



Country reports with a difference

International comparison of accessibility

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Note: The articles on European countries were written before the European elections of 6–9 June 2024.

At a Glance

People with disabilities are an especially marginalised group when it comes to political participation, not only in so-called developing countries. The recent years have illustrated that broad participation in political processes is a fundamental prerequisite for sustained development. Not least of all, the *Agenda 2030*, with its guiding principle of “no one left behind”, urges us to pay special attention to this issue – also, and especially, in the overseas offices of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.

On this issue, what are the circumstances in the various countries where our foundation maintains offices? To what degree do people with disabilities enjoy the same opportunities as compared to people without disabilities? What challenges are they confronted with, which hurdles must be overcome, and how can our foundation contribute to equal access to political participation for people with disabilities?

This publication provides research, compiled by some of our overseas offices, on the current situation of political participation for people with disabilities, in their respective countries. We hope that their reports will increase awareness of the sadly often persistent inequalities that remain and motivate all of us to pay greater heed to the issue of inclusion.

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Dear Readers,

The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung is advocating for inclusion worldwide. We are dedicated to ensuring that people with disabilities can participate in society in equal measure. This commitment is based on our conviction that inclusion constitutes a fundamental human right and that an inclusive society is beneficial for everyone.

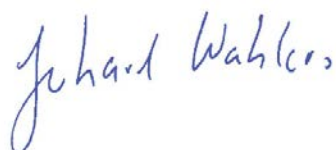
Especially in the field of education, people with disabilities are extremely marginalized and discriminated against in many countries around the world – even though education in particular has been proven to be a decisive factor for individual and sustainable development.

Not only the 2030 Agenda with its guiding principle of “leaving no one behind” and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, but most notably our Christian view of humanity oblige us to focus our attention on this topic in the work of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung abroad. We take this mission seriously: We want “civic education for all people!”

For us, this includes on the one hand ensuring that our events are accessible to all people, that our offices are barrier-free, and that special consideration is given to people with disabilities in the application process. On the other hand, in our work abroad, we join our local partners in addressing access to education for persons with disabilities in our countries of assignment.

This publication brings together selected country reports from all five continents that deal with the topic of “Political participation for people with disabilities.” They are based on research conducted by our offices abroad and provide insight into the current status and developments in the respective countries.

With our series entitled “Country reports with a difference,” we focus on the issue of inclusion and point out persistent inequalities. The reports illustrate both the diversity of existing opportunities and potential as well as the challenges and hurdles involved in implementing inclusive measures. It is a small but nonetheless important step on the long and difficult road to inclusion of persons with disabilities worldwide.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Gerhard Wahlers". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'G'.

Dr. Gerhard Wahlers

Deputy Secretary General and Head of the Division European and International Cooperation

Germany

“YES” to more Participation – but also in Politics?

The Global Disability Summit (also known as “GDS25”) will take place in Germany at the beginning of April 2025. The aim of the summit is to drive forward the global implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (or “UN CRPD” for short). In an interdimensional approach.

Global dimension.

Persons with disabilities constitute one of the most marginalized and disadvantaged groups worldwide. Some 1.3 billion people, or around one sixth of the world’s population, live with one or multiple disabilities. In Germany, over an eighth of eligible voters have a disability – and the trend is rising due to demographic change and the increasing prevalence of mental illness. If, in light of oftentimes considerable assistance needs, one includes family members as well, about half of all eligible voters – and therefore a group with immense voter potential – are affected by disability. In order to achieve the goal of inclusion in society, education, in studies and work, and finally also in politics, the United Nations (UN) created the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2008, which took effect in Germany in 2009. The most important innovation: “Disability” is understood as the result of the interplay of an individual impairment on the one hand and a “disabling environment,” i. e., social living spaces that are inaccessible to those affected. Hence it moves away from the notion that the actual disability prevents people from participating toward the idea that (local) framework conditions

(can) cause exclusion and thus disability. However, everyone benefits from a low-barrier environment, from older people to families with baby carriages. Accessibility is therefore an intersectional social issue.

Sixteen years after ratifying the UN CRPD, the Federal Republic of Germany is co-hosting the Global Disability Summit (GDS25) with the Kingdom of Jordan in Berlin in April 2025. This is the third summit of its kind, which is always hosted by an industrialized, emerging or developing country, and the International Disability Alliance (IDA). The IDA is the international umbrella association for organizations of persons with disabilities.¹

It focuses on improving the awareness and rights of persons with disabilities globally. The aim of GDS25 is to promote the global implementation of the UN CRPD in terms of (development) policy. On behalf of the German government, the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) is the lead ministry. Although persons with disabilities are particularly affected by poverty in developing countries, political participation opportunities are suboptimal in industrialized nations as well: The struggle for equal participation is similar globally, regardless of a country's level of development, which is due to the fact that barriers increase progressively depending on the level of prosperity and have an impact on participation. Correlating with country reports from other nations, this article examines in the following the situation in Germany's multi-level political system.

Dimension of political participation.

If one compares the larger sociocultural groups that make up at least 10 percent of society, persons with disabilities are by far the least represented in the European, federal, and state parliaments. True to the principle of the European Union, *In varietate concordia*, “United in diversity,” the German Bundestag is also becoming more diverse and colorful from election to election. Only persons with disabilities have not benefited from this – on the contrary: their share has decreased. It fell from 3.3 percent in the 19th parliamentary term to 2.3 percent in the current 20th Bundestag, despite the fact that the proportion in society is continuously rising due to demographic change and increasing mental illness. Most of these MPs affected themselves have disabilities with a degree of disability between 30 and 50 (out of 100), or an equivalent status, all of which were only “acquired” after reaching the age of 55 – and in each case after entering the Bundestag for the first time.

Dimension of mobility & dependencies.

Take a rural region, somewhere in the Black Forest. On Sundays, a bus is scheduled four times in this area, from Monday to Saturday frequency is down to only five times by now. Per day, mind you – not per hour. It is usually impossible to get to venues by public transport and back again at night. As a (nearly) blind person, you’d yield to the competitor from the neighboring village in the election for local chair, but in doing so you’ll have secured yourself a ride. This is where strategic considerations begin – and this is where some participatory decisions are already being settled. **(Un)consciously SO**. It is possible to become

involved in the district or district executive of the party and its branches, but only with well-meaning supporters who come from the local area, belong to the same committee, and are mobile. Otherwise, participation fails due to mobility issues. However, those who are not seen regularly can neither build up nor increase their political capital. Dependencies arise: Who do I propose, who do I vote for, so that I will also have a ride in the future to be able to participate in the respective committee? Furthermore, lead motions have to be applied for in advance in order to visualize them, arguments have to be memorized as best as possible – collaborating on initiative motions submitted during party conferences is far more laborious. Furthermore, participation also fails due to the impunctuality of Deutsche Bahn: If a train is more than 30 minutes late, the DB Mobility Service Center does not provide any assistance past 10 pm. It is therefore not uncommon for the local fire department to help out due to a lack of accessibility so that electric wheelchair users can still find their “barrier-free way” home from the platform at night.

Dimension of quotas.

We all know countless women who have achieved excellence: A political career with children; a doctorate parallel to being a member of parliament; an entrepreneur and mother – millions of examples can be cited in Germany alone. Since 2002, I myself have supported significantly more female than male candidates in election campaigns for direct mandates. All this was possible even without quotas. Looking ahead to the CDU federal party conference in Hannover in 2022, as a man with a disability I regularly

ask myself the question, **“Is effort REALLY still worth it?”** At that time, the CDU created an instrument that goes against every liberal idea: a binding quota based on gender. A quota that does not take into account the actual gender balance in the CDU and CSU. If a “breathing” quota were linked at each federal party conference to the actual percentage of members, this would be justifiable – and an incentive to recruit more women as members. This would constitute true competition. Contrary to the actual gender proportion, many offices are to be filled on a parity basis from district level upward. This will artificially reduce the room for maneuver in the CDU and CSU for male candidates: Some 75 percent of members are men – in some cases, they are only entitled to 50 percent of honorary posts. Where without a gender quota, candidates with disabilities could still hope for the goodwill of male competitors, in future only the principle of competition will apply: The strongest will prevail. What was defined as a “glass ceiling” by female candidates in the past will become a “steel barrier” for male candidates with disabilities. Insurmountable. It is precisely for this reason that some party members with disabilities, who performed despite all adversity and additional resource requirements, have the impression that continuous, individual effort no longer counts for anything.

There are three options for correcting the current situation in favor of greater participation: The first option would be to examine whether the gender quota could be suspended in justified exceptional cases, in favor of sociocultural groups that are demonstrably less represented than women – e. g., in favor

of male and female representatives of different age groups or persons with disabilities. The second option would be to create further, binding quotas in favor of underrepresented segments of society – for example, combined in a rotating system. Third option: concentrated promotion of the genders and various sociocultural groups – with the abolition of internal party quotas after the end of the current test phase. After all, it cannot and must not be the aim of a popular party – even if indirectly and possibly unconsciously – to exclude entire sections of society from political participation.

Dimension of regional proportionality.

No person with a disability was involved in the drafting of the CDU's new platform – although eight persons with disabilities were nominated for the “Social Security” expert commission. There is also no member with a disability on the federal executive of the CDU – or else no member is willing to admit to it for fear of stigmatization. As a result, participation is not sufficiently considered from the perspective of those affected. Regional representation and quotas seem to be more important than the representation of disabled people.

Dimension of language – aspect of accessibility.

In contrast, the CDU/CSU is in pole position when it comes to gender-neutral language from the perspective of various types of disability. On closer consideration, one could get the impression that parties from the green-left spectrum want to nip the participation of disadvantaged social groups in language in the bud: Gender-neutral language, especially the kind with

special characters in the middle of words, creates insurmountable language barriers for the blind, visually impaired, dyslexic, learning disabled, autistic, cognitively impaired, and also for migrants and older people: When using a screen reader, every footnote and every special character, i. e. asterisks, hyphens, slashes, and underscores, is read aloud – at the latest when academic work is concerned. So-called quote [sic!] *“Bürgerunterstrichinnen,” “Dachdeckerschrägstrichinnen,”* or the *“Innenministersterninnenkonferenz,”* i. e. originally male gender words, where the female form is added with an underscore or other special character, as in *“Bürger_innen,”* make entire passages of text incomprehensible rather than ensuring perceived equality of all genders in language.

The vehemence with which a supposedly “gender-equitable language” ignores the denied participation of entire social groups leads to the conclusion that the woke camp is not in the least interested in inclusion in language and therefore not in participation in education, work, and society either. Anyone who wants to create new language elites while excluding 40 to 50 percent of a society from language is taking the wrong path – even in the face of humanistic and pluralistic responsibility. Many authors of academic papers on gender language ignore accessibility against their better judgment. Measured against scholarly principles, these works are simply incomplete.

Dimension of professional participation.

In addition to parliaments and party committees, the underrepresentation of disabled persons is also reflected in the federal ministerial administration, despite the fact that the federal government ought to have a greater interest in employing qualified persons with disabilities. As the federal government's answer from June 2024 to a minor interpellation from the CDU/CSU reveals, most federal ministries – and their subordinate agencies – only meet the five percent employment quota for persons with disabilities because 20 percent of civil servants have a disability.² The fact that the lower-level civil service is to be abolished in the medium term – never mind. Despite relevant qualifications, there are significantly fewer persons with disabilities in the mid-level (4.7 percent) and senior-level (3.8 percent) civil service than required by law – not to mention executive positions.

The fact that inclusion in art and culture is not taken into account in public broadcasting either is shown, for example, by the crime series called “Blind Date.” The actress who plays a blind woman in the film, and quote [sic!] “(...) sees quite normally (...), [had to] *prepare meticulously for the unfamiliar role* [as a blind woman] *and first learn how to be blind.*” Imagine if an actress had had to prepare meticulously for “being a migrant” or “being black” – the outcry about “black facing” would have been huge. But in this way, public service broadcasting has merely squandered an opportunity to give an actress who is actually blind a chance to participate professionally.

Dimension of double standards.

What appears downright absurd is the social media posts from certain types of members found in greater or lesser number among every party: On the occasion of the “Day of Persons with Disabilities,” every year on December 3, they like to present themselves as particularly participation-friendly – and on March 21 of each year, they demonstrate their solidarity with people with Down syndrome by wearing two pairs of socks. However, as soon as it comes to the distribution of party-political honorary posts – let alone mandates – all initiatives toward participation are forgotten.

Dimension of practical implementation.

Running for a direct mandate is almost hopeless for persons with disabilities who are not mobile themselves – i. e., that cannot get from A to B without the support of a third party. Voters rightly have an interest in the direct candidate being present and mobile locally. This is precisely why it would be all the more important to position persons with disabilities prominently on state lists. The argument that direct candidates are initially “secured” via the lists is legitimate – however, this also acts as a further barrier to the disadvantage of persons with disabilities participating in politics. The factors for the non-representation of persons with disabilities (with a degree of disability [German: Grad der Behinderung – GdB] between 80–100, e. g., paraplegics, blind persons, deaf persons, etc.) are complex: Subsidies for sign language interpreters, guides, or other assistance services are usually only granted after a mandate has been achieved. Overcoming these hurdles requires an immense

amount of extra time and money over decades, parallel to training, studies, family, and work. When weighing up the use of time and financial resources, many disabled people are the first to stop their political involvement.

Barriers dimension.

In addition to a lack of public transport connections or train stations that are not barrier-free, other barriers such as the accessibility of conference venues, the non-existence of barrier-free sanitary facilities, the procurement of information, e. g., in sign language, the electronic availability of texts for the visually impaired, or the provision of information in plain language, can range all the way to barriers in people's minds (stigmas). In the spirit of the GDS25, these and other barriers need to be removed in the long term – after all, the whole of society benefits from the “intersectional issue of participation.”

Conclusion.

All political parties would be well advised to better include persons with disabilities in party committees and election proposals alongside various sociocultural groups: First, because according to the Holy Scriptures, every person has the same value. Secondly, because no party can do without more than an eighth of all eligible voters, when factoring in relatives, without half of all voters. And thirdly, persons with disabilities in particular have an increased potential for recognition – or “trademark” – a strong asset in the loud calls for distinctive minds in politics. In line with the idea of self-representation, it should be a matter of course when appointing participation

representatives in future that those affected represent themselves – just as women’s, migrant, East German, or LGBT representatives like to claim self-representation for themselves, and rightly so.

Roman Baumgartner is an aide to Wilfried Oellers, MP, CDU/CSU spokesperson for participation of persons with disabilities – and severely visually impaired.



