

From exclusion to inclusion: Evaluating election accessibility for persons with disabilities in Nigeria's 2023 general elections.

Plain English Summary

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Introduction

Persons with disabilities represent the largest minority group in both developed and developing democracies, yet they often face marginalisation in electoral and representative politics. Various reforms and policies have been proposed and implemented worldwide including Nigeria to improve election accessibility for persons with disabilities. This paper evaluates the extent to which Nigeria's election management officials implemented these accessibility reforms and policies during the 2023 general elections. Additionally, it examines the barriers that hinder Nigeria's election management officials from fully complying with the requirements of disability electoral laws and reforms in the election administration process.

Summary of Approach

The paper employed qualitative methods, including interviews, focus group discussions, direct observations, and the analysis of pertinent documents, to gather data from a range of participants, such as persons with disabilities, civil society organisations, polling officials, and officials from political parties throughout the Northern and Southern regions of Nigeria. Specifically, two states were chosen—one from each region—on the grounds that both have adopted national disability laws, thereby facilitating the tracking of implementation progress. The analysis utilised social and human rights models of disability as a theoretical framework to explore the rationale for disability inclusion in electoral processes as a matter of human rights.

Summary of Main Findings

The findings from this paper indicate that the right of persons with disabilities to participate in public and political life is recognised and acknowledged in Nigeria through amendments to relevant laws and policies. One significant way Nigeria demonstrates its commitment to disability inclusion is by ratifying and domesticating Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This was achieved through the enactment of the Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities Prohibition Act in 2018, alongside reforms to electoral laws aimed at providing reasonable accommodations for persons with disabilities throughout the electoral processes.

The paper further highlights that the election management body, responsible for overseeing elections in Nigeria, made notable improvements during the 2023 general elections to facilitate the participation of individuals with disabilities on an equal basis with others, particularly in comparison to previous elections. However, it also identified areas of both good and poor compliance in election administration.

On the positive side, the paper found that provisions were made for various assistive devices before Election Day, and individuals with disabilities were given priority to vote as

they arrived at polling units. Conversely, there were significant shortcomings, such as the inadequate deployment of assistive devices across various polling units and the placement of polling units in inaccessible voting centres for those with physical disabilities, particularly wheelchair users.

Several barriers were identified as impeding the full implementation of disability-related electoral laws throughout the election phases. These include a lack of disaggregated data on individuals with disabilities, insufficient training for election personnel, minimal representation of individuals with disabilities as polling officials, weak enforcement of disability laws at the sub-national level, and prevailing societal perceptions regarding individuals with disabilities.

Summary of Main Implications

This research is vital for analysing the fragile democracy of Nigeria, which is characterised by a declining voter turnout in successive elections. Experts and political actors often attribute this decline to electoral violence, while overlooking the marginalisation of politically disadvantaged groups, including persons with disabilities—who represent the largest minority group in both developed and developing democracies. Consequently, this paper contributes to the discourse on the political participation of marginalised groups in Africa’s most populous nation.

Moreover, the paper has significant implications for policy and practice, as the findings present opportunities for policy reforms, particularly from the election management body, to address the barriers hindering the broader involvement of persons with disabilities in the upcoming general elections in Nigeria. This research is also crucial for the implementation of Article 29 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), which mandates state parties and election management bodies to make reasonable adjustments and accommodations for persons with disabilities by ensuring that facilities and materials are accessible, enabling them to participate on an equal basis with those without disabilities.

Thus, the findings of this paper provide valuable information and feedback for the monitoring and evaluation unit of the UNCRPD, facilitating the tracking of Nigeria’s commitment to international agreements and best practices concerning disability inclusion in electoral processes.

Find out more:

I am Dr Afeez Kolawole Shittu, currently teaching political science at the Federal College of Education Special in Oyo, Nigeria. I recently completed my PhD in Political Science at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife, Nigeria. During my PhD programme, I was honoured to receive the prestigious Commonwealth Split-site Scholarship, which enabled me to spend the 2022-2023 academic year as a visiting PhD student at the University of Leeds. Prior to this, I obtained an MSc in Political Science from Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria, and a BSc (Education) in Political Science from Tai Solarin University of Education, Nigeria. My research interests lie at the intersection of elections and inclusive governance, with a particular focus on issues of democracy, equality, and justice, especially concerning how politics can be transformed for traditionally under-represented or marginalised groups.

