



Citizenship and political participation of young people with disabilities: a summary of studies from Sierra Leone, Cameroon and Senegal

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Sightsavers

Overview

As part of Sightsavers' social inclusion strategy, we are committed to supporting the greater citizenship and political participation of young women and men with disabilities. To help us do this, we have been building our knowledge base about how young people with disabilities currently experience political participation. We have also been looking at strategies to promote positive change.

We commissioned in-depth studies with young people with disabilities in Sierra Leone, Cameroon and Senegal. We also conducted a desk review of global strategies. This document summarises our findings.

Introduction

Politics is central to the everyday lives of people. A major feature of politics is the selection by citizens of the people that govern them. Citizens should have the freedom to exercise their constitutionally protected rights to vote and be voted for. However, the struggle for power also leads to the persistent exclusion of different groups of people. These include women, young people and people living with disabilities.

Young people make up one of the most persistently marginalised groups in politics and this is exacerbated for young people with disabilities. In West and Central Africa, 64% of the population is under 25 years old¹. Young people with disabilities, who represent 16 per cent of the youth population, must be part of this movement if that future is to be more inclusive.

Across our studies, young people expressed their disillusionment with the unethical behaviour of political actors and a lack of transparency in politics. However, they also expressed a desire to be engaged with politics as a way to serve their communities and participate in the development of their countries.

Our literature review showed that the key political interests of young people around the world are peace and security, employment, climate change and diversity and inclusion.



Political participation

Political participation can take different forms, including **voting**, **advocacy and campaigning**, **street's demonstrations**, communicating through **social media and cultural events**, engagement in **youth political movements** and holding **political office** at a local or national level.

Many of our study participants were already politically active in different ways, while others found it difficult to participate for a number of reasons. In the sections that follow, we look at the barriers to participation and offer suggestions on how to overcome them.

¹ <https://wcaro.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/UNFPA-WCARO-YOUTH-EN-WEB.pdf>

Barriers to participation



Structures and systems

Local laws and regulations can exclude young people by establishing minimum age and financial thresholds for political candidates. In Cameroon, citizens can vote from the age of 20, but candidates for the national Senate must be at least 40 years old. Anyone who wants to run for president must have at least 30 million CFA francs, or 50,000 US dollars, in a country where one in four people still live on less than 1.90 dollars a day.

In Senegal, political actors were seen as disconnected from the majority of people, which gave young people with disabilities the impression that the political realm was not accessible to them. Youth are seen as being used for violent protests to serve political leaders. Youth political movements are put aside because they are seen as competitors and immature. In Cameroon, the need for a powerful patron or “godfather” was seen as a major barrier to political participation.

In Sierra Leone, Senegal and Cameroon, legislation and initiatives exist to encourage the political participation of young people and people with disabilities, but implementation remains patchy.

Overcoming barriers

Our participants agreed that legislation and conventions that promote the rights and equal participation of people with disabilities in society are a positive development. However, these policies are meaningless without effective implementation.

Ensuring they are well implemented and upheld is crucial to creating an enabling environment for the political participation of young people with disabilities.

Mentorship schemes between political actors and young people with disabilities are one way to increase access to the political sphere. The schemes will expose young people to how systems work and encourage their ambitions.



Youth women with and without disability sharing their ideas on citizenship engagement in Sierra Leone, October 2023.



Discrimination

Young people with disabilities in all three countries continue to experience discrimination based on negative stereotyping and misperceptions. This informs their exclusion from political structures and spaces where decisions that affect their lives are made. Some participants felt that they were not considered equal members of society. This impacted their confidence and led them to believe that their contribution to civic life was very small.

However, we also heard that things are slowly improving in some areas, such as in Sierra Leone. Here young people with disabilities are being recognised as members who can contribute to community development, work in district councils and serve as representatives in ward and village committees.

Overcoming barriers

Political leaders and people in positions of power can help combat discrimination against people with disabilities through education and drawing attention to the contributions of young people with disabilities in decision-making spaces. Campaigns through traditional and social media have also been effective for educating people about the equal rights of people with disabilities, changing negative attitudes, and increasing the confidence of young people.



Education

Unequal access to education limits opportunities for young people with disabilities to engage in political life. For those who do attend school, in many places, citizenship education is not part of the school curriculum. Our participants in Sierra Leone stressed the importance of civic education for raising awareness of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship and how these extend to everyone.

However, the literature review cautioned against too great an emphasis on formal education as a requirement for political participation. Such policies risk exacerbating inequalities of opportunity between those with and without access to quality education.

Overcoming barriers

Civic education in schools has been shown to be beneficial for raising awareness of the rights and responsibilities of all citizens. Beyond schools, training schemes that focus specifically on political participation are an effective way to expose young people with disabilities to opportunities and encourage their ambitions.



Accessibility

Across all countries, our participants spoke of a lack of access to political participation for people with disabilities. This ranges from inaccessible electoral infrastructure such as polling booths and council offices, to inaccessible campaigning and communication materials.

Overcoming barriers

The continual adaptation of physical infrastructure to ensure accessibility for all is crucial for encouraging greater political participation among young people with disabilities. All of our participants also spoke of the role of technology in improving accessible communication. Social media is an especially powerful vehicle for galvanising political action and amplifying the voices of young leaders with disabilities.

We work with partners in low and middle income countries to eliminate avoidable blindness and promote equal opportunities for people with disabilities.

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