

# POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF PERSONS WITH INTELLECTUAL OR PSYCHOSOCIAL DISABILITIES



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The guide contains ideas and suggestions generated by 133 persons with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities who kindly shared their experiences and thoughts. Connie Laurin-Bowie, Kimber Bialik and Manel Mhiri of Inclusion International and Victoria Lee of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) provided insights and feedback on various drafts, as did Dan Malinovich, Valdemar Christensen and Razan Masad from UNDP. Ola Abualghaib and Natalia Mattioli of UNPRPD MPTF reviewed and commented on an early draft.

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The main author of the guide was Oliver Lewis, barrister at Doughty Street Chambers, London.

## Preface

The participation of all citizens is a fundamental democratic principle. The rights of every person to equal participation in public affairs, to vote and to be elected, and to have access to public service are affirmed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Meaningful participation is also central to the vision of Agenda 2030 and its pledge to leave no one behind and to reach the furthest behind first.

Yet, persons with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities are still often excluded from political processes. They experience multiple legal, institutional, and social barriers, which prevent them from voting, standing for election for public office, civic participation, or simply having a say in their own lives.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is committed to supporting the inclusive participation of persons with disabilities across all its programming and its operations. As the largest provider of UN electoral assistance, it aims to ensure that elections are credible, transparent and inclusive of all people, including persons with psychosocial or intellectual disabilities. To support this aim, UNDP in partnership with Inclusion International and with funding from the UN Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Multi Partner Trust Fund (UNPRPD MPTF),

has developed this practical guide on how to strengthen the political participation of persons with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities. Based on the principle of *Nothing About Us Without Us* it has benefited from input from focus groups with persons with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities from all around the world.

The guide is designed to be a practical tool for governments, election management bodies, organizations of persons with disabilities, civil society organizations, and electoral assistance providers. It also highlights the important role of international organizations such as UNDP in creating truly inclusive systems. At UNDP, we will use this practical guide in our projects to contribute to changing both practices and perceptions in the field of political participation of persons with disabilities.

I thank all those who generously gave their time to provide insights for this guide. We hope it serves as a useful contribution as we advance the political participation of persons with psychosocial or intellectual disabilities, combatting exclusion and inequality, and addressing the roadblocks we are facing in achieving the ambitious targets envisioned in the 2030 Agenda.



**Haoliang Xu**

Assistant Secretary General, Assistant Administrator  
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## Forewords

### Politics.

It is the very stuff of our collective life. Through it we help set, and continually re-set, the terms of our social co-existence. It is a badge of belonging.

To be included – to have a voice and to be heard – is the essence of citizenship. It holds its own symbolic importance. It marks you out as a worthy citizen – someone with a stake in our collective life. To be practically engaged means that our voice can have an equal impact compared with others. It enables us to feel part of periodic generational shifts and to acquire a stake in our country's political destiny and place in the world. And interest groups – like representative organizations of persons with disabilities – can engage directly and also form alliances with other like-interest groups to help define the public interest into the future.

To be excluded – even indirectly – has devastating consequences. To be denied the right to vote and even stand in elections marks people apart as unworthy of citizenship. Continued restrictions on voting based on disability are incomprehensible in an age when both neuroscience and behavioural science are showing that there is no (or no direct) link between rationality and decision-making like voting. Such continued restrictions lack any evidence base. Inaccessible voter information skews the political marketplace unfairly against those whose disabilities require accommodation. And inaccessible voting venues send powerful – and negative – messages that you don't belong and your view about our collective future is not valued. Equally important, the *demos* requires all voices to be heard – otherwise the public interest becomes captive to more powerful (or louder voices). Let it not be forgot that persons with

disabilities – like all citizens – have interests that sweep beyond their own personal circumstances to include, e.g., the environment, climate justice and how we treat the 'other', including refugees.

We rightly celebrate the many substantive innovations of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) – dignity, autonomy, inclusion, equality. Equally important are the process-based innovations. It's not enough to repeal bad laws – we have to fix the process that led to these bad laws. If we don't do that then history is likely to repeat itself. The CRPD imagines and then creates space for a *new politics of disability*. That is why personal voice and collective voice is given pride of place (Articles 12 and 4.3). That is why Article 29 (participation in political and public life) is critically important. That is why Article 33 – a re-alignment of Power (Government) with Voice in the co-production of policy - is so critically important. And that is why, incidentally, the right to participate in culture is so important since it too helps shape and re-shape our collective political imagination (Article 30).

This publication marks a useful and highly constructive contribution to the debates about how to identify and remove barriers and how to create a genuinely inclusive political process. It deserves to be read by policy-makers and civil society alike. Making the new politics of disability real will help in its own way to keeping civic space open. In this way, advancing inclusion for person with disabilities in the democratic process has a broader democratic dividend. This is exactly what the world needs at this moment in history.



**Gerard Quinn**

United Nations Special Rapporteur  
on the rights of persons with disabilities



My name is Mark Mapemba. I am a self-advocate, and I am the Vice-President of Inclusion International. I also participate in politics in my community and represent people with disabilities on the City Council in Blantyre, Malawi.

When it comes to political participation, so much of our lives depend on the work of politicians. To be involved in politics is something that is important for people with intellectual disabilities because if we are involved in politics, we will not be left behind. We can be involved as a Member of Parliament, as a Councillor, or even just through voting.

For many people with intellectual disabilities, voting and being in politics is difficult because the support needed for political participation is not there, and voting does not always happen in accessible places. Information is also not easy to understand – there must be good information on voting so that we can go through the process without any hiccups.

These guidelines will help make this happen. When we give these guidelines to governments and they get new ideas about how to be more accessible, they will also have more access to the voices of people with intellectual disabilities.

The information for these guidelines came from people with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities themselves, across different continents, which gave us the big picture of how things are happening on the ground when people try to vote. Inclusion International also helped develop these guidelines, and when governments work with organizations of people with disabilities, they can get good guidance for their departments and leaders about making sure things are accessible to everyone.

For people with intellectual disabilities, our votes are our voices. This is one of the ways that people make choices in their lives. It is a must for governments to make sure there is access for people with intellectual disabilities so we have no problems when it comes to voting – we need to understand the information, showing up to vote should be accessible, and the results should be easy for everyone to understand.

These guidelines will help governments take action to make sure that political participation is accessible to everyone.

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