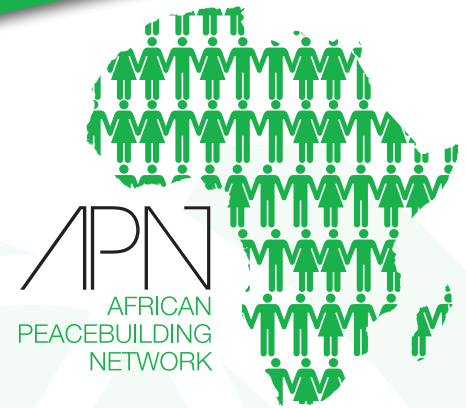




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Political Inclusion, Disability and the Sierra Leone 2018 General Elections: Some Policy Insights

By Alex Sivalie Mbayo

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Government of Sierra Leone should:

- **Create an enabling environment** for better enforcement of policies relating to PWDs' participation in elections.
- **Mobilize resources and develop the political will** to significantly increase the level of sensitization and awareness-raising programming.
- **Ensure that its agencies work** with political parties to fully mainstream PWD-friendly policies and activities.
- **Invest in social programs and educational activities** for empowering PWDs to participate in politics and decision-making.

Civil society should:

- **Provide platforms and information** for PWDs to organize themselves and mobilize resources necessary for engaging political institutions and processes.

For several decades, since the end of civil wars in 2002, people with disabilities (PWDs) in Sierra Leone have faced severe constraints in exercising their rights to participate in democratic processes due to the absence of or poor implementation of enabling laws, mechanisms, and guidelines that promote and facilitate their equal participation in elections.

This policy brief is based on findings from a study of the level of participation of PWDs in Sierra Leone's 2018 general elections. It concluded, among other things, that the level of PWD participation was higher compared with previous elections because of more effective awareness-raising and sensitization activities targeting PWDs concerning the election process. This was reflected in PWDs' familiarity with registration and voting processes, and the high turnout of about 72 percent in both the registration and voting processes. Additionally, PWDs' engagement with political parties with respect to PWD-related issues in their manifestoes clearly validates this point. The high turnout of PWDs was highlighted in my interviews of National Electoral Commission (NEC) officials in all four study locations: Bo, Freetown, Kenema, and Makeni.

Furthermore, the NEC put in place support mechanisms to facilitate the participation of PWDs in the voting process, including building ramps in front of most of their voting centers to make them accessible to PWDs and introducing tactile ballots for the visually-impaired. In spite of the progress made, there is much room for improvement. Participants in the study pointed out that despite promises made by political parties, they were unwilling to promote access, inclusivity, and participation of PWDs in mainstream political processes, such as running for parliamentary and local council positions. Another finding of the study was the hostile attitude toward PWDs among sections of the public. Most of the PWDs interviewed complained about not being able to participate in political rallies. They also reported not being

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allowed to address rallies and not being protected during such events. In a focus group discussion with women living with disabilities in a camp for amputees in Makeni, one of the candidates for the position of councilor expressed her anger and frustration about these issues:

PWDs, on the whole, were not given any material or financial support, at least not to my knowledge, nor was it even mentioned by any of our colleagues in the other parties. That is the main reason why some of us did not do well in our political campaigns since we did not have even the bare minimum of funds.

In addition, some respondents noted that they were booed when they attempted to take the stage to speak. Others explained that party officials often disrespected them and failed to provide the support needed to ensure their ease of mobility, particularly on difficult terrain. Such ill-treatment and discrimination was a source of concern to PWDs willing to participate in active politics. Furthermore, it suggests a lack of political will by politicians and political institutions to integrate them into the electoral process fully. Rather, the evidence encountered during fieldwork suggests PWDs are manipulated for political gain but remain largely marginalized from mainstream politics in Sierra Leone. To address these emerging issues, the government of Sierra Leone, through parliament, should enact laws to make the inclusion of clear guidelines on the participation of PWD's in political party constitutions mandatory, and implement affirmative action policies that facilitate the nomination of PWDs in electable positions in their constituencies across the country. Parliament should also review the current Disability Act (2011) and identify mechanisms for its full implementation, develop regulations to promote and protect the dignity and rights of PWDs, and establish a stand-alone inclusion committee in parliament to ensure PWD-friendly financial planning, laws, and policies at all levels, including making it mandatory for political parties to implement a quota system and provide material support for PWD political candidates.

The foregoing challenges PWDs face in Sierra Leone point to the need for a shift toward a more comprehensive, inclusive, and integrated approach for integrating PWDs into mainstream democratic politics. The government and its agencies, the National Electoral Commission, development partners, political parties, and civil society, including the Sierra Leone Union on Disability Issues, the National Commission for Persons with Disability, and NGOs should take proactive measures to implement the following policy recommendations aimed at promoting this shift.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Government of Sierra Leone should:

- Create an enabling environment for better enforcement of policies relating to PWDs' participation in elections as enshrined in both the Disability Act and the 1991 Constitution. It should work with relevant agencies and development partners to ensure that political parties abide by the provisions in the law to promote the participation of PWDs. Parliament should empower NEC and the Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC) to monitor and enforce strict adherence to such provisions.
- Mobilize resources and develop the political will to significantly increase the level of sensitization and awareness-raising programming by the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender, and Children's Affairs (MSWGCA), the Political Affairs Ministry, civil society, and human rights organizations on both the rights of PWDs and the need to promote their involvement and participation in politics and decision-making. Such engagements should target all levels of society and should also seek to eliminate the stereotyping, stigmatization, and discrimination of PWDs.
- Ensure that its agencies, such as the PPRC, the National Commission for Democracy (NCD), and civil society organizations, work with political parties to fully mainstream PWD-friendly policies and activities and introduce affirmative action measures to bridge the gap between PWDs and non-disabled members of political parties.
- Invest in social programs and educational activities for empowering PWDs and provide them with the confidence, knowledge, and economic security necessary to effectively participate in politics and decision-making processes in their communities.

Civil society should:

- Provide platforms and information for PWDs to organize themselves and mobilize resources necessary for engaging political institutions and processes and pursuing their interests more systematically and effectively.