

**Written Contribution on Article 29 of the CRPD**

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**Ms. Gertrude Oforiwa Fefoame**

Chair, Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)

8-14 Avenue de la Paix CH-1211 Geneva (Switzerland)

Via E-mail: [ohchr-crp@un.org](mailto:ohchr-crp@un.org)

**Written Contribution for the Day of General Discussion  
on Article 29 of the CRPD: Analyzing the Inclusivity of Electoral Processes in  
First and Third World Countries**

**Submitted by AccessibilityAtlas**

an organization of young persons advancing accessibility throughout the world

for the

**32nd Session of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities  
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## **Introduction**

AccessibilityAtlas presents this report to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities ahead of the Day of General Discussion on Article 29. AccessibilityAtlas is a global non profit organization based in the United States, committed to creating a world where people of all abilities can fully participate in their communities.

AccessibilityAtlas collaborates with civil society, international mechanisms, institutions of higher education, and local governments to catalyze change around the thematic issues of accessibility and inclusivity for persons with disabilities worldwide. Our reporting process involves comprehensive research, dialogue with civil society and individuals with disabilities, and collaborative drafting of reports to highlight successes, challenges and gaps in accessibility.

This petition is centered on four main issues: (1) Political Participation Barriers in First-World Countries; (2) Accessibility of the Voting Process in First-World Countries; (3) Political Participation Barriers in Third-World Countries and (4) Accessibility of the Voting Process in Third-World Countries.

## **Political Participation Barriers in First-World Countries**

### **Inaccessible Polling Infrastructure**

In a 2020 survey conducted after Ireland’s General Election, 52% of persons with disabilities were found to have faced barriers such as inaccessible polling stations, lack of information in

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accessible formats, and personal assistance.<sup>1</sup> Though the United States had increased its disabled voter turnout from 55.9% to 61.8% between 2016 and 2020, 11% of disabled participants reported difficulty voting<sup>2</sup>. Among the disabled non-voters in the 2022 (United States) US election, 28% reported that they expected difficulties casting their ballot in person and 13% by mail<sup>3</sup>.

However, several countries have implemented measures to address these discrepancies. Estonia's improvement of polling stations saw an increase from 60% in 2019 to 95% in 2022<sup>4</sup>. Similarly, in the Netherlands, the number of accessible polling stations jumped from 63% to 79% in 2023<sup>5</sup> thanks to the 'Unrestricted Voting' hotline which improved accessibility measures<sup>6</sup>. Furthermore, the US introduced the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act to close existing disparities within the Voting Rights Act of 1965<sup>7</sup>; the bill required federal approval to change voting procedures to ensure non-discriminatory regulations against disabled and colored voters<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>*Disability Stakeholder Group:*

[https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/33/joint\\_committee\\_on\\_disability\\_matters/submissions/2021/2021-09-23\\_opening-statement-renee-dempsey-clifford-et-al-independent-chairperson-disability-stakeholders-group\\_en.pdf](https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/33/joint_committee_on_disability_matters/submissions/2021/2021-09-23_opening-statement-renee-dempsey-clifford-et-al-independent-chairperson-disability-stakeholders-group_en.pdf)

<sup>2</sup>*U.S. Election Assistance Commission:*

[https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/document\\_library/files/Fact\\_sheet\\_on\\_disability\\_and\\_voter\\_turnout\\_in\\_2020\\_0.pdf](https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/document_library/files/Fact_sheet_on_disability_and_voter_turnout_in_2020_0.pdf).

<sup>3</sup>*U.S. Election Assistance Commission:*

[https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/2023-07/EAC\\_2023\\_Rutgers\\_Report\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/2023-07/EAC_2023_Rutgers_Report_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>4</sup>*European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights:*

<https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2024/political-participation?page=5>

<sup>5</sup>*Government of the Netherlands:*

<https://open.overheid.nl/documenten/a83fd62d-d4c9-49b3-b809-ea4e8cb2d4ad/file>

<sup>6</sup>*Netherlands Institute for Human Rights:*

<https://publicaties.mensenrechten.nl/publicatie/73e2da78-ef87-4aaa-b9ab-a831fffe0e0d>

<sup>7</sup>*Human Rights Campaign:*

<https://www.hrc.org/resources/voting-rights-advancement-act>

<sup>8</sup>*U.S. Vote Foundation:*

<https://www.usvotefoundation.org/closing-gap-voters-disabilities-updated-2024>

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Despite these initiatives, challenges among disabled peoples still persist. The inaccessibility of polling infrastructure enables stigma that perpetuates discrimination. The continued lack of representation of the disabled populace will continue to weaken the principles of equality that democracies possess.