- 1 Hosts of the first GDS 2018: Great Britain, Kenya, and the IDA; hosts of the second GDS 2022: Norway, Ghana, and the IDA; hosts of the third GDS 2025: Germany, Jordan, and the IDA.
- 2 Cf. <https://dip.bundestag.de/vorgang/besch%C3%A4ftigungssituation-von-menschen-mit-behinderungen-in-bundeskanzleramt-in-bundesministerien-und/311838>; response dated June 3, 2024 (last accessed January 13, 2025).

Belgium

In Belgium, voting is compulsory for all public elections – including the European elections. However, there is no voting by mail or any means to vote digitally, for instance, from home. Anyone who is unable to come to the polling station in person due to a disability merely has the option of authorizing another person to cast the vote on their behalf.

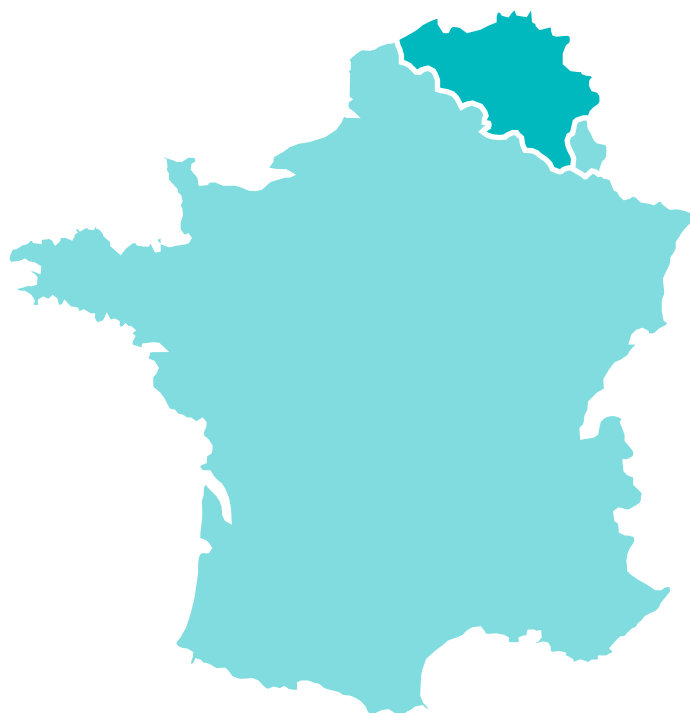
There are guidelines for municipalities on how to design their polling stations barrier-free. This includes, for example, barrier-free parking spaces nearby, ramps, and wide entrance doors. In addition, at least one polling booth must be available that can be used by people in wheelchairs.

The election notifications and other information material on the parties running for election are being sent by e-mail so that blind and visually impaired people can use various technical tools, such as having the documents read out loud or translated into plain language.

However, voting at the local polling station takes place without specific aids; only an accompanying person may assist persons with disabilities in the polling booth. If one does not have a personal assistant, a member of the electoral board is appointed at the polling station to help voters with disabilities. There are no election commercials on television in Belgium; the parties rely on digital communication or the traditional direct approach using printed information.

Meike Lenzner

Beatrice Gorawantschy, Head of KAS European Office Brussels



Greece

Voters with disabilities are to be given preferential treatment in the upcoming European elections in Greece. Greek polling stations are located in public buildings such as schools, which often do not have sufficient barrier-free accessibility. The electoral committees are therefore called upon to take all appropriate measures to provide support. Specifically, for polling stations that are not located on the ground floor and do not meet the accessibility criteria for persons with disabilities, setting up a reception and assistance area is to be arranged. An accompanying person who is a legal representative or an accompanying person of the person voting is permitted in the voting area. This is done after verification by the chair of the electoral committee of the respective polling station and under the responsibility and in the presence of the person acting as legal representative. The designated person can assist in expressing the voter's wishes with the discretion and confidentiality required to protect the secrecy of the ballot. Voters with disabilities or limited mobility may also be accompanied by a guide dog.

To make it easier for Greek voters to exercise their right to vote, voting by mail will be offered for the first time in the European elections. This measure is primarily intended to give Greeks the opportunity to vote from their place of residence or work without having to travel long distances. In addition, however, a barrier-free mail-in ballot will be offered as well. It meets all the necessary specifications so that voters who are unable to complete the ballot by hand can print it out

digitally and insert it into the ballot envelope. This provision follows the institutionalization of voting by mail, which offers considerable relief to persons with disabilities or mobility impairments. It complements a number of initiatives by the Ministry of the Interior to facilitate and strengthen equal access to voting by mail for voters with disabilities. The law introducing voting by mail also provides for party speeches and interviews with political leaders to be broadcast in sign language and/or with subtitles.

(Information at www.ypes.gr)



Cyprus

Although the upcoming European elections in Cyprus have been combined with other local elections, still no option is available for voting by mail or digital voting. This is problematic as not all polling stations feature barrier-free access. Where ramps exist, these are sometimes steep and dangerous, and not all polling stations have wheelchair-accessible booths. During the voting process, the polling officer can explain to each voter how to cast the vote. Any action or movement that could be interpreted as advice or instructions in favor of a particular candidate must be carefully avoided. The election documents are also made available in plain language. Blind or physically disabled people can, if they wish, vote on their own by simply declaring to the person presiding that they are able to do so. Voters who are unable to cast their vote due to their blindness or other physical impairment can ask the chairperson to help them cast their vote. This is done in the presence of a polling station assistant or another person in whom they have absolute confidence. The voting information on the election websites is subtitled, but not interpreted into sign language.

Turkish Cypriots and citizens of the Republic of Cyprus living in the non-government controlled areas are still able to vote in the European Parliament elections. For this purpose, special voting centers are being set up near the ceasefire line and special identification cards will ensure that no double voting is possible. In addition, citizens living in the occupied territories of

Karpasia and Kyrenia are able to cast their vote in a dedicated voting center in the free territories to exercise their right to vote and participate in the democratic process.

(Information at www.elections.gov.cy)

Conclusion

In summary, Greece has made progress in improving accessibility through the introduction of voting by mail and the adaptation of polling stations and mail-in voting documents. In Cyprus, efforts are not as advanced and further measures are needed to improve accessibility, even if the elections are difficult due to the particular political circumstances.

Marian Wendt

Head of KAS Office Greece and Cyprus

Hannes Jürgens





Italy

No options for voting by mail or digital voting are available in Italy. Italians living abroad can vote at their local consulate after entry in the register of Italians residing abroad. However, voters with reduced mobility have the right to a state-funded transportation service. If you are unable to travel, you have the right to vote at home or in hospital. An application for this must be submitted at least 20 days prior to the election. If the application is granted, the vote is cast at an agreed time in the presence of a member of the relevant electoral board.

Not all polling stations in Italy are barrier-free, but people with walking disabilities are entitled to vote in a barrier-free polling station. Upon request, voting can accordingly take place in another polling station. There are no special voting documents for blind and visually impaired people. In general, blind and visually impaired persons, as well as people with motor impairments, have the right to be accompanied into the polling booth. The prerequisite for this is a special authorization to vote. For blind people, the so-called libretto di pensione confirming their visual impairment is sufficient.

Texts in plain language are still not very widespread in Italy, and there are no election documents in plain language. The tradition of parties creating a party logo before each election to simplify visual recognition dates back to a time when the number of illiterate voters was high. To vote, it is then sufficient to mark the desired party logo with a cross. For voters

who wish to give a preference vote to a particular candidate, the name of that person must be written by hand next to the party logo. According to the relevant case law of the Italian Constitutional Court, it is sufficient if the voter's will is clearly recognizable. This means that the candidate's full name does not have to be written down correctly. It is sufficient to write down a clear part of the name. In the European elections, several politicians are advertising the idea of simply writing down their first name on the ballot. For example, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, who is running as her party's list leader in the European elections, is advertising with the words "scrivi Giorgia" ("write Giorgia").

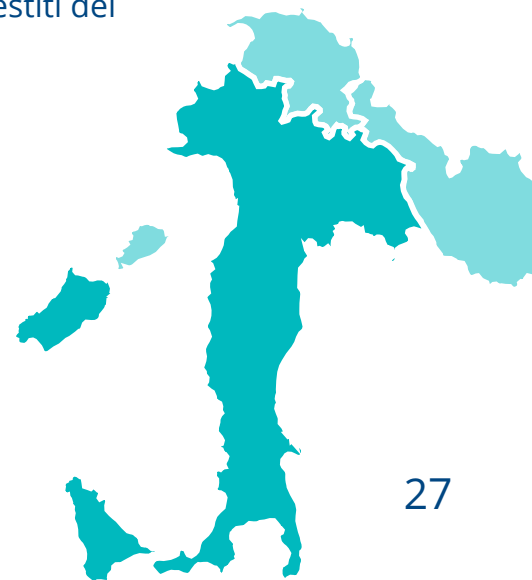
Sign language or subtitles for deaf people, for example, pertaining to election programs or in election commercials, are the exception rather than the rule in Italy. Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's party, the Fratelli d'Italia, has subtitled its current election commercial for the European elections. The small social-liberal party Azione has integrated a sign language interpreter into the commercial.

(Information at: Il diritto di voto e le persone con disabilità – Agenzia Iura; Italia – Come votare (europa.eu); Ministero Dell'Interno – Approfondimento, Elezioni Europee 2024 – Messaggi autogestiti del 31/05/2024 – Video – RaiPlay)

Nino Galetti

Head of KAS Office Italy

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Brazil

The only topic on which there is consensus.

In an otherwise highly polarized country, one issue enjoys cross-party support: the inclusion of persons with disabilities. In the midst of numerous disparities, Brazil has been making considerable efforts for decades. The aim is to assert the right of Brazilian citizens to participate fully in public life. Although this has met with approval in politics, there are still some barriers in practice.

Inclusion, order & progress

Tactile guide strips for blind persons on the sidewalks, ramps for wheelchair users at the beginning and end of every crosswalk, level access to the subway. All the things that have only recently been introduced into public spaces in Germany have long been regulated by law in Brazil and have become an integral part of the country's infrastructure. In a country that has always been among the top in surveys on social inequality, the demand for inclusion meets the harsh reality. When the sidewalk simply ends and turns into a gravel road, the guiding strip ends too. If the ramp for the wheelchair user ends in a pothole, the road cannot be crossed there. If local public transport is hopelessly overloaded, especially at peak times, even barrier-free entrances do not provide any space on the bus or train.

Anyone who raises an eyebrow here and discredits the country's considerable efforts with a wave of the hand is ill-advised. An "I thought so" is out of place. You do not have to look far to see shortcomings in the implementation of inclusion. In Germany, it does



Brazil's first paraplegic senator, Mara Gabrielli, accompanied by presidential candidate Simone Tebet. Sao Paulo, October 2, 2022.

not take a trip to the rural backwaters either. Even in medium-sized stations, often only one of the platforms can be reached via an escalator or elevator. If these are not broken, there is always the threat of the German railroads' "permanent special" involving spontaneous non-barrier-free access. The sidewalks, or even more iconically, the Bürgersteige ("citizens' walks"), do not lack any attributions for designating the users walking, promenading, or strolling along them – but they usually lack a ramp. Potholes are better left out in this conversation, just as they often are in road construction. Beyond the infrastructural shortcomings that can be observed on both sides of the Atlantic without much effort, Germany is lagging behind Brazil particularly in one practical respect. Brazil has succeeded in ensuring that its citizens have internalized the need to include their fellow citizens with disabilities.



Every event at a public institution in Brazil must be simultaneously translated into sign language. Private institutions are also feeling more and more obliged to do so.

Inclusion is visible in Brazil. Inclusion is part of everyday life. Inclusion is consensual, a matter of course – despite the challenges. There may be a lack of practical implementation, but the legal situation is advanced (see “Country Report with a Difference” of KAS Brazil, January 2023) and the participation of persons with disabilities in public life is also becoming increasingly visible in the remote regions of the fifth largest country in the world. Inclusion is progressing gradually and inexorably, it appears. Persons with disabilities, senior citizens, and pregnant women have preferential access to public spaces as a matter of course. There are special counters for them in banks; they can be the first to board a plane at the airport; and special checkouts in supermarkets are in place as well. The practical effect of this may be quite banal – the queues are shorter – but the impact of the

“prioridade” counters on the visibility of inclusion is enormous. The same applies to sign language interpreters, who are on stage at every public event to simultaneously translate the spoken word into visually perceptible language. Even if there is no deaf person in the audience, inclusion is visible to all participants.

Sign language received a boost in Brazil thanks to the efforts of Michelle Bolsonaro. The former First Lady of Brazil was self-taught in the visually perceptible language and regularly caused a sensation when she spontaneously interpreted her husband’s statements. The Bolsonaros, of all people, you might think. Jair Bolsonaro did not exactly stand out as a unifying politician of inclusion, but rather as a divisive demagogue. While he was not above vulgar outbursts against minorities and regularly provoked scandals at home and abroad, Bolsonaro remained remarkably presidential when it came to the inclusion of persons with disabilities.

Policy without the politics

“You have come here to make the following announcement to the Brazilian government: we exist, we want to be treated with dignity and with respect; and that is exactly what we will do!”

– President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, July 17, 2024¹

“I would particularly like to address the deaf community, persons with disabilities, and all those who feel left out. You will be valued and your rights will be respected.”

– Michelle Bolsonaro, January 1, 2019²

In a country where the formation of camps around the political poles sowed discord and even divided families, the issue of inclusion of persons with disabilities remained relatively united. Relatively, mind you. Brazilian politics does not seem to be able to get by without heated discussions and controversies. Not even when it comes to a complex of issues that are in themselves unifying. The political left in particular, in its opposition role to the Bolsonaro government, regularly accused the president of wanting to segregate persons with disabilities instead of integrating them. And, of course, it was not exactly difficult to associate Bolsonaro with something divisive. After all, when it came to every other social group, whether sexual or ethnic minorities, the former president basically positioned himself with varying degrees of vehemence against their positive discrimination. It is only against this background that it becomes clear how loudly the Bolsonaro government spoke out in favor of the inclusion of persons with disabilities by tacitly endorsing it. Bolsonaro's time in office was therefore undoubtedly not a leap forward in terms of promoting the participation of persons with disabilities in public life – but neither was it a step backwards, as in many other areas of social policy.

Since Brazil's re-democratization in the mid-1980s, the inclusion of persons with disabilities has been continuously promoted – despite all the adversities of everyday life in Brazil. The principle of equality enshrined in the constitution is therefore being implemented step by step. Especially in political life and in this context, in the particularly sensitive area of democratic elections, inclusion is applied most effectively.

To be sure, the country looks back on a long history of marginalization and exclusion of entire population groups. While the political system was initially dominated by large landowners, the first Brazilian democracy, which lasted from 1945 to 1964, also excluded illiterate people from voting. And thus, a quarter of the population otherwise entitled to vote. What is therefore presented in Germany as a matter of course with reference to voting by mail is a public mandate in Brazil: All citizens ought to be able to exercise their right to participate visibly and without restriction.

