

## Brief note

# **‘Nothing for us without us’: The deployment, access and impression of voting process towards full inclusion of people with disabilities in Zimbabwe**

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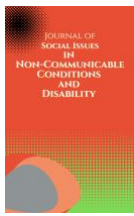
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### Abstract

In this brief note, I interrogate the need for the participation of people with disabilities (PWDs) in order to realize full inclusion. Missing in literature was a close look into the participation of PWDs at the just ended Zimbabwean elections. This note is also meant to laud the noble efforts by Zimbabwe Election Commission and other key stakeholders to involve people with disabilities in the election process. This is in line with calls that have been made in international, regional and local legal instruments to ensure the full inclusion of persons with disabilities in issues that affect them. Such a move is an important stepping stone towards ensuring full inclusion of people with disabilities in Zimbabwe because elections affect them too. For as long as the Government continue to make reforms that ensures the voting process is convenient for people with disabilities, we will continue to move closer to full inclusion.

### Key words

Election, inclusion, people with disabilities, participation, voting, Zimbabwe



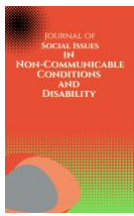
People with disabilities have been facing a number of barriers, even during COVID-19, but showing resilience (Mwapaura and Chikoko 2021; Chikoko and Mwapaura, 2022). There has been calls for ZEC to make the election process smooth for people with disabilities and include them. Zimbabwe ratified the United Nations Convention on the rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2013. Several legal instruments have also been enacted to realise their wellbeing and inclusion. For example, Disabled Persons Act (17:01), Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) sections 21, 23 and 83 and Disability Policy (Government of Zimbabwe, 1992, 2013 and 2021). According to Women Academy for Leadership and Political Excellence (WALPE) (2020) women with disabilities have been excluded from decision making. In this light, the option for electoral participation for people with disabilities has now become an obligation.

The deployment of people with disabilities by ZEC shows that attention has been turned from fixing disability weakness into fixing the electoral environment. People with disabilities (PWDs) are among officials that presided over 2023 Zimbabwean harmonised elections. The traditional practice of limiting activities for PWDs has transformed into facilitating electoral activity. The belittling of PWDs has now been replaced by dignifying them through political participation. Signs of Hope Trust, in partnership with MISA Zimbabwe and the Parliament of Zimbabwe, and Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) made a conscious effort to ensure electoral participation of people with disabilities by giving people with disabilities roles to play in the whole process of elections and signaling that gone are the days when PWDs were treated as charity cases.

When PWDs continue to be provided with opportunities such as voter educator, polling officers, enumerators, observers and other fields of electoral endeavor, we will continue to move closer to full inclusion. The effort by Signs of Hope Trust to run a campaign on access to electoral information, specifically for people with disabilities shows that discrimination of PWDs is being transformed into equality. I believe that whenever the nation is heading for a general election, it very pertinent for stakeholders to discuss the state of access to information for persons with disabilities so that segregation of PWDs can slowly be transformed into integration.

Another important measure critical to facilitate the participation of PWDs in elections is accessibility of voting centers. I share the same sentiments with the Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (ZLHR) which inquired the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) to provide information on measures which the elections management body has implemented to ensure that people with disabilities can comfortably have access to polling stations designated for the 2023 general elections and guarantee the secrecy of their vote. In line with Article 29 of UNCRPD people with disabilities should participate in political and public life hence the published list of polling stations should advise the public if all of the said provisional polling stations have facilities which are accessible by PWDs in order to enable them to cast their vote.

In terms of section 67(3) of the Constitution, every Zimbabwe citizen who is aged 18 years and above has the right to vote in all elections and referendums and has the corollary right to vote in secret (Government of Zimbabwe, 2013). Furthermore, in terms of section 56(3) of the



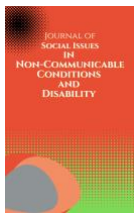
Constitution, every person has the right not to be treated in an unfairly discriminatory manner among other things on the basis of disability. It cannot be over emphasised that ZEC has a constitutional obligation to ensure that all the polling stations to be used in the harmonized elections are accessible and are friendly to persons with disability. The Electoral Act should protect the constitutional right of the visually impaired people to vote in secret, just like any other voters in Zimbabwe. In this light, ZEC to should take measures and or implement special arrangements to ensure that all polling stations to be used in elections are accessible to people with disabilities and to guarantee the secrecy of their vote.

As an election observer, there was lasting impressions in the voting process. The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) seemingly created an enabling environment that allowed PWDs to vote freely and with ease. During the election process, people with disability (PWDs), the elderly and pregnant mothers were given preferential treatment at polling stations as they did not have to queue. Those who are visually-impaired were being taken through the voting process in the company of a person of their choice. The hearing and lingually impaired were equally being assisted by polling officers who are fluent in sign language. PWDs also participated as election officers at various polling stations. This is important as it is important PWDs to exercise their legal right as well to vote. A polling officer helped PWDs to check for their names on the voters roll outside the polling station and this made the process easier for them. I believe that, PWDs have a legal right to cast their vote, if the environment is not conducive then some people might shy away. Considering removing environment barriers is critical to ensure PWDs wellbeing (Mwapaura and Chikoko 2020; Mwapaura, 2021; WALPE, 2020).

Although PWDs for example visually impaired, may be free to select a trusted person, a vote should be confidential and there may be no guarantee that the person would have marked in the box of the person that would have been chosen. In future there is need for ZEC to incorporate braille so that the visually-impaired can go through the voting process on their own. Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) should provide information on measures which the elections management body has implemented to ensure that people with disabilities can comfortably have access to polling stations designated for the future elections and guarantee the secrecy of their vote. As long as, the government continue to make reforms that ensures the voting process is convenient for people with disabilities, we will continue to move closer to full inclusion.

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