**Despite the Voting Rights Act of 1965 being a landmark piece of legislation that expanded suffrage to countless individuals, it failed to account for persons with disabilities until recent years. This highlights the ongoing need for nations to address systemic accessibility barriers in polling stations. We respectfully urge the committee to examine existing regulations across UN member states and identify necessary amendments or enforcement mechanisms to ensure truly universal suffrage.**

### Restrictive Voting Laws

Restrictive voting laws are a product of legal shortcomings that restrict universal suffrage amongst adult citizens. In the EU, an estimated 400,000 citizens with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDDs) had been denied the right to vote in the European Union (EU) Parliament election as of 2024. Furthermore, approximately 800,000 EU citizens were unable to vote in the 2019 parliament elections due to unfair regulations<sup>9</sup>.

In Germany, Luxembourg, Estonia, Cyprus, Greece, and several additional developed countries, persons under certain protective measures such as plenary guardianship are subjected to automatic exclusion from political participation<sup>10</sup>. For example, according to Germany's Federal Elections Act, a person who appoints a custodian to manage all of their affairs is automatically deprived of the right to vote<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup>*European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights:*

<https://fra.europa.eu/en/print/pdf/node/45344>

<sup>10</sup>*European Economic and Social Committee:*

<https://www.eesc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/files/qe-02-19-153-en-n.pdf>

<sup>11</sup>*The Federal Returning Officer (Germany):*

[https://www.bundeswahlleiterin.de/en/dam/jcr/4ff317c1-041f-4ba7-bbbf-1e5dc45097b3/bundeswahlgesetz\\_engl.pdf](https://www.bundeswahlleiterin.de/en/dam/jcr/4ff317c1-041f-4ba7-bbbf-1e5dc45097b3/bundeswahlgesetz_engl.pdf)

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On the other hand, countries such as the United States increased the civic participation of persons with disabilities from 29% in 2018 to 37% in 2022 with the option of voting via mail<sup>12</sup>. Furthermore, Spain granted 100,000 people under guardianship the ability to vote in the beginning of 2019<sup>13</sup>. Similarly, Luxembourg passed legislation allowing persons with disabilities to vote, regardless of their legal capacity<sup>16</sup>.

Significant challenges remain despite the progress made to remove the barriers barring universal suffrage amongst adults. Legal disenfranchisement continues to hinder the political outlets persons with disabilities need to accurately have their opinions represented; inconsistent policies continue to bar disabled citizens from their rightful guarantee of free expression. Inconsistent EU intervention in the disenfranchisement of disabled peoples continues to promote the cycle of exclusion, a result of negligence towards the suffrage of disabled persons, furthering the diminishment of their representation in all scales of electoral processes.

**Loopholes in key legislative provisions, such as Germany’s Federal Elections Act, have severely impacted persons with disabilities. We urge the committee to investigate these gaps further and call on member states to close them, ensuring full suffrage for individuals with disabilities.**

## Accessibility of the Voting Process in First-World Countries

### Physical Accessibility

Of the 27 members of the EU, 23 are considered developed countries<sup>14</sup>. Articles 39 & 40 of the EU Charter state that “Every citizen of the Union has the right to vote” in all elections, regardless of size. However, in 2024, over 400,000 eligible voters with disabilities were unable to vote in

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<sup>12</sup>*U.S. Election Assistance Commission:*

[https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/2023-07/EAC\\_2023\\_Rutgers\\_Report\\_Supplement\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/2023-07/EAC_2023_Rutgers_Report_Supplement_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>13</sup>*European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights:*

[https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra\\_uploads/fra-2019-right-vote-ep-elections-legal-capacity\\_en.pdf](https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2019-right-vote-ep-elections-legal-capacity_en.pdf)

<sup>14</sup>*International Monetary Fund:*

<https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2023/April/groups-and-aggregates>

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the EU<sup>15</sup>, partially due to inadequate voting stations in member states. This number represents widespread disenfranchisement within the electorate, an infringement upon Article 29 of the UN Convention on The Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD)<sup>16</sup>.

For instance, in the March 8 referendum on Family and Care held in The Republic of Ireland, 1 in 5 polling stations were inaccessible for wheelchair users<sup>17</sup>. Moreover, citizens must have the right to vote in a free and secret ballot. However, persons with disabilities are unable to do so confidentially, due to inaccessible stations, resulting in the need for a representative to cast their ballot for them, violating the right to privacy. In 18 member states of the EU, blind voters cannot cast their ballot independently, further exacerbated by the fact that in 8 member states of the EU, there are no alternative voting methods, forcing citizens with disabilities to rely on others for assistance<sup>18</sup>.