Brazilian law provides for a variety of measures to achieve this. Persons with disabilities, e. g., with limited mobility or Down's syndrome, can be accompanied to the polling booth by a caregiver. Election advertising and information must be accessible, as must the actual infrastructure, i. e., the buildings where voting takes place. Examples of this are buttons featuring braille for using the electronic ballot boxes common in Brazil or models that have audio or video playback of a sign language interpreter. Although some of these or similar structural measures can also be found in Germany, Brazil's are much more sophisticated. In order to have equal access to political discussions or campaigns, the Brazilian federal authority MGI, together with the Federal University of Paraíba in João Pessoa, developed the *Suíte VLibras* application, which can be used to translate multimedia content into sign language. Based on artificial intelligence, the application's algorithm has already trained hundreds of thousands of translations from spoken or written language into its visually perceptible version. What would otherwise be neglected

by campaign strategists with the chronically (too) tight budgets of political advertising measures is now made possible by the smartphone: unrestricted access for deaf people.

Politicians with (still) many barriers

Brazil has already made great strides in exercising the right to run for election, giving its citizens broad access to both information and the opportunity to cast their ballot. Running for election and thus exercising the right to be elected is still a major hurdle for politicized persons with disabilities³ – despite all of the progress made.

A look at the figures is revealing: Although about 9 percent of the Brazilian population live with one or more disabilities, they are underrepresented at all political levels in the country. Of the 81 senators in Brazil's upper house, four have a disability; of the 513 members of the lower house, only eleven have a disability; and in all of Brazil's 5,500 or so municipalities, there are only just over 6,500 councilors with disabilities. A look at Brazil's volatile party system reinforces this impression as well. Although the numerous parties show great flexibility in terms of content, the proportion of party members with one or more disabilities who actually run for political office is between zero and two percent.

One cannot construe a clear ideological preference from these figures. With a share of just over two percent of candidates with disabilities, the radical left-wing PSOL is at the top of the list and the economically liberal to libertarian NOVO is at the lower end

of the scale with 0.8 percent, but the range remains narrow. A look at Bolsonaro's PL party (1 percent) and President Lula's Workers' Party (PT) (1.3 percent) illustrates that the parties at the center of the respective camps are not that far apart in terms of the number of candidates with disabilities.

In the recent local elections, the number of candidates with disabilities actually fell compared to the 2020 elections. A look at the number of elected representatives is sobering. Only 24 of the 166 mayoral candidates with disabilities were elected.⁴

Although Brazil achieved further improvements in the exercise of passive voting rights for persons with disabilities and their vote broke a new record, candidates with disabilities remain marginalized. Taking into account infrastructural requirements is one thing, taking into account voters with disabilities in the campaigns of politicians is another. At the local level, the needs of persons with disabilities remain, if at all, only a footnote in the election manifestos – and across all parties at that. Paradoxically, the federal authorities are taking considerable measures to promote inclusion and facilitate the participation of persons with disabilities in the political decision-making process. However, this does not result in a target group for the election campaign, nor does it increase the visibility of politicians with disabilities.

Thus, there is still a long way to go, but individual political protagonists are doing valuable pioneering work and increasing the visibility of persons with disa-

bilities in politics. Even under the harsh conditions of Brazilian politics and the sheer vastness of the country, which in itself requires a high degree of mobility, the Brazilian population's strong affinity for social media is creating new opportunities. The example of politician Mara Gabrilli (PSD) is inspiring in many ways. In 1994, she survived a car accident making her a paraplegic, and she has since dedicated herself to medical research and the inclusion of persons with disabilities. Through her charitable work, she entered politics via the municipal administration of the metropolis of São Paulo. In 2011, she was elected to the Chamber of Deputies of the Brazilian National Congress and, since 2019, she has been Brazil's first paraplegic senator. Mara Gabrilli reaches tens of thousands on social media.

Philipp Gerhard,
Trainee KAS Office Brazil



- 1 Presidência da República. Press releases. 'Lula reforça compromisso com o avanço de políticas para as pessoas com deficiência,' July 17, 2024 [<https://www.gov.br/planalto/pt-br/acompanhe-o-planalto/noticias/2024/07/lula-reforca-compromisso-com-o-avanco-de-politicas-para-as-pessoas-com-deficiencia>] (last accessed February 07, 2025).
- 2 Folha de São Paulo. 'Leia a íntegra do discurso de Michelle Bolsonaro em Libras,' January 1, 2019 [<https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2019/01/leia-a-integra-do-discurso-de-michelle-bolsonaro-em-libras.shtml>] (last accessed February 07, 2025).
- 3 Diário PcD. 'Quem são e onde estão os candidatos com deficiência em todo o Brasil?,' October 10, 2024 [<https://diariopcd.com.br/2024/10/10/quem-sao-e-onde-estao-os-candidatos-com-deficiencia-em-todo-o-brasil/>] (last accessed February 07, 2025).
- 4 Estado de São Paulo. Blog Vencer Limites. 'População com deficiência, mais uma vez, passa oculta nas eleições municipais,' October 28, 2024 [<https://www.estadao.com.br/brasil/vencer-limites/populacao-com-deficiencia-mais-uma-vez-passa-oculta-nas-eleicoes-municipais/>] (last accessed February 07, 2025).

Estonia

In Estonia, all citizens aged 18 and over can vote in the European elections. However, this does not apply to people who have been deemed ineligible to vote by a court, for example due to a criminal offense. Estonians living abroad can also take part in the elections. They can cast their ballot by *e-voting* (which stands for electronic voting), voting by mail, or in-person at an embassy. Estonians are automatically eligible to vote in the European elections. Starting in October, even be the option of so-called *m-voting*, voting by cell phone, will be available.

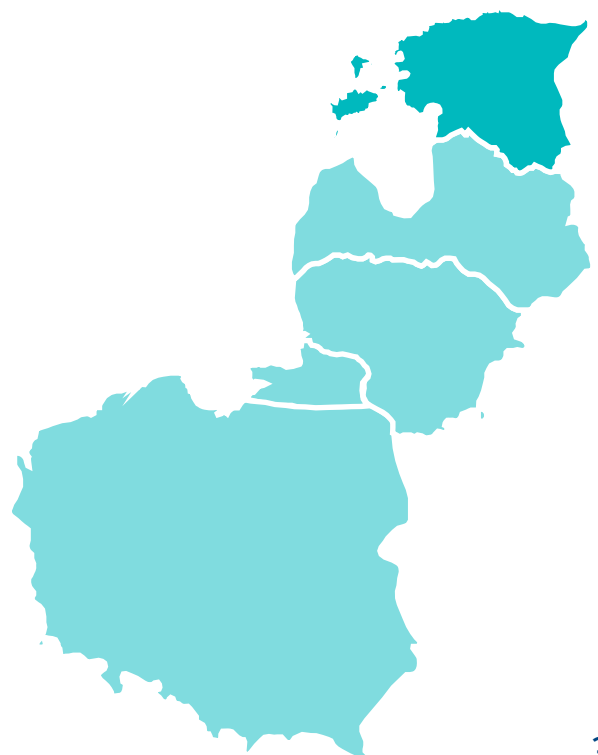
EU citizens who are officially residing in Estonia must submit an application to vote (in their first election in Estonia) by May 10, 2024 in order to be entered in the electoral register. The information for EU citizens residing in Estonia was sent out at the end of March 2024.

Easy-to-read information can be found on the website of the Estonian Electoral Office and the official EU website for the 2024 European elections. The information is available in large font and in plain language in Estonian, English, and Russian. Election information will be sent to all eligible voters in advance.

The Estonian population of 1,265,420 people includes an estimated 189,813 persons with a disability. Consequently, there are various options for assistance when voting. Voters with visual impairments will find an app that takes this into account. Most polling

stations are barrier-free (step-free access). If going to the polling station in person is not possible, one can apply to vote from home. Polling assistants are available in inpatient facilities such as hospitals. If necessary, a second person entitled to vote (not a MEP candidate) can go into the polling booth to support the person voting.

Estonia is distinguished by its *e-democracy*, which provides various services with the corresponding data protection to ensure transparency in political decision-making processes. This includes *e-voting*. With an identity card (analog or digital), all citizens registered to vote were able to vote from June 3 (9 am) until June 8 (8 pm), 2024. The online voting process meets high security standards (data protection, anonymity) and claims to be transparent. Voters can still change their vote until the end of the deadline.



Latvia

In Latvia, all citizens who have reached the age of 18 on election day can vote. Polling stations that were established after the revision of the electoral law must be barrier-free. However, older polling stations do not have to meet this criterion. A map of accessible polling stations will be published before the election. Voting from home is possible on request for sick people and caregivers. Voting assistants are also permitted by law for people with physical disabilities, although members of the electoral committee are not allowed to perform this role. Furthermore, early voting is possible in some polling stations. Voting by mail is not an option within Latvia, but it is possible from abroad. State television channels provide sign language interpreters during election campaign debates.

The website of the Central Election Commission provides information texts in easy-to-read Latvian. There are also options to have texts read aloud or to change the contrast and font size. Persons who are deemed to be of unsound mind due to a criminal offense cannot run for political office.



Lithuania

In Lithuania, all citizens who are 18 years old on election day and have not been excluded from voting by a court are allowed to vote. Among a population of 2,884,433, an estimated 432,665 persons have a disability. Lithuanian law provides for them to be supported during the ballot. It is possible to vote in advance at an accessible municipal authority, but this must be applied for. Voting is possible on election day in inpatient facilities such as retirement homes or hospitals. Appropriate assistance is provided. There is also the option of voting from home on the last Friday and Saturday before the election. This also requires an application.

Some 90 percent of polling stations are barrier-free. On election day, people with hearing impairments are put in touch with a Skype advisor. In the case of a visual impairment, documents in braille will be provided. If persons are unable to fill in the ballot on their own, they have the right to take a trusted person with them into the polling booth. Easy-to-read information is available on the Internet. Information is available in Lithuanian and English.



In summary, one can see that many different types of voting assistance are available in the three Baltic states, but that some problems with voting accessibility have not yet been addressed. Of particular interest are the options to vote from home and in hospital. Estonia provides a particularly inclusive voting option with *e-voting*. These options embody the idea of inclusion and can serve as a model for other countries.

With regard to voting documents in braille and support of the deaf or persons hard of hearing by means of a sign language interpreter, the options in Estonia and Latvia are still inadequate. Those affected must be aware of this information a few days before the election and support must be requested in time. The information on this matter could be more easily accessible and more inclusive overall, with the Latvian electoral commission's website being a positive example. Almost all polling stations are accessible for wheelchair users, but the lack of guaranteed accessibility to all polling stations remains a problem. In particular, as voting by mail from within the country is not possible in either of three Baltic states, this can lead to restrictions for some citizens.

Oliver Morwinsky

Head of the Baltic States Offices

Julian Loibl, Tobias Thelen, Konrad Geist



Palestinian Territories

Fight for Equal Rights and Participation

The inclusion of persons with disabilities in political processes is not only a question of social justice, but also crucial for building an inclusive and pluralistic society. Their voices and perspectives are often missing from the public debate, which leads to political decisions being made without sufficiently taking their needs into account. In the Palestinian territories, persons with disabilities face political, social, and infrastructural barriers that make political participation difficult. At the same time, there is no shortage of inspiring individuals who raise their voices and fight for their rights.

Mohannad Shafi drives up the ramp to Ramallah City Hall. He has been in a wheelchair since an accident at work a few years ago, twelve of which he has spent working for the city council as an accessibility officer. “At work, we all sit in the same chair. The difference between us is in our heads and not in our legs,” he remarks as he slides his business card across the table. His contact information is stamped in braille on the card, as is now the case on all Ramallah city council business cards.

Ramallah, the seat of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the occupied West Bank, has come a long way in recent years with regard to accessibility in public spaces. The city center is dotted with occasional parking spaces for persons with disabilities – acoustic signals for blind people sound at the pedestrian lights in front of city hall. Mohannad reports that Palestinians from outside Ramallah regularly praise the city:

“We don’t feel disabled here.” He is currently working on a map that identifies barrier-free places for visitors and residents alike. Nevertheless, there are still many barriers for persons with disabilities in the Palestinian territories: physical, social, economic, and also political.

Living with a disability in the Palestinian territories

According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), until October 7, 2023 and the outbreak of the war in the Gaza Strip, about 2.1 percent of the population in the Palestinian territories lived with some form of disability, affecting some 115,000 people.¹ The proportion has always been higher in the Gaza Strip than in the West Bank. The UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) reported that by the fall of 2023, 21 percent of households in Gaza included at least one person with a disability.

However, the data is not reliable. The actual percentage is likely to be much higher, not least due to a narrow, medical definition in the statistics and a widespread negative culture toward disabilities, which means that many families tend to hide information about disabled family members, especially women. International humanitarian organizations estimate that between 10–15 percent of Palestinian society lives with a disability, and according to the UN refugee agency UNRWA, the proportion in Palestinian refugee camps is just under 15 percent. Many of the

disabilities, particularly mobility impairments, are the result of war injuries – especially in the Gaza Strip – or violent conflicts in the West Bank.

According to medical examinations, as early as 2014 Israeli military operations in the coastal area had led to permanent disabilities in a third of those injured. Even though the dust has not yet settled on the war in Gaza, experts believe that the number of war-related disabilities has increased significantly due to the extensive fighting in the Gaza Strip.² The difficulty of importing medical supplies, the struggle to leave the country for treatment abroad, and the destruction of the healthcare infrastructure, from hospitals to rehabilitation centers, all add to the challenges facing disabled people in Gaza.

Within Palestinian society, persons with disabilities often also face deep-rooted social stigma and discrimination that significantly limit their participation in social life. Traditional and cultural attitudes toward disability often contribute to marginalization. About 20 percent of persons with disabilities are under the age of 18. They are often denied access to education due to a lack of resources and because of social stigmas. While the average illiteracy rate in the Palestinian territories is about two percent, it amounts to 53 percent among persons with disabilities. Almost 90 percent of persons with disabilities do not have a permanent job and many of them are affected more severely by poverty.



Mohannad works as an accessibility officer for the city administration in Ramallah. He is also the deputy head of the Palestinian Olympic Committee, an athlete and professional basketball player. He was supposed to travel to the Paralympics in Paris, but he left his place to an athlete from the Gaza Strip.

Injuries resulting from the First Intifada in the 1980s brought perspectives on and life with disabilities to the attention of many Palestinians for the first time. In 1991, the Palestinian General Union of People with Disability was founded and later became part of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). As an advocacy group, it campaigns for the implementation of the Palestinian Law on Full Equality for Persons with Disabilities (1999).

