

Overcoming Barriers to Participate in Local Democracy for People with Disabilities: The Case of Zimbabwe



Photo: Interviews with people with disabilities (Research Team 2020)

Authors¹

Abstract

This policy brief discusses barriers to the inclusion and participation of people with disabilities in local democracy in rural Zimbabwe and provides recommendations for enhanced participation. The analysis is part of a broader mixed research study on the inclusion and participation of vulnerable groups in Zimbabwe's local democracy. Results of the study show how people with disabilities face multiple barriers to participate in local democracy. These include widespread poverty, stigmatisation, limited social support, limited knowledge of human rights and duties, among others. To ensure the inclusion and participation of people with disabilities, we recommend amending the Constitution and aligning laws to create a quota for people with disabilities in local authorities. There also needs to be strengthening for the capacity of people with disabilities and local government institutions and structures by establishing and revamping disability desks within local authorities. Continuous and regular awareness programmes on the human rights of people with disabilities in general, as well as their right to participate in local democracy is also encouraged.

Introduction

Local democracy is significant because it enables citizens to participate in making decisions that are appropriate and serve the needs of the local community (Fung 2001:41). To be effective and successful, local democratic processes must include marginalised groups of society such as people with disabilities, who constitute 15 percent of the world's population – 80 percent of whom are living in developing countries (GIZ, 2019). Yet, the needs of people with disabilities are often neglected and ignored in democratic and governance processes – at national and even local levels of democracy. This study focused on interrogating the challenges to the inclusion of vulnerable persons in local democracy, particularly the adequacy of the constitutional, legislative, policy and institutional framework on local democracy in Zimbabwe. The purpose of this brief is to capture the situation and offer recommendations to mitigate the challenges faced by people with disabilities in participating in local democracy.

About ICLD

The Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD) is part of the Swedish development cooperation. The mandate of the organization is to contribute to poverty alleviation by strengthening local governments.

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Methodology

Utilising qualitative research methodology, we examined the experiences and perspectives of people with disabilities in local democracy. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews and key informant interviews in Chiredzi Rural District. Primary data were bolstered with a review of relevant laws and policy documents which affect the participation of vulnerable groups in local governance.

Findings

The following major observations were made:

1. Inadequate frameworks

In Zimbabwe, laws, policies and institutional frameworks exist regarding the participation in public life of marginalised groups including people with disabilities, but these are insufficient. Except for the Constitution and the National Disability Policy that confer people with disabilities rights and speak for their greater inclusion, all other laws are inadequate with regards to this group's inclusion and participation. All the current laws including the Constitution say nothing with regards to creating quotas in local authorities for people with disabilities.

2. Limited implementation

Zimbabwe has a progressive Constitution, National Disability Policy, National Development Strategy 1 (NDS1), and the Devolution and Decentralisation Agenda, which all provide for a more democratic, citizen-centred focus on the needs of marginalised groups. However, lack of effective implementation, particularly on disability mainstreaming, remains a challenge. The inadequacy emanates mainly from resource constraints, limited capacity and lack of political will. Without knowledge about disability mainstreaming, many public officials tend to relegate people with disabilities to the margins of society.

3. Negative attitudes

It also emerged from the study that local democracy officials as well as community members have negative attitudes towards people with disabilities; this poses numerous obstacles to participating in public life. Personnel in public offices still hold the erroneous view that people with disabilities cannot effectively participate in local democracy² The end result is that many people with disabilities are not assisted to take part in public life.

“I have a disability, and no one will vote for me to be a Councillor or a Member of Parliament. We cannot compete with the able-bodied.”

² Groce, N. and Kett, M., 2014, Youth with disabilities (Working Paper Series: No. 23), Leonard Cheshire Disability and Inclusive Development Centre, London. Viewed 12 November 2018 at: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lcccr/centrepublishations/workingpapers/WP23_Youth_with_Disabilities.pdf>.

“Where projects are supposed to benefit the disabled and the able-bodied we will definitely lose out because we are not represented in such projects. There is nothing for us without us”

The study also noted the following challenges which are specific to people with disabilities:

1. Knowledge gap

The study found low levels of education and knowledge among people with disabilities regarding their rights and duties as citizens. Moreover, people with disabilities professed to having limited understanding of the existing laws and structures for their participation in local democracy. Most of them could not name any law or policy that safeguards their rights. Without this crucial knowledge, they cannot claim their rights and space in local democracy.

2. Low socio-economic status

The study also noted that the low socio-economic status of people with disabilities affects their participation. Without education and a sound social support system, many people with disabilities are unemployed, destitute and have low self-esteem to actively participate in society. The majority of people with disabilities survive on begging and hand-outs. They do not have a reliable income to meet their participation needs including transport costs and access to assistive devices such as wheelchairs, reading glasses, cell phones and braille machines.

3. Inaccessible infrastructure and transport system

Inaccessible architectural and physical structures remain a challenge for people with disabilities' participation in local democracy. The study found both the public transport system and public buildings to be inaccessible for people with disabilities, particularly the visually impaired and those with physical disabilities. Many modes of public transport, bus termini, buildings including offices where meetings and consultations are held such as schools and public halls, have no ramps and guiding rails, thus making these places inaccessible to people with disabilities without the assistance of others. As a result, people with disabilities avoid leading a public life that would require them to leave home.

Questions for discussion

1. How can governments cater for the inclusion in local development of people with disabilities who live in resettlement areas?
2. How adequate are the intervention strategies by government and NGOs in promoting inclusive local democratic processes?
3. What can be done at family and community levels to mainstream people with disabilities in local development initiatives?

Recommendations for Local Policymakers

The following recommendations are made:

- 1.** Amendment of the Constitution and local governance laws including the Rural District Councils Act to create a quota for people with disabilities in local governance authority and devolution structures.
- 2.** Inculcate a human rights-based approach with emphasis on disability mainstreaming into the work of all local government personnel. This will ensure inclusion of vulnerable groups in general, and people with disabilities in particular, as non-discrimination and inclusion are some of the main pillars of human rights.
- 3.** Continued awareness-raising – through creation and/or revamping of disability desks within local authorities and grassroots-level disability groups that regularly meet to discuss, engage policymakers and share ideas on human rights and participation in local democracy.
- 4.** Translate relevant policy documents and information into accessible formats for people with disabilities and train local government officials in sign language to ensure easy communication between people with disabilities and local government officials.
- 5.** Adequately resource local government departments to ensure that implementation of inclusion policies at local level is effectively carried out.

Sources

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The recommendations in this policy brief exclusively reflect the views of its authors.

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