**The right to a confidential vote is fundamental to any true democracy. Denying this right to persons with disabilities—whether in the EU or globally—undermines democratic principles. We urge the committee to call on UN member states to prioritize the accessibility of polling stations. This could include establishing dedicated polling stations for persons with disabilities, ensuring they can cast their votes independently.**

### Digital Accessibility

Over 100 million persons with disabilities living in Europe are significantly hindered from casting informed votes due to the inaccessibility of political information provided by

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<sup>15</sup> *European Disability Forum:*

<https://www.edf-feph.org/unequal-voting-persons-with-disabilities-face-barriers-during-eu-elections/>

<sup>16</sup> *Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights:*

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-persons-disabilities>

<sup>17</sup> *An Coimisiún Toghcháin:*

<https://cdn.electoralcommission.ie/app/uploads/2024/09/03150406/Post-Electoral-Event-Review.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> *Inclusion Europe:*

<https://www.inclusion-europe.eu/2024-eu-elections-and-disability-rights-on-voting/>

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parties on official websites<sup>19</sup>. This impedes a fair democratic process, as people with disabilities are less likely to vote if they cannot access information regarding an election due to issues such as inaccessible interface and insufficient colour contrast.

Lastly, the European Council estimated that 1 in 4 adults over the age of 16 had some form of a disability, meaning 101 million people in the EU<sup>20</sup>. This means that 27% of eligible voters have a disability, which makes equal opportunities in the voting landscape a necessity, especially considering that voter turnout in 2024 was only 51.08%<sup>21</sup>, meaning elections are affected by declined accessibility for information, as less persons with disabilities will participate in the election.

**The accessibility of polling stations is one of many barriers persons with disabilities face when exercising their right to vote. As the world becomes increasingly digital, countless resources and platforms that are essential to the voting process have shifted online, often discerning accessibility. Therefore, we respectfully request that the committee collaborate with member states, civil society, and other UN mechanisms to develop a detailed guide and a prototype online platform for civic engagement suitable for everybody, regardless of ability.**

## Political Participation Barriers in Third-World Countries

### Stigmas Limiting Political Participation

In third world countries, political participation among individuals with disabilities is a great deal less than those without. For example, in Cameroon, persons with disabilities are 42% less likely to vote. Similarly, in Senegal, this difference is 64%. Furthermore, the large stigma against

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<sup>19</sup>European Disability Forum:

<https://www.edf-feph.org/content/uploads/2020/04/Access-Denied-inaccessibility-of-political-parties-full-report.pdf>

<sup>20</sup>FRA European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights:

<https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2024/political-participation>

<sup>21</sup>Fondation Robert Schuman::

<https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/monitor/6235-despite-a-push-to-the-right-the-outgoing-majority-coalition-with-over-400-seats-is-set-to-be-renewed>

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disabled individuals leads to political exclusion—specifically, in Ghana, 95% of persons with disabilities stated that stigma led to political marginalization<sup>22</sup>.

This issue has not gone unaddressed. Projects in Cameroon and Senegal have attempted to combat this by helping over 200 persons with disabilities to become elected as local councilors, parliamentarians, senators, or official representatives in local working groups. The project has also helped almost 3,500 people with disabilities get voting cards and the other necessary documentation. These projects have not only educated disabled individuals on their political rights but have shown that it is possible for the disabled population to take part in politics, addressing stigma as well.<sup>23</sup>

Social stigmas also prevent persons with disabilities from getting involved in politics on a deeper level than voting as well. In Zambia, it was found that persons with disabilities are viewed as incapable of making good decisions and representing other people<sup>24</sup>. This is also reflected in legal provisions. For example, in Kenya, persons with disabilities are described using terms such as “unsound mind”.<sup>25</sup>

Several countries have implemented measures to try to include disabled people in politics. Some Kenyan parties have implemented discounted nomination fees, the formation of party disability leagues, and inclusive intra-party policies.<sup>26</sup> In Egypt, the 2014 Constitution gave 8

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<sup>22</sup>*The Journalist Resource:*

<https://journalistsresource.org/home/barriers-to-voting-for-people-with-disabilities-an-explainer-and-research-roundup/>

<sup>23</sup>*Sight Savers:*

<https://www.sightsavers.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Disability-inclusive-elections-in-Africa-a-qualitative-systematic-review.pdf>

<sup>24</sup>*Demo Finland:*

[https://demofinland.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/FINAL\\_Inclusion-of-persons-with-disabilities.pdf](https://demofinland.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/FINAL_Inclusion-of-persons-with-disabilities.pdf)

<sup>25</sup>*World Federation of the Deaf:*

<https://www.wfd.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/WFD-KIPP-Baseline-Report-The-State-of-Political-Inclusion-of-Persons-with-Disability-PWDs-within-Political-parties-in-Kenya.pdf>

<sup>26</sup>*Sight Savers:*

<https://www.sightsaversusa.org/blogs/2019/10/including-people-with-disabilities-african-political-life/>



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parliamentary seats for persons with disabilities.<sup>27</sup> Lastly, researchers in Ghana have proposed amending the Local Government Act to include a specific quota of disabled people in the government.<sup>28</sup> Regardless of these amazing breakthroughs, there is much work needed.