Since then, a large number of social and sociopolitical documents have been drawn up that deal with the rights of persons with disabilities: national strategies for the disability sector, inclusion in education, national health, and employment. However, implementation is still lacking. In view of the daily

challenges in the West Bank, intra-Palestinian power struggles, and a continuous economic emergency, social policy developments such as the participation of persons with disabilities are often put on the back burner.

The Palestinian Authority ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2014 and also committed to the Sustainable Development Goals and the inclusion of persons with disabilities by signing the 2030 Agenda. Among other things, the UN CRPD commits to equality in political participation.

Political participation in the Palestinian territories

The last Palestinian parliamentary elections were held in 2006. Among the Palestinian population in the occupied territories, 65 percent are under 30 years old – and have therefore never voted in their lives. Plans for national elections have been repeatedly canceled in recent years, most recently in 2021. Since the split between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in 2007, the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) has not met for a regular, joint session. The PLC was finally dissolved in 2018. Since then, President Mahmoud Abbas has ruled by presidential decree. Direct political participation is only possible at the local level. Local elections were last held at the end of 2021. Elections to student parliaments at universities in the West Bank, such as the renowned Birzeit University, are often used as a reference for the political mood within the population.

When considering the political decision-making and participation opportunities of persons with disabilities in the Palestinian territories, it is therefore relevant to shed light on physical accessibility in electoral processes at the local and national levels, as well as examples of election nominations and representation in political bodies such as city councils and political parties. The general perception and treatment of persons with disabilities in Palestinian society can also provide an insight into realities of participation.

Electoral process and accessibility

A prime example of this is Azzam Ismail – or Abu Muataz, as he is known after his first-born son – the former mayor of Al-Bireh, Ramallah’s twin city. In 2005, he ran as an independent in the local elections and was directly elected as a member of the city council. After being re-elected in 2012, the city elected him mayor in 2017. In the last local elections in 2021, he lost his post due to a change in the majority. Since then, Abu Muataz has once again been serving as an ordinary member of the city council.

When Azzam took office, he wanted to create a culture and awareness of social interaction with persons with disabilities. He insisted on increasing accessibility in the city and introduced grooved plates for blind people on public sidewalks in some places. Azzam owns two sports equipment stores, one in Ramallah and one in Jerusalem. Even as a teenager, he was a sports enthusiast, a member of the local sports club and eventually club president. In his youth, he was known as the boy in the neighborhood who rode his bike and crutches up and down the hilly streets of



Soccer fan and sports shop owner, occasional referee at basketball matches. When Azzam, a city councilor and former mayor of the city of Al-Bireh, is not fighting for the interests of his constituents, he can be found – sometimes to the chagrin of his wife – on the nearest sports field.

Al-Bireh. “My disability never stopped me,” Azzam beams. His father, in particular, used to encourage him: “Don’t be ashamed of who you are. You can do anything.”

For Azzam, his disability never was and never has been a restriction on participation or a successful political campaign. Like any politician, he is convinced that a commitment to the constituency will be rewarded with votes and political office – whether with crutches or not. According to the Central Election Commission, 92 persons with disabilities ran in the 2021 local elections, about one percent of candidates, and just under half were elected to office.

The situation is different when it comes to restrictions for voters. Many of the polling stations were not accessible, even during the last local elections almost three years ago. Azzam also believes that this prevents many people from voting. To change this, it would be necessary to increase the accessibility of buildings and set up barrier-free polling stations specifically for persons with disabilities. This is even more urgent in rural regions than in urban centers. Blind voters must bring an accompanying person to read the ballot to them.

Unrestricted political ambitions

One of these blind voters is Ziad Amr, head of the Palestine Association of Visually Impaired Persons (PAVIP) and board member responsible for persons with disabilities in the Palestinian Human Rights Commission. In a traditional Palestinian stone house from the Ottoman period in the old town of Kufr' Aqab, located in the East Jerusalem city area though on the other side of the Israeli barrier, Ziad leans his cane against the wall. He was injured in the eye during an Israeli army raid on the University of Hebron in 1987, shortly before the start of the First Intifada. "I lost the pain during the operation, but I also lost my sight," he jokes. After going blind, the former student began to campaign for the rights of persons with disabilities in the Palestinian territories.

Ziad was one of the initiators of the Palestinian General Union of People with Disability, founded in 1991, serving as its elected president until 2005 and the subsequent takeover of the union by the PLO. He was convinced that persons with disabilities should be



“A lot has happened in regard to the rights of persons with disabilities in Palestine,” says Ziad. His eventful story as a political activist and human rights campaigner shows this impressively.

represented in political bodies, but also in organizations that campaign for their rights and for general human rights. He represented the Palestinians in the negotiations on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and he was, as he proudly mentions, the driving force behind the explicit reference to the rights of persons with disabilities under military occupation in the preamble to the UN CRPD.³

At the same time, Ziad also decided to take on political responsibility. In the PLC elections in 2006, he ran on the “Independent Palestine” list, led by Mustafa Barghouti’s Palestinian National Initiative. Ziad was number nine on the list, which ultimately won two seats in parliament. Nevertheless, his candidacy was a novelty and opened up a debate even within the established Palestinian parties about persons with

disabilities and their concerns in political programs. “The fact that we were being talked about at all was already a success,” says Ziad today.

In the Legislative Council elections announced for 2021 and ultimately canceled by President Abbas, Ziad took it even further. He put together a list with and for Palestinians with disabilities and other socially disadvantaged people. In the end, the elections did not take place, but his initiative merged with other groups and is now called “Enough is enough!” (tafa7 al-qael). Its members are openly critical of the Fatah-led PA and are committed to human rights and a fair healthcare system.

Overcoming trauma and increasing visibility

Dr. Leila Atshan has a lot to say about the Palestinian healthcare system and the social impact of disabilities on young Palestinians in particular. The psychotherapist has been working for years as a trauma counselor for the UN Children’s Fund UNICEF. Atshan, whose last name means “thirsty” in Arabic, sits on the couch in her apartment in Ramallah and sips a Nescafé with cinnamon. A photo of her graduation from Harvard hangs on the wall. In the course of her work, she has been traveling a lot through the region: to Tunisia, Yemen, Iraq, and most recently, to Lebanon.

“Being born a girl in Palestine was a challenge back then. Being born a blind girl was a disaster (mzibe),” laughs Laila, who was born as one of three blind children into a refugee family of ten shortly after the founding of the state of Israel. Throughout her life,

she has dedicated herself to “keeping the candle lit” – the title of one of her TEDx Talks from 2011.⁴ After studying in the USA, she returned to the Palestinian territories in 1990 to work with young people who had been injured during the First Intifada. For many, the sudden disability meant alienation within their communities. For Laila, this was also an opportunity to create positive awareness of disability, “because these young people were heroes in the eyes of many Palestinians.” Overcoming this alienation and invisibility of persons with disabilities is one of the first steps toward increased political participation.

In recent years, numerous civil society organizations have stepped up their efforts to give persons with disabilities a voice. Thus, for instance, KAS partner Palestine Vision has worked with the Bihimitkom (Arabic for “with your commitment”) initiative to promote the participation of persons with disabilities in political processes at the local and national levels through training and awareness-raising campaigns, encouraging young people in particular and breaking down existing barriers.

Small steps on the way to greater participation

Despite the successes already achieved, the path to political participation for persons with disabilities in the Palestinian territories remains full of obstacles. While individuals like Mohannad and Abu Muataz are breaking through barriers with their commitment, Palestinian society still faces major challenges. Steep stairs, a lack of ramps, and often society ducking away are physical and symbolic hurdles that make integration and participation difficult. But there is hope,

because civil society and political involvement, as well as the stories of those people who fight for their rights despite all resistance are signs of change. “We need political representation,” says Mohannad from the Ramallah municipal administration, “for the perspective of persons with disabilities in shaping political decisions” and in order to see what others may not be able to see. The realization of the UN CRPD remains an achievable goal – one that could reshape the social landscape of the Palestinian territories.

Simon Engelkes

Head of KAS Office Palestinian Territories



- 1 Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) 2023 Press Release on the Occasion of the International Day of Persons with Disabilities: <https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/post.aspx?lang=en&ItemID=4648> (last accessed November 15, 2024). Upon inquiry by KAS, the Bethlehem Arab Society for Rehabilitation stated that when conducting surveys in 2011/12 in the Palestinian territories based on the concepts and definitions (broad definition: "difficulty"; narrow definition "disability") set out by the Washington Group on Disability Statistics and the World Health Organization, the prevalence of disability among persons in the West Bank and Gaza Strip was approx. 7 percent (broad definition) and less than 3 percent (narrow definition).
- 2 As early as the beginning of 2024, the UN Children's Fund UNICEF stated that over 1,000 minors in the Gaza Strip had lost one or both of their legs as a result of the fighting. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/12/1144927> (last accessed November 15, 2024).
- 3 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: <https://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf> (last accessed November 15, 2024).
- 4 Laila Atshan 2011. Keeping the Candle Lit, TEDxRamallah: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9uDEVlOUxUI> (last accessed November 15, 2024).

Czech Republic

For a long time, Central Eastern Europe was a late-comer with regard to recognizing the rights of persons with disabilities, including the right to vote. Although the right to vote has of course existed for all Czech citizens aged 18 and older since the democratic upheaval at the beginning of the 1990s, there has often been a lack of uncomplicated access to the ballot box for persons with disabilities. A lot has happened in the Czech Republic in recent years.

Today translation of important political speeches, press conferences, and public announcements in the media in sign language is a matter of course. Election debates, election advertising, etc. are also broadcast in sign language or with subtitles.

Many government services can be accessed digitally from anywhere. Identification takes place in a multi-stage process using security codes, bank tan/pin systems, and SMS confirmations. However, persons with disabilities cannot vote digitally in the European elections, and voting by mail is also not possible in the Czech Republic. Nevertheless, progress is being made: The Ministry of the Interior is asking local authorities to select polling stations with accessibility in mind. If in the building a physical barrier exists that cannot be removed, people with reduced mobility can vote in the polling station with assistance from another voter provided by them or by using of a portable ballot box outside the building. If voters are

unable to visit the polling station in their respective locality, they can vote at home under the supervision of a representative of the electoral commission.

Visually impaired persons are supported on site and can exercise their right to vote with the help of an assistant. Voting documents in plain language are also available if required.

The Czech Republic has come closer to the standards for supporting persons with disabilities in many respects. Today an understanding exists of the rights and limitations of these people.

Often the issue is not a lack of will, but a lack of funding, for example, of local authorities in order to enable modern standards of barrier-free accessibility in the beautiful, sometimes centuries-old listed buildings. New public buildings, schools, universities, city halls, etc., which have sprung up in many places in recent years, incorporate these accessibility criteria into their design and offer good access across the board (whether at elections or in everyday life) to make it easier for persons with disabilities to get around, which is often difficult anyway.

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Tereza Domkářová



Armenia

Political and Social Participation of Persons with Disabilities – A Meeting in Yerevan

In Armenia, it is still difficult for persons with disabilities to participate in social life and particularly, in political life. Although the government is trying to improve the situation, the obstacles that persons with disabilities, officially almost 174,000, face in everyday and political life continue to be enormous. Fortunately, there are organizations working toward change. As representatives of the South Caucasus Regional Political Dialogue Program, we visited one of them – We Can. Armine Sahakyan, chair of We Can, spoke to us about her work and the challenges for the political participation of persons with disabilities in Armenia.

A few words on the Global Disability Summit

This report was written as part of the preparations for the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V.'s application to participate in the Global Disability Summit, taking place in Berlin from April 2–3, 2025. The photos in this report were taken during our visit to the We Can organization.

Legal regulations and new laws – on political participation

Armenia distinguishes between persons with disabilities in five categories: visually impaired, mentally/psychologically impaired, hearing impaired, motor impaired, and chronically ill. This categorization helps record more accurately the needs of those affected.



Photo wall in the We Can office.



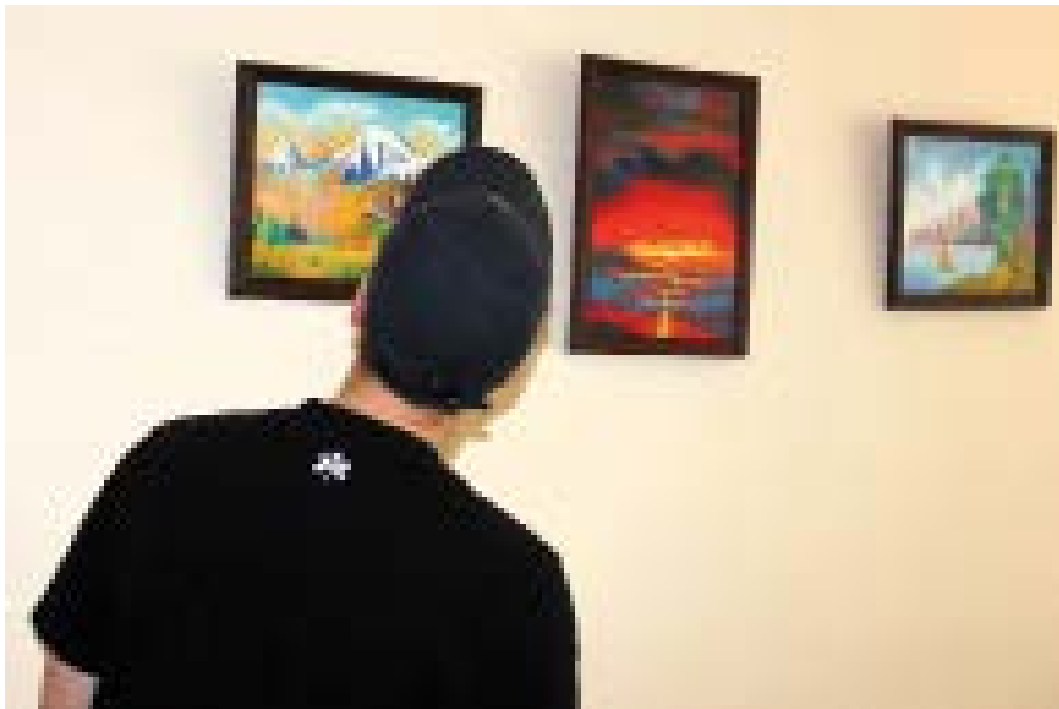
Armine Sahakyan in conversation with the KAS team.

As of July 1, 2024, almost 174,000 persons with disabilities were registered in Armenia, including 23,084 with mental and behavioral disorders.¹ Since February 2023, the Armenian Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs has had a new data collection and categorization system in place that anonymizes and individually evaluates a person's abilities.² The aim of this system is to enable a more precise assessment of support needs in order to improve access to rights and services for the target group.

