



POLICY BRIEF

ENHANCING INCLUSIVE PARTICIPATION OF PWDS IN ELECTIONS - CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

BACKGROUND

At their best, democratic elections are characterised by high turnout and equal levels of participation across different segments in a society so that the outcome of the election is not unevenly shaped. This serves as the basis for the progression and development of nations which believe in, and consciously practice, equity for all citizens. It has been noted by some thinkers, that a society can be measured best, by the way it treats Persons with Disabilities (PWDs), often the poorest of the poor. In Ghana, this segment of society is mostly neglected and left to struggle to achieve a better quality of life all by themselves.

With true global figures of circa 15% of the world's population of about 7.8 billion deemed to be disabled, Ghana's figure is put at 3% of the total population of 24,658,823 (GSS, 2010), a figure which even then, is doubtful and likely outrageously under reported. Nonetheless, this significant number of PWDs in Ghana often have restricted access to the processes and systems that will ensure their equal participation in democratic spaces

A key question is how can new digital technologies, and offline measures such as pointed advocacy and self-help attitudes ensure that there are no unfair restrictions placed on persons with disabilities? This policy brief outlines some issues and seeks to advocate for a holistic approach to finding solutions to numerous challenges of inclusivity of PWDs and other vulnerable groups in society, as Ghana heads for the polls on December 7, 2020.

PENPLUSBYTES WEBINAR SERIES-A FIRST STEP TO APPROACHING THE ISSUES

In June 2020, Penplusbytes launched a weekly Webinar Series to engage with and tackle emerging issues in Ghana's election 2020 from an interdisciplinary perspective, so as to find solutions to the multifaceted issues of inclusivity, legitimacy and acceptance of fair election results in Ghana. The Webinar Series interrogated ways in which technology, pointed advocacy, as well as civic education can ensure there are no unfair restrictions placed on segments of the society, especially people with disabilities, young persons, the elderly and the vulnerable. Penplusbytes convened a weekly panel of a diverse group of individuals, including tech experts, leading scholars and thinkers, policy makers and occasionally politicians. Each session had interesting revelations that are worth the time and attention of the government, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), donor agencies, as well as individuals who have an interest in ensuring equity in elections.

The first set of webinars, three in all, which hosted 123 participants on Zoom and over 400 global participants on Facebook Live were held to discuss the topic; Elections 2020: Highlighting ways to include PWD and Vulnerable groups amidst COVID-19 with lead discussants, Mr. Alexander Bankole Williams, an Advisory Board Member of the Coalition of Election Observers (CODEO) and Mr. Alex Tetteh, the President for the Centre for the Employment of Persons with Disability (CEPD). The second had the topic, Elections 2020: Mapping Tech Solutions for enabling inclusive PWD Participation with lead discussants; Mr. Andrew A. Bayor, a technology systems design researcher at the Queensland University of Technology in Australia, Mr. Kwami Ahiabenu, Tech Consultant and Mrs Abigail Nutakor, Head of disability and gender-EC. The third in the series which sought to climax the conversation on PWDs under the topic; A Stakeholder Conversation on Specific Tech Tools for Inclusive Participation of PWDs, brought together Mr. Jerry Sam, Deputy Executive Director-Penplusbytes, Mr. Max Vardon, Former Executive Secretary-National Council of Persons with Disability and Farida Bedwei, a software designer and a co-founder-Logiciel.

KEY ISSUES/CONCERNS

1

LACK OF ACCURATE & RELEVANT DATA ON PWDs

Persons with disabilities constitute an estimated 15 percent of Ghana's current population of about 30 million. However there persists the issue of the lack of a comprehensive database for this segment of the population. In spite of the various categories of PWDs, the focus is mostly on the physically disabled during elections, and this informs the need to develop reliable, dynamic and current data of the various PWD groups.

2

DISCRIMINATION AMONG PWD GROUPS

Ghana focuses on persons whose disabilities are moderate, severe or profound whereas a large portion of PWDs fall within the mild to moderate category which has accounted for the shortfall in achieving full participation of PWDs in elections as those with milder forms of disability including intellectual disabilities are not targeted or catered for.