**One of the most pervasive barriers persons with disabilities face comes from societal attitudes. Deep-rooted social stigmas have had a profoundly negative impact, limiting opportunities and reinforcing exclusion. History has shown that education is one of the most effective ways to challenge such biases—just as it played a crucial role in combating discrimination against marginalized groups, such as African Americans during the Jim Crow era. We respectfully urge the committee to emphasize educational initiatives, particularly in developing countries, to foster awareness and ensure that persons with disabilities are recognized as equal members of society.**

## Accessibility of the Voting Process in Third-World Countries

### Physical Accessibility

Voting in third-world countries is extremely inaccessible for those with disabilities, further decreasing voter turnout, undermining democratic principles. In Cameroon, persons with disabilities were 42% less likely to vote compared to those without disabilities. In Senegal, this disparity is even higher, with 64% of disabled persons being less likely to vote.<sup>29</sup> This issue is further exacerbated by non-inclusive election strategies, best demonstrated by the Democratic Republic of Congo where most voters needed to travel up to 20 kilometers to reach their nearest voter registration centers. Furthermore, in Ghana over 50% of citizens have reported that registration centers and polling stations are not accessible to accommodate the needs of persons with physical disabilities.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>*Harvard Law Journal*:

<https://journals.law.harvard.edu/ilj/2023/12/bridging-the-gap-african-countries-outpace-the-west-in-descriptive-representation-for-persons-with-disabilities/>

<sup>28</sup>*Scandinavian Journal Of Disability Research*:

<https://sjdr.se/articles/10.1080/15017419.2014.941925>

<sup>29</sup>*National Library of Medicine*:

<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11538344/>

<sup>30</sup>*Disability & Society*:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09687599.2018.1431108>

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Several third-world countries have been making strides to encourage the accessibility of polling stations. However, there is a lack of systemic change. Cameroon developed the "Accessible Elections for People with Disabilities" project, which included refurbishing 12 pilot voting booths with ramps, improved lighting, and low-level tables. While the Democratic Republic of Congo, only utilized the ground floors of schools for registration.<sup>31</sup> Despite advancements in several third world countries regarding the accessibility in physical voting centers, the lack of voting centers results in citizens being forced to travel long distances to vote, creating barriers for persons with disabilities.

**Measures similar to those taken by Cameroon are commendable but often entail prohibitively high costs. Therefore, we urge the committee to explore more cost-effective accessibility solutions that can be implemented globally.**

### Note on Digital Accessibility

Please note that although AccessibilityAtlas was able to find information on physical barriers to voting, there was a concerning lack of data regarding the digital accessibility of government platforms, perhaps due to less than 1 in 5 persons with disabilities having access to the internet in third world countries.<sup>32</sup>

## Conclusion

In conclusion, AccessibilityAtlas implores the Committee to explore innovative solutions to fostering inclusive electoral systems in all member states. Despite the significant progress made, there are still systematic barriers which must be addressed. It is critical for the Committee to ensure that countries adopt and enforce policies that remove barriers, align with the principles of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and promote a truly inclusive society.

This report may be published on the CRPD webpage to the general public. Direct enquiries to Dinu Antonescu, [pitocea@gmail.com](mailto:pitocea@gmail.com); Manasareddy Sanivarapu, [manasarsanivarapu@gmail.com](mailto:manasarsanivarapu@gmail.com); Anastasia Nathalia Cadogan, [anastasia.cadogan@isb.ro](mailto:anastasia.cadogan@isb.ro); Thomas Mathew, [Tommyawesome24@gmail.com](mailto:Tommyawesome24@gmail.com); and Miles Agle, [milesagle@gmail.com](mailto:milesagle@gmail.com).

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<sup>31</sup>*Disability & Society:*

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09687599.2018.1431108>

<sup>32</sup>*United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs:*

<https://social.desa.un.org/sites/default/files/publications/2024-06/Final-UN-DDR-2024-Exective%20Summary.pdf>