Despite some progress in legislation, such as the adoption of a law to strengthen the rights of persons with disabilities in 2021,³ political participation of the disabled in Armenia remains a major challenge. Although the country has ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, there are still legal, infrastructural, and technical barriers that prevent equal participation in political life. Some persons with disabilities are only able to exercise their democratic rights to a limited extent due to these barriers.

Although persons with disabilities have the right to vote in Armenia, this can be restricted by court decisions. If people are classified as "incapacitated," they lose the right to participate in elections. The procedure for determining "incapacity" is initiated at the request of a family member, a guardianship authority, or a psychiatric organization.⁴

Activists emphasize that this form of classification has serious consequences and affects not only legal status but also social standing. Often, such a person



Florian Binder (trainee) looking at works of art created as part of the We Can activities.

is also not seen as a full member by their family and by society, which has a long-term impact on that individual's self-confidence and social participation.

The Armenian Ombudsman Institute explained to us in a personal conversation that this so-called “incapacity test” is to be reformed. As part of the planned changes, blanket judgments about a person's “incapacity” will no longer be allowed in future. Instead, a new system is to be introduced that classifies disabilities in degrees. This innovation could help to give persons with disabilities in Armenia more rights and freedoms, but it remains to be seen what concrete impact this will have on their political participation.

Another obstacle to the political participation of persons with disabilities is limited access to assistive technologies. One example of this is the Armenian

government's "e-draft" web portal⁵, which enables citizens to find out about new legislative initiatives and take part in public consultations. This platform is in itself a positive example of greater government transparency. However, it lacks barrier-free accessibility, as there are neither read-aloud functions nor summaries in plain language. This means that people with certain disabilities have no or only difficult access to this information and are therefore excluded from important political processes.

The situation is similarly problematic when it comes to accessibility at polling stations. Many polling stations in Armenia are not accessible for persons with disabilities. There are no ramps, the polling booths are often too narrow for wheelchair users, and there is a lack of special aids such as magnifying glasses or other devices that would enable people with visual impairments to vote independently. This represents a significant obstacle to political participation.

Progress was made at the beginning of 2024 when a law took effect granting persons with disabilities the right to personal assistance services. It states that persons with disabilities are entitled to support in the form of personal assistance to help them cope with everyday tasks and thus facilitate their participation in social life. The original plan was to include 2,450 people in the program, but so far only 100 people have benefited from this offer. However, the government has announced that it will increase the number of beneficiaries if demand increases.⁶



Florian Binder and the We Can employees on a tour of the We Can premises.

Although it is still too early to assess the impact of this new regulation, experts are already pointing out that it may not go far enough to break down the existing structural barriers. Nevertheless, this measure signals the Armenian government's growing interest in improving the social participation of persons with disabilities. One must emphasize though that inclusion and political participation of persons with disabilities are not yet among the top priorities of the political agenda in Armenia.

Commitment to participation – a visit to We Can

However, there are organizations committed to the rights of persons with disabilities that try to expand their opportunities for participation. One of these organizations already carries its claim in the name: We Can.

As part of our research for this report, we visited the NGO and spoke to its chair, Armine Sahakyan, about her work, the challenges in Armenia, and the importance of political and social inclusion – also for her personally:

When we arrive at the modest premises of We Can, four women, all smiles, extend a warm welcome to us. Three of them are the founders of We Can, the fourth will translate into English for us. She has a hearing impairment and follows our conversation by lip-reading.

Armine tells the story of We Can. Founded in 2013, it brings together parents and relatives of persons with disabilities as well as people who are themselves affected by disabilities. The goals they have set themselves are diverse and ambitious: They defend the political and social rights of persons with disabilities, carry out extensive educational work, and place a special focus on the development of educational offers, both analog and digital.

We Can visits schools, offers workshops for persons with disabilities, develops specialized web portals for this target group, and organizes training seminars, for example in photography. The organization strives to empower persons with disabilities in all areas of life.



KAS team and employees of the We Can NGO.

Information is crucial – web portals for political education

For Armine, it is also a personal story. Her 25-year-old son has a mental disability and can only read and write a little. Nevertheless, he wanted to cast his vote in the Yerevan mayoral elections in 2023. Armine says that this surprised her. But after considering for a moment, she realized that this was the logical next step in her long-standing commitment to her son's social inclusion. It was also a moment of reflection: In all her years of activism, she had campaigned for many rights of persons with disabilities, but the right to vote had taken a back seat.

Armine therefore decided to support her son's wish.

With the help of his sister and the aforementioned personal assistant, her son finally cast his vote. To his delight, the candidate he had chosen won. This

experience was also a point of rethinking for Armine. She describes it as “breaking a stereotype” in her family. As a mother, but also as a citizen, this experience showed her that naturally her son also has the right to vote and that exercising it is important to him.

For We Can, these and other personal experiences were a source of professional inspiration as well. The staff wondered how to make knowledge about society and politics, essential for participation, easily accessible to people with intellectual disabilities. The solution they decided on was the establishment of three different online information portals, so-called AREGAKs (Armenian for sun).

Each AREGAK portal addresses a different target group. The first⁷ is aimed at children of elementary school age and provides general knowledge. The second,⁸ “My Rights,” provides information in plain language on the rights of persons with disabilities, but also on human rights in general. The third,⁹ “My right to choose,” is the centerpiece and explicitly aimed at increasing political participation. It is directed at people of voting age who have an intellectual disability or learning difficulties. Here, users are informed in plain language and with clear images and symbols about how social participation is possible.

The employees of We Can explain to us that the playful approach in all three portals is particularly suitable for imparting knowledge. The NGO is a pioneer in this respect; similar concepts or offers did not previously exist in Armenia.

The interaction of the AREGAKs makes it possible to convey complex content in a way that builds on each other. The content also provides a basis for the political participation of persons with disabilities.

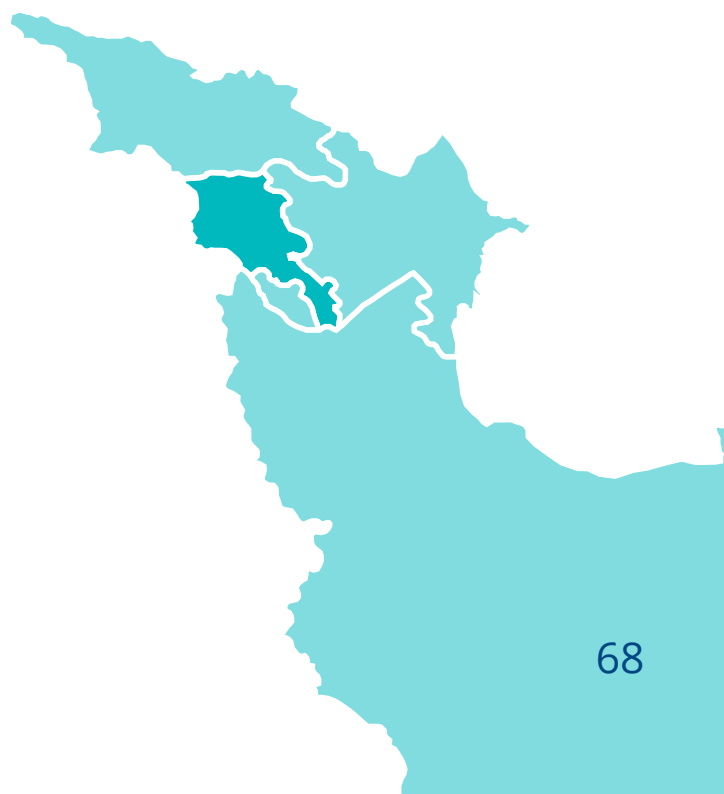
In the meantime, all three portals and their content have been recognized as official teaching materials by the Armenian Ministry of Education. A great success, but only a start.

Still a long way to go

The conditions for increased social and political participation of persons with disabilities in Armenia are in place. Inclusive laws exist, outdated classification patterns are being reformed, and several organizations are campaigning for the rights of persons with disabilities. Nevertheless, our interviewees describe that not much has changed in society so far. Thus, there is still a long way to go toward achieving comprehensive inclusion and participation of persons with disabilities in Armenia. It would be important for Armenia's international partners to engage more intensively in these issues.

Florian Binder

Regional Programme Political Dialogue
South Caucasus



- 1 Hasmik Bali (2024): Disabled People Avoid Personal Assistant Service | Aliq Media Armenia (last accessed October 14, 2024).
- 2 Arka News Agency (2023): New disability assessment system to be introduced in Armenia (ar-ka.am) (last accessed October 14, 2024).
- 3 Anahit Chilingaryan (2021): Important Progress for Persons with disabilities in Armenia | Human Rights Watch (hrw.org) (last accessed October 14, 2024).
- 4 §249, Civil Procedure Code of the Republic of Armenia.
- 5 Unified Website for Publication of Legal Acts' Drafts (e-draft.am) (last accessed October 14, 2024).
- 6 Gayane Sargsyan (2024): Issues with personal assistants for disabled in Armenia JAMnews (jam-news.net) (last accessed October 14, 2024).
- 7 <https://www.aregak.online/> (last accessed October 14, 2024).
- 8 <https://right.aregak.online/> (last accessed October 14, 2024).
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Bulgaria

Voting by mail is not an option in Bulgaria. However, Bulgarians living abroad can vote in polling stations specially set up in the respective countries. It is possible to vote both with voting machines (voting computers) and alternatively with paper ballots.

Polling stations are not generally barrier-free; special polling stations equipped with ramps are set up for people with physical disabilities. Disabled people who are unable to exercise their right to vote at a local polling station can apply to the mayor for a mobile ballot box, provided that such a service is available in the municipality. They will then be visited at home. For blind or visually impaired people, audio players with information and lists of the parties and coalitions in braille can be offered as an option outside the polling stations. Election documents in braille or stencils are not available.

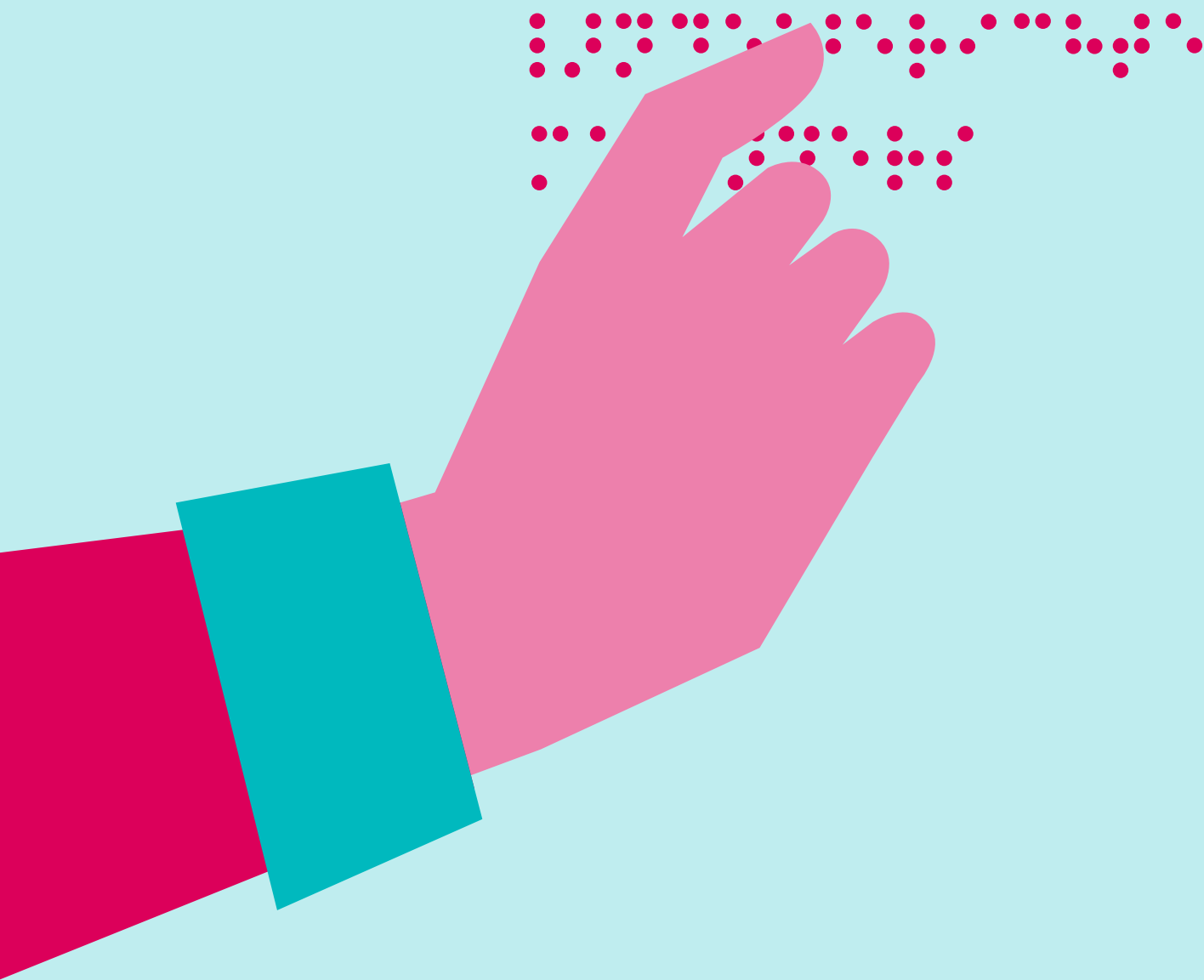
If voters are unable to carry out the required actions, an assistant may also enter the polling booth to provide support. If voters are able to vote themselves, the assistant may only accompany them to the polling booth. If voters are unable to sign the electoral roll themselves, a member of the electoral commission signs in their place. Illiteracy is not a reason for allowing an assistant in Bulgaria.

Election documents in plain language are not offered in Bulgaria. Election programs are subtitled for deaf people on TV, albeit very rarely. There has not yet been any translation using sign language.

Norbert Beckmann-Dierkes

Head of KAS Office Bulgaria





Jordan

Political Participation for All – Legal Progress and Practical Hurdles

Since a royal reform initiative in 2011, Jordan has been striving to gradually increase the participation of its citizens in the political system. The new legal framework has also brought improvements for persons with disabilities – and more attention to their political participation rights. This momentum must now be used to make progress in everyday reality. Inclusion of persons with disabilities remains a challenge for the Hashemite Kingdom, not only politically but also in socioeconomic terms.

More democracy through inclusion

For years, there had been growing signs in the Hashemite Kingdom that citizens were dissatisfied with the state of their country. Although hardly anyone questioned the monarchy, complaints about an entrenched power elite, corruption, and an inefficient state apparatus had become increasingly loud. Participation in the 2020 parliamentary elections had slipped below 30 percent, and trust in political institutions was at an all-time low according to all polls. In the summer of 2021, King Abdullah II, who has ruled the country since 1999, struck a liberating blow: He appointed a high-caliber reform committee to draw up proposals on how political life in the kingdom could be reorganized. The core idea was to strengthen parliament and parties and make them more representative. The participation of the population in the political system was to be increased, especially for women and young people.