3

INACCESSIBLE POLLING CENTRES

Persons with physical disabilities for instance, have from 1992 till date had polling stations that are inaccessible for wheelchair users. Deaf persons have also had difficulties in communicating with electoral officers during the registration processes. If the Electoral Commission (EC) persists in the use of polling centres that are not accessible to PWDs, then it is in breach of the legal requirement of Act 715, but this has happened election after election with little regard for ramifications.

4

MINIMAL GOVERNMENT EFFORTS

Ghana in 2002 made an effort in addressing some of the challenges that PWDs face by providing the visually impaired with the tactile jackets with support from the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES). This notwithstanding, a lot more remains to be done in order to attain the full participation of PWDs in elections and this requires that policy actors become more interested in finding a lasting solution.

5

LACK OF SELF-HELP ATTITUDE

PWDs should find ways of coming together to form a strong force and advocate for their rights to fully participate in the electoral process of the country. The umbrella body of PWDs, the Ghana Federation of Disability Organizations (GFD) needs to make this possible by involving all its member organisations.

KEY ISSUES/CONCERNS

6

TAILOR-MADE DIGITAL TOOLS

When persons with disabilities (PWDs) have to rely on others to help them in exercising their franchise, it infringes on their rights. After getting reliable data on PWDs, we need to leverage technology in ways that support the different groups of disability that the data has identified.

7

MAKE PROVISION FOR ALL PWDs

The Electoral Commission currently collects data on mostly the visually impaired to enable the Commission provide them with tactile jackets which allows them to independently vote during elections. Data on persons with amputated arms or fingers is also available and provisions made for their participation, since the biometric voting system requires voters to use their fingers for verification during elections. Whereas this is a step forward, it is minimal and still disenfranchises most PWDs, especially people with some level of mental impairment, albinos and bed bound disabilities.

8

SPECIAL VOTING FOR PWDs

PWDs are to be given the opportunity to have a special voting system that allows them to vote on a separate day and under conducive settings such as accessible polling stations and interpreters at the centres for the deaf.

9

LEGAL REFORMS

The Electoral Commission is not mandated by law to make significant changes such as conducting special voting for PWDs currently, to improve therefore, there is need for a legal instrument to be enacted by parliament so as to include this in the EC's mandate and to have it institutionalized and subsequently fully implemented. This will ensure that PWDs have special attention and the necessary assistance that enables them to vote in elections just as any other citizens of the country.

10

MOUNTING OF BILLBOARDS FOR PWDs

It is highly recommended that the Electoral Commission mounts bill boards at vantage points that educate the general public on why PWDs, older persons and pregnant women or lactating mothers should be given preferential treatment during elections. This is because even though PWDs are to enjoy this privilege, in most cases, it has been observed that this does not happen. Thus, citizens should be aware of such issues in order to cooperate with authorities during elections.



POLICY BRIEF

ENHANCING INCLUSIVE PARTICIPATION OF PWDS IN ELECTIONS - CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

CONCLUSIONS

For equity in the participation of elections in Ghana, stakeholders must tackle these policy actions enumerated above by bearing in mind that Ghana's database on PWDs should rapidly be improved so that policy decisions at the local, national and international levels can be evidence-based and responsive to the increasing demand for PWDs to effectively participate in elections and its associated challenges. More importantly, for PWD data systems and research to be effective, they should be country-owned and led; they must involve the coordinated efforts of relevant ministries and agencies, academic institutions, PWD associations and other partners, and they also need financial and technical donor support.

ABOUT PENPLUSBYTES



Penplusbytes is a not-for-profit organization driving change through innovations in four key areas: using new digital technologies to enable good governance and accountability, investigating new media which drive innovations, enhancing oversight for effective utilisation of mining, oil and gas revenue and conducting research to improve health and environmental outcomes.

For further information, contact us on:

E-mail: info@penplusbytes.org

Subscribe to our mailing list by sending an e-mail to: members@penplusbytes.org

Facebook: Penplusbytes

Twitter/Instagram: @penplusbytes

Tel: +233 (0) 302 922620/1, +233 (0) 302 798995

Mobile/WhatsApp: +233 (0) 24 1995737

Location: No. 1 Ostwe Close, Ako-Adjei, Osu, Accra-Ghana