities,” Odidi says.

An Innovation: A lean working group of political parties and civil society

In Kenya, 12 political parties worked together in the Demo Finland’s Kenya Inclusive Political Parties Programme, along with several organisations of persons with disabilities.

“It was a very big group to engage with,” says Faith Odidi of Westminster Foundation for Democracy.

That is why the core partners decided that a leaner team was needed to lead the work and to ensure that the agenda moved forward at the legislative and policy levels. They decided to form a Technical Working Group composed of representatives of a few political parties and a few organisations of persons with disabilities to push the agenda forward.

“This working group has really played a leadership role in advocacy and lobbying various government offices and political parties, ensuring that persons with disabilities are included,” Odidi says.

In practice all the political parties and organisations still meet regularly, and agendas are set together. In between the general meetings, it is the technical working group members who keep the wheels turning. This has led to ensuring that there is a constant follow-up both within the political parties and in the legislative processes.

Maureen Oduori from Westminster Foundation for Democracy says that the working group has been so successful and worked so well that WFD has taken more of a back seat and let the technical working group spearhead the programme.

“Beyond the investment that the programme is giving, there’s this group that is constantly thinking, strategising, seeing who to engage and how to lead those discussions.”

WFD is focusing now on building the technical working group to a level where it can drive this agenda. This is a model that should also be considered elsewhere, where large numbers of political parties and organisations are working well together towards the goal of inclusion.

A leaner team can lead the work and follow-up to make sure that the inclusion agenda moves forward.

A brave politician - Dr Mtonga of Zambia

“For someone in Africa to stand and try to contest for any election, it takes a lot of bravery, especially from a person with disability,” says Doctor Thomas Mtonga, who campaigned in the Zambian general elections in 2021 for a seat in Parliament.

He has strenuously fought his way through schools and universities, completing two Master’s degrees and finally a doctorate as well. There were many obstacles in his path, as Dr. Mtonga became visually impaired because of measles when he was ten years old.

“I am a very resilient person, full of perseverance,” he says.

Decades since the last visually impaired MP

Dr. Mtonga wanted to enter politics to make things better for his home region in the Eastern Province of Zambia, after local chiefs and village heads encouraged him to do so.

“There were no clinics, no schools and no bridges,” he says.

But he also wanted to represent persons with disabilities in Parliament. The last time the Zambian Parliament had MPs with visual or hearing impairments was in the 1980s.

“From the time Zambia became a multi-party participatory democracy in the 1990s, no one has ever dared to stand, except for those colleagues with physical disabilities.”

Some politicians with physical disabilities may not talk about disability, and according to Dr. Mtonga, they may even be offended if they are referred to as persons with disabilities.

Resources and beliefs as barriers

At first, he thought his salary from the University of Zambia would carry him through the elections, but soon it became clear that campaigning was very expensive and the resources were not sufficient.

Another barrier was the social stigma concerning disability. In his constituency, more than 70 per cent are illiterate, and the stigma was very real.

“Sometimes some of the people would climb trees to see the blind man who was campaigning.”

Some contenders took advantage of this, and mocked his disability.

“I remember one of the contestants going on the radio and saying: Look, you have three children. One child has a disability, two children are able-bodied. Who can you send to go and cultivate in the field?”

When you lose, you may lose big

In the end, Dr. Mtonga came close. Another thousand votes, and he would have been an elected MP. He stood for the then ruling party, and people wanted change. Losing the elections unfortunately meant that he also lost his job at the University of Zambia. It is not uncommon for the new ruling party to dismiss people of the losing political party, even from non-political offices.

“It becomes a double tragedy,” he says. *“Now I’m really facing it, having lost my job, and passing through what we call political stigmatisation. I was put back at zero, meaning that I have to start all over again rebuilding myself.”*

Now he is doing consultancy work on inclusive education.

“Really I would’ve loved to achieve so much for Mother Zambia,” he says. *“I still have a dream that one day I will be able to go to the Parliament.”*

Recommendations for political parties

Often political parties would like clear and easy check-lists for the inclusion of persons with disabilities. Unfortunately such a universal list would be impossible to come by, as disability is a multi-dimensional phenomenon, and the country and political party contexts vary greatly. Here are some recommendations that Demo Finland and its partners have found useful.

Awareness

- Make a true commitment to inclusion.
- Identify gaps in accessibility and commit to gradually eliminating these barriers.
- Strengthen the awareness of your core actors about disability and how to dismantle discrimination against persons with disabilities.
- Create a safe space and communication channels for political party actors with disabilities to raise any shortcomings.

Physical accessibility

- Make sure your offices are accessible and hallways not cluttered with furniture.
- Stop organising events and other activities in facilities that are not accessible.
- Actively promote full accessibility of places such as council meeting halls.
- Communicate clearly to members with disabilities whether and how your venues are accessible.

Communications

- Ensure that your websites and other digital services are accessible.
- Ensure that your printed materials are accessible. Remember simple, clear language, ensure good contrast and transcribe into braille.
- Produce material concerning your activities in sign language and ensure the availability of sign language interpretation in all activities.
- Pay attention to ensuring that the existence of persons with disabilities is reflected in all political party communications in active roles.
- Actively communicate that political activities for persons with disabilities is not only possible but also an integral part of political party activities.

Party documents and structures

- Revise party policies, constitutions and manifestos to render them more inclusive.
- Develop clear disability, youth and gender policies through engagement with experts, for instance organisations of persons with disabilities.
- Create a disability league to strengthen the work towards inclusion. Include the league in policy-making, nominations and budgeting.

- Revise the recruitment forms to collect and accurately store data on disability. Take consideration of all ethical concerns in data collection and storage.
- Consider mentoring programmes to support persons with disabilities in advancing in the political party.
- Design holistic interventions that cover entire electoral cycles – do not forget inclusion after elections.

Quotas

- Consider introducing disability quotas or other means of positive discrimination when selecting persons both for administrative bodies and for positions such as an MP's assistant.
- Consider voluntary party quotas for internal party posts or quotas for different stages of the candidate selection process.
- Quotas can also work in parliamentary elections, at least in the interim, so that people can see that persons with disabilities are able to govern.

Safety

- Ensure the security of persons with disabilities, especially women, in and after your meetings and events.
- Have very stringent rules that perpetrators of gender-based violence are identified and brought to justice.

Economic empowerment

- Discount or waiver membership and nomination fees for persons with disabilities and other marginalised groups.
- Consider establishing a fund for helping persons with disabilities financially in campaigning. Remember this when budgeting.
- Lobby for the economic empowerment of persons with disabilities and other minorities in society.

Co-operation with political parties and NGOs

- Create linkages and co-operation organs with other political parties to work on inclusion together.
- Co-operate with organisations of persons with disabilities and organise training for them, if necessary.
- Map all relevant stakeholders and establish co-operation with them.
- Sustain and strengthen partnerships with more strategic state and non-state actors for electoral reforms.

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