Ahmad Abu-Rayan, an alumnus of the KAS seminar on political participation, as an election observer at a polling station during the parliamentary elections in Jordan on September 10, 2024.

The legal framework for political participation, which was then reformed in the course of 2022, also brought improvements for persons with disabilities. Since then, the constitution has explicitly stipulated that their rights must be protected and their “participation and inclusion in various areas of life” must be promoted. According to the new Political Parties Act, political parties must have at least 1,000 members, 20 percent of whom must be female and under 35 years of age – and one member with a disability. In addition, parties receive a bonus in state party funding if a member of parliament with a disability enters parliament for a particular party.

These regulations moved the issue of the political participation of persons with disabilities much more into the public eye than before and also into the



Participants sign applause at a Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung seminar on “Leadership & Advocacy” for persons with disabilities in Amman in August 2024.

political arena. The Independent Electoral Commission worked intensively on the issue and endeavored to ensure accessible polling stations and raise awareness on all sides. The responsible government agency, the Higher Council for Persons with Disabilities (HCD), together with a number of international organizations, including the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, launched a package of measures in advance to provide persons with disabilities with political training and a platform for political debates.

Shortcomings in implementation and structural challenges While all of this can be assessed as progress, it remains very limited in political and social practice. In fact, most of the 38 parties registered in Jordan have only one legally required member with a disability; only one party has more than a dozen. Less than

a third of the parties address the issue of persons with disabilities in their platforms. Of the 1,634 candidates in the 2024 parliamentary election, only six had a disability, none of whom managed to enter the House of Representatives. The number of accessible polling stations compared to the previous election was increased from 23 to 95, out of a total of 1,649 polling stations. However, the possible change of polling stations planned, i. e., from a non-accessible to an accessible one, failed due to a lack of information and because of technical glitches. Missing data also meant that voters with disabilities could not be targeted on a large scale. Ultimately, only about one percent of voters with disabilities (some 15,000) cast their vote, compared to a general voter turnout of approx. 32 percent.

The political participation of persons with disabilities is hindered as well by structural factors to which this population group is exposed in Jordan. These include high healthcare costs, difficulties in finding work, and the above-average risk of being exposed to domestic violence. Barriers in the education system are particularly problematic. While over eleven percent of the Jordanian population has a disability, the Ministry of Education estimates the proportion of students with disabilities at just two percent. With regard to the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the labor market, it is clear that quota regulations require accompanying measures to overcome barriers that stand in the way of inclusion. For example, an amendment to the law in 2017 established a quota for employees with disabilities. In practice, however, only a small

proportion of workplaces are barrier-free. As a result, persons with disabilities compete with each other for these accessible jobs.

International networking and exchange of experiences at the Mult-Regional Global Disability Pre-Summit in Amman on 14 November 2024: Dr. Edmund Ratka and Hala Abu-Gazaleh from KAS Jordan, Kathrin Heinrichs from the CDU North Rhine-Westphalia and Prince Mired bin Ra'ad, President of the Jordanian Higher Council for Persons with Disability.

Using the political momentum and putting it into practice! In some areas of legal protection for persons with disabilities, Jordan already plays a pioneering role, for example, in the inclusion of this group in civil protection. The fact that these people also have political rights was made clear by Jordan long before the "political modernization," for example, through the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2008. With the current "political modernization," there is now a new momentum for inclusion that needs to be used!

At a legal level, there are still some provisions that require reviewing, such as the fundamental non-recognition of the right to vote for people with intellectual disabilities. It is also worth discussing whether – as with respect to women, young people, and ethnic minorities – a quota system for persons with disabilities in parliamentary elections would be helpful. More important, however, is a fundamentally

better integration of persons with disabilities into Jordanian society. Socioeconomic and political participation are mutually reinforcing!

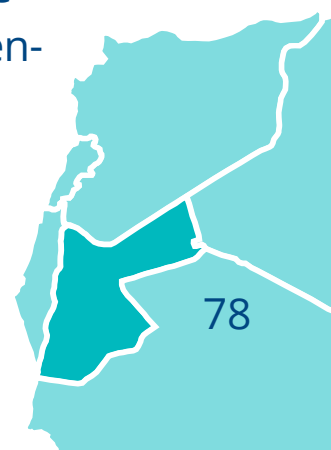
A comprehensive approach is therefore needed that understands the rights of persons with disabilities as an indivisible overall package. Those who have better access to education and who develop their personality in a professional and social environment can also be more politically active. The stronger presence of persons with disabilities in everyday life and in public will ultimately also contribute to a change in perception among the population as a whole, which will affirm inclusion as a positive element and contribute to it.

There is now momentum for this in Jordan: the six, predominantly young, parliamentary candidates with disabilities, four of whom are women, can act as role models and motivate others to get involved in politics. Strengthening the political participation of persons with disabilities is one of the recommendations of the EU Election Observation Mission, the implementation of which is politically important for Jordan. The Kingdom is also co-hosting the Global Disability Summit, which will take place in Berlin in April 2025. “Political modernization” is an opportunity to make the political system more inclusive – for all citizens of the country. This opportunity must be seized, especially for persons with disabilities, so that their potential can be fully realized in politics.

Edmund Ratka

Head of KAS Office Jordan

Simela Papatheophilou





Kenya

Political Participation of Persons with Disabilities in Kenya

In spring 2024, a law was passed to improve the political representation of persons with disabilities in the two chambers of the Republic of Kenya. In view of continuing marked prejudices against persons with disabilities in Kenyan society, this is a step in the right direction, but further measures and broader support are needed.

The situation of persons with disabilities in Kenya

About 40 percent of people in Kenya live in poverty, 20 million in absolute terms.¹ Persons with disabilities are disproportionately more affected by this poverty; they are frequently marginalized and often unable to actively participate in social life. According to official figures from 2020, at least one million people in Kenya are currently living with a disability; at the time of the survey, this would correspond to just 2 percent of the total population.² The WHO, for example, assumes a global average of 16 percent, so the number of unreported cases in Kenya is likely to be much higher.³ This discrepancy between the existing and expected data situation already indicates the difficult situation of persons with disabilities in Kenya.

The persistent stigmatization and superstition toward persons with disabilities is particularly serious in Kenya, especially among the poorer, rural population. Disabilities of all kinds are sometimes seen as a “punishment from God” for sins. In the case of affected children, superstitious people attribute the reason for the disability to any sins committed by the mother, father, or even distant relatives. Persons with a



Isaac Mwaura and Prof. Dr. Lammert at the staff conference of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in Nairobi 2024.

mental disability are even perceived by some as “possessed.” The lack of information and unavailable medical professionals in rural areas often drive families of persons with disabilities to self-proclaimed “healing priests” or “shamans” who offer highly questionable healing methods. As this cannot make a mental disability or physical limitations disappear into thin air, the family usually comes to terms with the situation. Unfortunately, however, it also happens that children with a disability in particular are hidden away by the family. Family members with a disability often receive only the smallest share of the already scarce resources. Due to this neglect, they often do not get the benefit of an education, let alone a permanent job later on. Even if a family is financially able and willing to enable a child with a visual impairment, for example, to attend school, almost no school in rural areas is equipped to provide an appropriate learning environment. There is

not only a lack of learning materials in braille, but also an absence of appropriate teacher training. Many persons with disabilities are therefore dependent on intensive family support for the rest of their lives.

Meanwhile, the situation in Kenya's urban areas is not much better. The advantage there, however, is the fact that fewer people in the cities have superstitious ideas about disabilities. In addition, there are counseling services for persons with disabilities in the larger cities, schools with appropriate material and personnel capacities, and generally more advanced healthcare and infrastructure.

Civil society organizations, such as United Disabled Persons of Kenya, play an important role in supporting persons with disabilities, offering advice and support. Many organizations that specialize in this work are also led by persons with disabilities and are actively involved in the country's sociopolitical discourse. In addition to civil society groups, there are also state-organized bodies, such as the National Council for Persons with Disabilities (NCPWD),⁴ which has been advocating for the rights of persons with disabilities since 2004. Meanwhile, the Kenya Institute of Special Education advocates for the provision of educational capacities for persons with disabilities. The Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Development is mainly responsible for government support; in addition to the two institutions mentioned, it also operates a number of training centers for persons with disabilities. Particularly thanks to the work of

the aforementioned actors, improving the situation of persons with disabilities is repeatedly placed on the political agenda.

Political participation

The aforementioned law to strengthen the political representation of persons with disabilities amends some articles of the constitution and thus creates a total of 21 seats in both chambers of the legislature for persons with disabilities.⁵ However, these seats are not filled through the usual electoral process, but by the parties on the basis of their proportional strength. This approach is a good interim solution, particularly in view of the persistently difficult position of persons with disabilities in Kenyan society, and it is currently also being used to strengthen the representation of women. As soon as acceptance among the population has increased, it will hopefully be possible to introduce a quota by regular procedure, although this will still take some time and educational work due to intense stigmatization. The participation of persons with disabilities must also be given greater consideration in other areas of Kenya's political landscape, for example in the organization of elections or in the functioning of political parties.

The 2022 elections

The 2022 elections were the first in Kenya's history in which the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) published statistics revealing how many persons with disabilities registered to vote. According to the IEBC, persons with disabilities made

up 8.7 percent of the electorate, a figure that is significantly closer to the WHO average than the figures from the official 2020 survey.⁶

Participation in the elections, however, was marked by many difficulties; polling stations were often structurally inaccessible for people with reduced mobility.⁷ A lack of elevators at polling stations on higher floors, general structural defects, high door thresholds, narrow entrances and corridors, or no facilities for people with visual impairments were just some of the problems.⁸ The voting booths were also inadequate, as they were too narrow or too high to provide adequate access for people who had to vote sitting down. Those affected often had to rely on the improvised help of their fellow citizens. Overall, almost one in five polling stations were located on higher floors and were therefore difficult to access. Considering the other hurdles described, almost no polling station was adequately equipped for voters with disabilities.⁹ Another alarming problem was that in some cases, where voters needed assistance in casting their votes, a large group of unauthorized persons observed the process from close up, which meant that in some cases the secrecy of the ballot could not be maintained.¹⁰

In most cases, however, at least a minimum level of support was provided, albeit usually in a very improvised manner. In most cases, polling station staff enabled persons with disabilities as well as pregnant women and the elderly to prioritize voting, thus avoiding extremely long waiting times for these people. Instructions on the voting process, for example, were also communicated in writing or, in rare cases, using

sign language, improvised ramps or ad hoc rooms on the ground floor enabled people with limited mobility to vote.

The approach, often improvised, shows that inclusion is by and large a marginal issue in Kenya. This important issue, which directly affects almost one in ten voters, was not taken into account when planning the election. However, the publication of statistics on the participation of persons with disabilities for the first time gives hope that the Electoral Commission will do more to address the numerous shortcomings in the 2027 election. To ensure this, pressure from civil society, but especially from politicians, should increase, as the latter unfortunately do not do too well themselves when it comes to the participation of persons with disabilities.

Career in political parties

Kenya's Political Parties Act of 2011 sets out the framework conditions for the parties' work. Article 21 mentions that political parties should represent special interest groups, but special interest groups are defined quite broadly and there is no obligation to have a specific quota.¹¹ Furthermore, all relevant formulations in the law are worded in such a way that no clear legal entitlement arises. Only Articles 4 and 5 of the Code of Conduct for Political Parties require parties to uphold and support the right to participation of people from the Special Interest Groups.¹² The concerns of persons with disabilities therefore only play a secondary role in the legal basis for party

work in Kenya, and this is reflected in most parties, where the issue is often only treated as a secondary concern.

One of the biggest obstacles to greater participation of persons with disabilities in political decision-making is the widespread discrimination against them. Unfortunately, superstition, prejudice, and disdain can also be found in political parties; party colleagues often consider the skills of persons with disabilities to be categorically worse than those of people without disabilities. In addition to the already significant disadvantage caused by discrimination in election campaigns, this leads to further structural disadvantage in intra-party competition. Particularly at the state level and wherever a strict legal framework is lacking, party positions specifically for persons with disabilities are sometimes even filled with people who do not have a disability at all.¹³ Another hurdle is the average worse economic situation of persons with disabilities; they are disproportionately affected by poverty and are often particularly dependent on the support of their families. On the other hand, aspiring to a political function in Kenya, whether within the party structure or in the legislature, is very costly and in most cases reserved for the country's upper class. In addition to this financial deficit, there is often an educational disadvantage; as already mentioned, it is particularly difficult for persons with disabilities to receive a good formal education, whether due to a lack of opportunities or a lack of support.

As party positions, list places, and party resources are almost always tied to power-calculating considerations, they are often awarded to those members who have the best chances of mobilizing many voters of their ethnic group, those who can contribute special financial resources, or simply family members of leading party leaders.¹⁴ Particularly in the less enlightened rural regions, the pervasive discrimination against persons with disabilities means that they are almost never given the opportunity to take on a role for their party, let alone run in an election campaign. The average poorer economic starting position does the rest, also preventing advancement outside of the campaign logic.

These problems explain why few persons with disabilities take on leadership roles in most political parties in Kenya. Some of the more prominent parties have created committees for persons with disabilities, but often these committees are unable to fulfill their tasks. This is mostly due to lack of funding or lack of human capacity.

However, various bodies, including the Office of Registrar of Political Parties (ORPP), are trying to improve the participation of persons with disabilities through education and training. The goal of strengthening the political participation of persons with disabilities is anchored in the strategic plan of the state institution, and just recently further materials were published to better prepare interested individuals for leadership roles in Kenya's political landscape.¹⁵ However, such top-level support cannot bring about a general political change and at the same time change in social

culture; accordingly, many further efforts are needed to consolidate the participation of persons with disabilities in Kenya's political parties and ensure that their voices and concerns are prominently heard.

Conclusion

Persons with disabilities are structurally disadvantaged in Kenya. At a societal level, they are often seen as less capable, and discrimination goes much further in less enlightened population strata. Together with the mostly inadequate infrastructure, which further restricts the opportunities of persons with disabilities, this makes it particularly difficult for them to access the basic requirements for political participation. This problem is particularly evident in elections, but the power-calculating logic of politics also leaves little room for persons with disabilities to get involved. Although civil society and state actors as well as some political parties are making explicit efforts to strengthen the representation of persons with disabilities, the political culture and widespread social discrimination prevent real equality of opportunity. To strengthen the participation of persons with disabilities in political processes, laws such as the one on greater representation in the two chambers of the Kenyan legislature are a step in the right direction. However, individual members of parliament will hardly be able to bring about a major change in social and political culture on their own and at the same time eliminate the structural shortcomings, particularly in the poorest areas. Achieving this goal requires above all time as well as continuous pressure and support of these politicians by civil society. Prominent politicians with disabilities, such as Isaac Mwaura,

Kenya's current government spokesperson, are key figures in this regard. Already a strong advocate for persons with disabilities in Kenya, he is also co-founder of the Albinism Society of Kenya as well as founder of an extra-parliamentary group, the Kenya Disability Parliamentary Association, for MPs with disabilities. Personalities such as Isaac Mwaura serve as role models and inspiration and can ensure that the issue is always on the agenda. Provided that Kenyan politicians do not shy away from further legislative adjustments, things can certainly change for the better in the medium term.

Jan-Ole Voß

Deputy Head of the Kenya Office and Project Manager



- 1 The World Bank: Kenya Poverty and Equity Assessment 2023, p. 1.
- 2 Government of Kenya: The State of Kenya Population 2020, p 1.
- 3 WHO: Disability, 2023, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/disability-and-health>, October 10, 2024 (last accessed February 07, 2025).
- 4 NCPWD: <https://ncpwd.go.ke/> (last accessed February 07, 2025).
- 5 Kenya Gazette Supplement No. 73, 2024.
- 6 UDPK: Audit of the 9 August 2022 General Election, 2023, p. 27.
- 7 Ibid., p. 28.
- 8 Ibid., p. 31.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 The Political Parties Act, No. 11 of 2011, revised edition 2022, Article 21-1-h, p. 17.
- 12 Ibid., Code of Conduct for Political Parties, Article 4-d & 5-a, p. 34.
- 13 The State of Political Inclusion of Persons with Disability (PWDs) within Political parties in Kenya, 2020, p. 42.
- 14 Ibid., p. 31 ff.
- 15 ORPP Kenya: Strategic Plan 2020–2025, p. 5.

France

In France, it is a legal requirement for polling stations and technology to be accessible to all, regardless of disability.

Polling stations in France are located in public buildings such as schools and city halls, which must be sufficiently barrier-free. French citizens living abroad can vote in their embassies and consulates. This means that all polling stations are generally accessible to people with reduced mobility.

As far as voting is concerned, no online voting or voting by mail are available in France. The only alternative to appearing in person at the polling station is to authorize a trusted person by going to a police or gendarmerie station to issue the proxy. Issuing a proxy is made easier for persons with disabilities: In order to issue the proxy, a representative of the police can go to the home of the person who is unable to get around due to illness or a severe disability.

For voters who do have access to the polling station but are unable to go into the polling booth alone, to place the ballot in the envelope, and to drop the envelope into the ballot box, the law provides for the option that these people can be accompanied by another voter at all stages of the voting process.

In terms of accessibility to election information, two weeks before the election, the French Ministry of the Interior sends out information on the parties officially

registered for the election (Programme des candidats aux élections – Accueil (interieur.gouv.fr)) and the ballots in paper form to every registered voter. The Ministry compiles the manifestos of the parties and party alliances on its website, with each list having the option of providing a document with audio description accessible to blind people and a version in plain language. In practice, however, of the 38 lists competing in the European elections, only three lists have made their manifestos available in all versions for maximum inclusion.

All information on the elections for people with a disability can be found on the following website of the French Ministry of the Interior:

<https://www.elections.interieur.gouv.fr/comprendre-elections/comment-je-vote/vote-des-personnes-en-situation-de-handicap-laccessibilite-des>

Anja Czymmeck

Head of KAS Office France



Israel

Political Participation of Persons with Disabilities

In recent years, there have been more parliamentary elections in Israel than is usually the case in democracies. Israelis have been called to cast their votes a total of five times in the last five years. It goes without saying that people in Israel who are disabled in any way have the inalienable right and opportunity to vote and be elected. This is enshrined as well in the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which Israel ratified in 2012. Israeli electoral law also stipulates that every Israeli citizen who is 18 years of age or older has the right to vote in elections to the Israeli parliament, the Knesset, and to run for a seat at the age of 21.

In Israel, a lot has been done for years to ensure that persons with disabilities can also participate in elections without further restrictions. The political participation of persons with disabilities is enshrined in laws and guidelines in Israel. At the same time, there are the same or at least similar discussions in Israel about the social and political participation of persons with disabilities as in other Western democracies. In Israel, for example, shortcomings in terms of barrier-free access and the accessibility of public facilities are repeatedly addressed. In 2021, there were increased protests across the country in which people blocked railroad lines or highways in order to push for an increase in state aid for persons with disabilities. In public reporting, topics such as equal opportunities or the integration of persons with disabilities into the labor market are also repeatedly discussed. At the

same time, there is a particular sensitivity toward persons with disabilities in Israel – not least due to a higher number of war invalids or victims of terrorist attacks. Not only are there a large number of charitable institutions involved in this area, but Israeli society likewise displays a great willingness to help in various everyday situations. The 2021 protests were successful as well. The government provided 300 million shekels for the treatment of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) and also hired additional civil servants in this field.

Moreover, various aspects and initiatives exist in Israel that can be seen as progressive and innovative: For example, Israelis with a disability cannot be obliged to perform military service,¹ but they can volunteer despite having a severe disability. Numerous units of the Israeli army (IDF) are open to them. One impressive example is the deaf, later Knesset member Shirly Pinto, who first served as a conscript in the Israeli Air Force for two years and then became an officer. The 120 members of the Knesset have always included politicians with disabilities. For example, Karine Elharrar, MP and former Minister of Energy and Water Supply, is dependent on the use of a wheelchair due to a muscular disorder. The long-standing Meretz MP Ilan Gilon, who had a walking disability due to polio as a child, was a member of the Knesset for over 15 years and therefore well known to many Israelis.

As far as political participation is concerned, particularly in the context of elections, various laws are in effect in Israel that create a legal basis for this. For example, the Election Law² stipulates that every

polling station must feature at least one polling booth that is accessible to voters with reduced mobility. In larger towns and villages, there must be at least one accessible polling booth per 10,000 residents. The 2022 elections for the 25th Knesset featured 5,265 polling booths overall in which people with reduced mobility were able to vote independently.³ Furthermore, 2,979 designated polling stations are specially designed to be barrier-free. Hospitals feature polling stations specifically furnished to ensure that the right to vote can be exercised there as well.⁴

In view of the many challenges that Israel is currently facing, the political participation of persons with disabilities does not always play a central role. In addition, the number of persons with disabilities living in Israel is significantly lower than in the European Union. In the EU, an average of 27 percent – over a quarter of the population – have a physical or mental disability.⁵ In Israel, on the other hand, according to public statistics, one fifth of the population has a physical or mental disability.⁶

Nevertheless, there is of course room for further development and improvement in Israel, too. Persons with disabilities need special support, especially in times of war. For example, reaching a shelter in the event of a missile alert is a major and often insurmountable challenge.⁷ Although debates about this issue take place in the Israeli public, they are not

always a top priority. Despite – or perhaps because of – the challenging times, this topic deserves more attention and addressing it belongs on the political agenda

Michael Rimmel

Head of KAS Office Israel

Johannes Sosada



- 1 In Israel, compulsory military service is obligatory for men (36 months) and women (24 months).
- 2 Knesset Election Law 5729-1969.
- 3 <https://www.gov.il/en/pages/knesset25-elections-info?chapterIndex=8> (last accessed October 14, 2024).
- 4 <https://www.gov.il/en/pages/knesset25-elections-info?chapterIndex=3> (last accessed October 14, 2024).
- 5 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/disability-eu-facts-figures/#:~:text=How%20many%20people%20have%20a,people%20adults%20in%20the%20EU> (last accessed October 14, 2024).
- 6 https://www.gov.il/en/pages/pwd_israel_2021_statistics (last accessed October 14, 2024).
- 7 Depending on the part of the country, you have between 15 and 90 seconds to reach a shelter. Not everyone has a shelter in their own home but instead must either go to a communal shelter in the building or a public shelter in the neighborhood.



Colombia

Political Participation of Persons with Disabilities

The legal guarantee of political participation for persons with disabilities is well advanced in Colombia – at least on paper. However, as in many other policy areas, practical implementation is lacking.

Legal basis

The recognition and guarantee of the rights of persons with disabilities in Colombia took place in several stages. An important milestone was Law 163 (1994), which focused on issues relating to the electoral process. Article 16 establishes that citizens who suffer from physical limitations that prevent them from taking care of themselves can exercise their right to “accompanied” voting in the voting booth. Three years later, Law 361 (1997) laid the foundations for the social, but not political, integration of this population group. A special framework was created to guarantee persons with disabilities access to the healthcare, employment, education, social, and cultural systems. Minimum requirements for infrastructure and public transportation were also defined. As a result, Law 1145 (2007) created an institutional framework that grants those citizens concerned the right to participate in the formulation, implementation, and monitoring of public policies that affect them.

In 2009, Law 1275 established national policy guidelines for people with extremely short stature in order to guarantee the fundamental rights of this population group. At a political level, it promoted the adaptation of urban public infrastructure, as many of



February 29, 2016: Persons with disabilities staged a sit-in in front of the mayor's office in Bogotá to demand that Mayor Enrique Peñalosa ensure the continuity of Project 721 and that basic rights such as health, education, food, and housing be recognized.

these locations also serve as polling stations. In the same year, the Congress of the Republic adopted the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities through Law 1346 and transposed it into national legislation. This created the legal basis for the development and implementation of public policies to protect persons with disabilities.

Law 1618 (2013) aimed at ensuring the effective exercise of the rights of persons with disabilities through the adoption of inclusion measures, affirmative action, and reasonable accommodation, and at eliminating all forms of discrimination. Finally, Law 1996 (2019) regulates the exercise of legal capacity of disabled persons of legal age as well as access to the support necessary for exercising this legal capacity.

Current situation of political participation

According to the national statistics authority, persons with disabilities make up about 7.1 percent of the Colombian population. Thanks to the norms and laws passed since 1994, a framework for action has been established that guarantees their social and political rights as well as the practical exercise of their right to vote. This has been reflected in public policy and various government programs. One example of this is the creation of an office for the interests of persons with disabilities by the National Registry of Civil Status in order to prioritize the identification of this population group.

Since 2021, the Ministry of the Interior and the National Electoral Council, in coordination with other government agencies, have developed a protocol for the care of persons with disabilities. The protocol proposes necessary, concrete changes in the electoral process to ensure full respect for the right to vote of these people under equal conditions. In addition, the authority responsible for the civil registry has launched a comprehensive training program for the elections to raise awareness among election workers and improve support in exercising the right to vote. For its part, the Electoral Observation Mission (MOE) of civil society has identified five resolutions adopted by the electoral authority since 2018 that focus on access to the electoral process for persons with disabilities. In its election observation reports, the organization attaches great importance to the issue of inclusion in the electoral process and emphatically points out remaining shortcomings. While barrier-free access to polling stations or voting documents in

braille are often guaranteed in urban centers, for instance, the situation in rural Colombia is completely different. Civil society has played an important role in the steps taken so far to improve political participation. For example, the National Institute for the Blind and the National Institute for the Deaf have been working since 1994 on the development of ballots in braille and the ongoing promotion of educational strategies to ensure participation in the electoral process. The interaction between the state and civil society was an important prerequisite for the development and implementation of the National Policy for Disability and Social Inclusion 2013–22, an instrument designed to ensure the full exercise of the rights of individuals in this population group and their participation in society.

This government policy has led to tangible improvements for persons with disabilities. Greater visibility and recognition of their rights have been achieved; opportunities for social and political participation have been expanded. At an institutional level, the government developed guidelines and protocols to strengthen the normative framework and to ensure greater coherence in government action. In addition, inclusive education was promoted by creating more accessible spaces in the school system and improving teacher training. In 2013, the National Disability Observatory (OND) was created and the coverage of the Register for the Localization and Characterization of Persons with Disabilities (RLCPD) was expanded.



Mayor Claudia López publicly presented the roadmap for the population with disabilities for the next 12 years. In the picture, Mayor Claudia López, Undersecretary Felipe Jiménez, and Undersecretary for Social Integration Margarita Barraquer together with some of those attending the presentation of the public policy for persons with disabilities 2023–2024.

Challenges in implementation

Although efforts are being made to guarantee the political rights of persons with disabilities, challenges remain. Even though the creation of a legal basis is positive, concrete implementation at the administrative and procedural level remains inadequate. The Saldarriaga Concha Foundation, which sees itself as a voice and advocate for the interests of persons with disabilities, points out that the procedure for obtaining a disability card in Colombia is excessively bureaucratic. The process is extremely complex due to the large number of documents required and the lack of information and it is almost impossible for the average citizen to manage without professional support. This document, which was introduced in Germany in

2020 as the equivalent of a severely disabled person's ID card, is essential for accessing a wide range of services and benefits. These include specialized medical care, employment opportunities or state support services for reasonable accommodation at home or in the workplace. This not only affects disabled people themselves, but also their entire support network.

At the political-institutional level, obstacles to efficient cooperation exist between representatives of civil society and government agencies that promote the development of inclusive activities. As a result, due to a lack of dialog, state actors fail to plan for the interests and needs of persons with disabilities or do not take them sufficiently into account, e. g., in terms of barrier-free access to government agencies and public infrastructure. Furthermore, the problem of coordinating government strategies between local and national authorities persists. This is reflected in the impact assessment of the National Policy on Disability and Social Inclusion 2013–2022. It also critically notes that there is a lack of substantial political representation regarding the interests of these persons. On the one hand, no body exists that is exclusively responsible for this population group. On the other hand, their perspectives and concerns are hardly taken into account in the public debate. Senator Laura Fortich has introduced two bills in 2022 to improve this situation. One is intended to promote the participation of persons with disabilities and their political representation through a direct seat in the National Congress, while the other aims to differentiate tenders and application procedures in public institutions and thus create equal opportunities.

In summary, one can say that the Colombian state has taken a whole series of positive legal and political measures since 1991 to guarantee the political rights of these people. However, the practical implementation of these provisions, especially outside the country's urban centers, remains inadequate. There are still many hurdles to overcome in order to fully guarantee the political participation of persons with disabilities and to turn this into tangible reality.

Sergio Rojas

Head of KAS Office Colombia

Stefan Reith



Hungary

Voters not residing in Hungary or other European Union countries were able to vote by mail in the European Parliament elections on June 9; to do so they had to submit an application for registration on the electoral roll by May 15. Absentee voters by mail could opt for postal delivery when registering; more than 102,000 persons did so, and the National Election Office (NVI) sent them their absentee voting package by mail in the week of May 13.

According to Act XXXVI of 2013 on voting procedures, a person with a disability – including a visually impaired person – has several options to cast the vote in exercising the right to self-determination. Before election day, such a person can request a braille notice with detailed information about the election. A text containing the most important information in simplified language can also be requested.

A visually impaired person using braille may request a braille voting form up to nine days before voting, which can be used both at the mobile ballot box and at the polling station.

Voters who are visually impaired, unable to read, or whose physical disability prevents them from voting may be assisted by another voter or official polling assistants. This means that these persons are allowed to go into the polling booth and fill in the ballot together according to the voter's instructions. Based

on a corresponding application, which can be submitted digitally, in person, or by mail up to the fourth day before polling day, persons with disabilities are able to vote in a barrier-free polling station. Voters who are unable to go to the polling station for health reasons or due to a disability can submit an application for a mobile ballot box by 12 noon on the day of the election.

The debate between the EP list leaders on the public television channel M1 was interpreted using sign language. The debates that took place on other channels were not translated.

Michael Winzer

Head of KAS Office Hungary

Gróznér Dániel



Mongolia

Without Access – no Participation

In Mongolia, persons with disabilities face major obstacles. Despite government efforts and international agreements, their political participation remains severely restricted. Inadequate accessibility, a lack of support, and prejudice make it difficult for them to access political processes. But people like Bilgun and Darkhihu are determined to overcome these obstacles. Their commitment shows that the future of Mongolia also depends on their voice.

There is no lack of will

“The political education of young people is generally poor. I estimate that only about 20 percent of young people are politically informed,” says Bilgun D. The logistics manager has been suffering from paresis since birth and took part in the KAS Community Advocacy Program (KASCAP) this year. Since 2020, the Public Policy Impact Program has been promoting the political participation of young persons with disabilities in Mongolia. The aim is to strengthen their social and political participation and teach them leadership skills. For one week, they meet with experts and leaders from various sectors. They exchange knowledge and experiences and build sustainable networks.

The lack of political education is not, however, the result of disinterest in societal involvement, Bilgun emphasizes. A survey conducted by the Mongolian National Human Rights Commission in 2023 confirms his assessment. Interest is particularly strong among 18 to 35-year-olds with disabilities. 85.7% of respond-



KASCAP 2024 participants.

ents took part in the 2020 parliamentary elections, 84.1% in the local elections in the same year, and 84.7% in the 2021 presidential election.

This high turnout is also due to government efforts to make the voting process more accessible for persons with disabilities. Various measures were taken for the 2024 parliamentary elections: ballots in braille, magnifying glasses in polling booths, and more accessible polling stations. These steps are intended to increase voter turnout and enable secret, free voting. Disabled people who are unable to appear in person at a polling station are visited by mobile electoral commissions, enabling them to vote from home.

Despite the measures taken, many challenges persist. Voting freely and by secret ballot remains a key difficulty for persons with disabilities. In the 2021 presidential election, 90 percent of respondents stated

that they would not have been able to vote without assistance. Especially for people with intellectual disabilities, what lacks is a clear legal framework limiting the influence of caregivers.

In many polling stations, accessibility was inadequate during the parliamentary elections, often lacking the necessary facilities for voters with disabilities. The National Human Rights Commission also criticizes the fact that while the law stipulates barrier-free booths and information displays for national elections, this is not the case for local elections, further reducing the already low voter turnout in local elections and leading to discrimination against persons with disabilities. As early as 2023, the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities called for better implementation of the convention guaranteeing the right to assistance in elections. However, it is still insufficiently enshrined in Mongolian legislation.

Lack of accessibility fosters isolation

Another major obstacle is the lack of barrier-free accessibility and, to some extent, disastrous infrastructure, especially for pedestrians. “Poor infrastructure is one of the major factors limiting our participation,” explains Bilgun. “Stairs are a good example. They are often insurmountable obstacles for people with walking disabilities. It is unrealistic to replace all stairs with ramps. The main problem is that many stairs are too steep and built without handrails,” putting at risk not only disabled persons but all people in general who move around in public spaces. Norms and



KASCAP 2024 discussion round.

standards should protect the interests of everyone and offer the best solutions. These must be consistently introduced and monitored in Mongolia.

Mr. Darkhihu, head of the NGO Center for Independent Living of Arkhangai Province and participant in the KASCAP program, agrees with Bilgun. Also suffering from paresis, he is actively involved in societal life. Recently, he has participated in many training events and activities, the number of which has increased. Nevertheless, he sees that poor roads and a lack of infrastructure are a major obstacle to independent participation in social activities.

The lack of or limited access to public spaces leads to discrimination against a significant proportion of the Mongolian population. According to the National Statistics Committee, 111,200 persons with disabilities were residing in Mongolia at the end of 2023, which

is around 3.1 percent of the total population. This low rate compared to countries such as Germany or Austria suggests that the government statistics may deviate from the actual reality of life.

In order to improve the quality of life and participation of these people, Mongolia has reformed its laws and created new structures in recent years. One important step was the adoption of the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2016, followed by the establishment of the General Agency for Development of Persons with Disabilities in 2018. Special development centers were also opened in several provinces.

Despite this progress, the situation remains sobering: Persons with disabilities continue to be among the most isolated groups in society. A study conducted by the Institute of Philosophy of the Academy of Sciences in 2023 shows that their isolation rate is 42.9 percent – 23.3 percentage points higher than for people without disabilities in the same household and 28.1 percentage points above the average for other population groups.

Despite Mongolia's signing of international agreements to protect the rights of persons with disabilities, the reality is different. Many are still unable to participate in social life on an equal footing. Although the legal foundations are in place, there is often a lack of practical implementation and the necessary resources to ensure genuine inclusion.

Representation in parliament as a panacea

One approach taken by the Mongolian government is to increase the proportion of persons with disabilities in parliament. In the consultations concerning the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, recommendations were made to change the legal situation and to take special measures to promote their political participation. Particular emphasis was placed on support for people with hearing, visual and mental impairments, and the promotion of candidates from smaller parties who also have a disability.

In this year's parliamentary elections, 126 members of parliament were elected for the first time as a result of the recent constitutional amendments. The expectation was that the representation of different social groups in parliament would increase. 78 MPs were elected through the first-past-the-post system and 48 through the proportional system. The ruling Mongolian People's Party (MPP) set an example by placing O. Saranchuluun, the walking-impaired managing director of the NGO Akhilis Mongolia, in fourth place on its list. The Democratic Party (DP) nominated J. Bayasgalan, a wheelchair-bound actor, in seventh place. Both succeeded in entering parliament, making them the first persons with disabilities in the Mongolian legislature.

The motivation behind the nomination may not have been altruistic. The Political Parties Act, which was passed in 2023, provides for increased financial support for parties that successfully bring disabled people into parliament. Unfortunately, many of the

recommendations to promote the political involvement of persons with disabilities did not make it into the law. This includes the obligation to spend 20 percent of state funding on strengthening particularly vulnerable groups. There are also no clear provisions to support such persons running as candidates for so-called small parties.

The impact of the numerous laws and guidelines to support the political participation of persons with disabilities, including regulations on voting rights, falls short of expectations. There is a lack of a system that monitors implementation and holds those responsible accountable for non-compliance. Often the measures taken by political parties to promote participation remain purely symbolic and depend heavily on the initiative of individual leaders or influential politicians. Ultimately, running for office via party lists remains the only realistic chance for persons with disabilities to enter parliament. Direct mandates remain largely unattainable.

Direct candidacies not financially feasible

One of the main reasons for this fact is the high financial hurdle. The contribution to election campaign costs alone, which is permitted by law and expected from the parties, amounts to over 300,000 euros – a sum unaffordable for most persons with disabilities in Mongolia. To address this problem, the 23rd Report of the National Human Rights Commission recommends various support measures at all electoral levels. These include the funding of advertising

materials, accessible vehicles, advertising space, and the provision of sign language interpreters and personal assistants.

The government plans to create legal regulations for financial support, remuneration, and tax relief. However, in view of the slow implementation to date, it remains to be seen whether these plans will actually be realized.

An important facet to mention is that the two disabled parliamentarians acquired their status as a result of accidents. This in no way diminishes their disabilities and the daily challenges they face. However, their professional and political careers began long before the accidents, and they had access to resources and opportunities that are not available to most persons with disabilities in Mongolia.

Accessibility as an unattainable “dream”

Despite the accessibility of polling stations and voting processes, the political participation of persons with disabilities remains severely limited. Barrier-free infrastructure, accessible means of transportation, comprehensive information, and equal competition are still lacking. The creation of barrier-free public spaces, buildings, and facilities has been under discussion since 2006. However, inadequate implementation, a lack of monitoring, and the disinterest of broad sections of society render the existing laws and standards largely ineffective. Everyday obstacles often make the rights guaranteed by law seem like an unattainable “dream.”

Breaking down mental barriers

Another reason for the low political representation of persons with disabilities is their perception by society. Exclusion from the public sphere and the resulting low visibility mean that many people in Mongolia have little opportunity to gather experience concerning persons with disabilities. This reinforces the emergence of prejudices.

People often doubt the mental abilities of physically disabled people. This doubt, combined with the feeling of insufficient political knowledge and practical experience among those affected, frequently leads to a lack of self-confidence. Yet it is precisely this self-confidence that is crucial for active participation in social and political life. To overcome this insecurity and become politically active, Mr. Bilgun decided to participate in the KASCAP program.

This program strengthens the self-confidence of persons with disabilities by imparting knowledge, experience, and networks. It shows that overcoming the existing grievances is only possible through the active participation of those affected themselves. Foreign organizations such as KAS can offer support, but they cannot replace the commitment of the disabled themselves.

Mr. Darkhihu agrees. With his NGO, he motivates other persons with disabilities to get involved in politics despite all the difficulties. Mongolia's development, he says, depends on their participation.

Viktor Frank
Head of KAS Office Mongolia

Nomin Borgil



KASCAP 2024 final photo.



Sweden

In Sweden, a legal requirement stipulates that all polling stations must feature barrier-free accessibility. If access to a polling station is still not possible on election day, a vote can also be cast outside the polling station. In Sweden, voting by mail is an option only from abroad. However, it is also possible to vote in advance from May 2 to June 9 while in Sweden. Voting documents can be requested in braille or large print in advance for independent voting on election day. All important information on the website about voting in Sweden is also available in plain language and explained in videos with subtitles. Information on voting in Sweden is available in a variety of languages as well.

Various options exist for assistance when voting. If people have a disability or restrictions, they can receive help from a polling officer, a poll worker, a companion, or a personal assistant for putting the cross or inserting the ballot into the ballot envelope.

Another option is voting by courier. This means that someone other than the voter takes the ballot to the polling station or to an early voting location. Reasons for voting by courier may include illness, age, disability, being in custody or correctional facilities, and residing or staying along a rural mail route. In the latter case, you can vote by courier with the help of the rural letter carrier. In any case, a courier, a witness, and special materials are required for voting by courier. This can be requested from the municipality. If it

is neither possible to come to a polling station in person nor for anyone to assist as a courier, the respective municipality can set up a mobile polling station. For this method, casting the vote must be prepared in the same way as for early voting at a regular polling station.



Finland

In Finland, polling stations must feature barrier-free access. One can vote in advance both at home and abroad. There is at least one polling station in every municipality where you can vote early. Also, special polling stations are available in hospitals, prisons, and some other institutions where only people being treated or detained there are allowed to vote. In addition, people whose mobility or functional capacity is so limited that they cannot come to a polling station in person on election day may vote at home, i. e., an election commissioner calls on them to receive their vote. The crew of a Finnish ship abroad can vote in advance on board the ship. Voting by mail is only possible for persons who are abroad during the entire pre-election period, including election day, and who apply for voting by mail in accordance with the requirements.

If someone needs assistance casting the vote at a polling station, a personal election assistant may help, though only if that person or their close relatives are not themselves candidates in the election. For anyone lacking assistance with voting, special polling assistants capable of helping are present at the polling stations.

Explanations regarding voting are available in many different languages and in plain language, including videos in Finnish and some in English. However, no voting documents in braille or large print are provided.

(Information at www.vaalit.fi)



Denmark

In Denmark, a black pen for marking ballots, a non-portable magnifying glass, and a non-portable lamp must be available as aids at every polling station. At least one polling station per municipality must also feature a height-adjustable table and a magnifying glass with a screen for adjusting font size, contrast, and brightness. In addition, in case of a disability or impairment, the vote can be cast in another polling station if so requested in advance.

It is possible to receive assistance when voting if required. For example, the ballot can be read out loud in a soundproof room for visually impaired or blind people so that others cannot hear for whom the vote is being cast. Assistance is usually provided by two people to ensure impartiality. These can be election officials, polling station staff, or personal assistants. It is also possible to obtain assistance in casting a vote from just one person of one's choosing, i. e., without the involvement of an authority figure (election official or appointed election assistant).

However, this is only possible on express request under certain conditions. If someone is unable to enter the polling station for special reasons, one can also vote outside the polling station, for example, in one's own car. If this is not possible either, voting may also take place at home if requested in advance.

Voting by mail is possible from six weeks to three days prior to election day. Assistance may be provided in this context as well with similar regulations as at the polling station. In institutions such as hospitals or prisons, staff take care of voting by mail and may provide assistance if necessary. Residents of care homes, homes for people with limited physical or mental capacity or the like, as well as women's shelters can receive help with voting by mail from appointed polling assistants. Such helpers may also include employees of the municipal administration or personal election assistants.

(Information at <https://valg.im.dk/>)

Conclusion

In summary, one can see that different types of support for voting are available in all three countries, depending on the different needs of voters. Of particular interest is the option to vote from home. There could still be improvements in Finland and Denmark with regard to voting documents in braille. Overall, although some of the options need to be familiar and require making an application, the information is easy to find and appears to be practicable.

Gabriela Baumann

Head of Regional Program Nordic Countries



Slovakia

Although a lot has happened in terms of support for persons with disabilities since the democratic transition, Slovakia is still lagging behind in key areas. Often there is still a lack of awareness concerning the fact that even a few stairs, a font too small, or a swinging door can be an insurmountable obstacle for persons with disabilities. Although people are always ready to help, it is one thing to be able to enter a building only with the help of others and another to manage so independently. It constitutes a frustrating experience for disabled people on a daily basis.

Official bodies are increasingly trying to put the topic on the agenda. Public television programs broadcast important reports, political topics, official government statements in sign language and also (still too rarely) offer programs in plain language.

However, the upcoming European elections show that too much depends on the initiative of individual, committed local players. Whether a polling station has barrier-free access is limited by the mostly listed and old buildings in which the elections are usually held: City halls, schools, and community halls often date back to the time of Maria Theresa – beautiful to look at but difficult to adapt to today's standards of accessibility for persons with disabilities.

Disabled persons can be assisted on site by a trusted person when exercising their right to vote. It is also possible to vote from home using a mobile ballot box

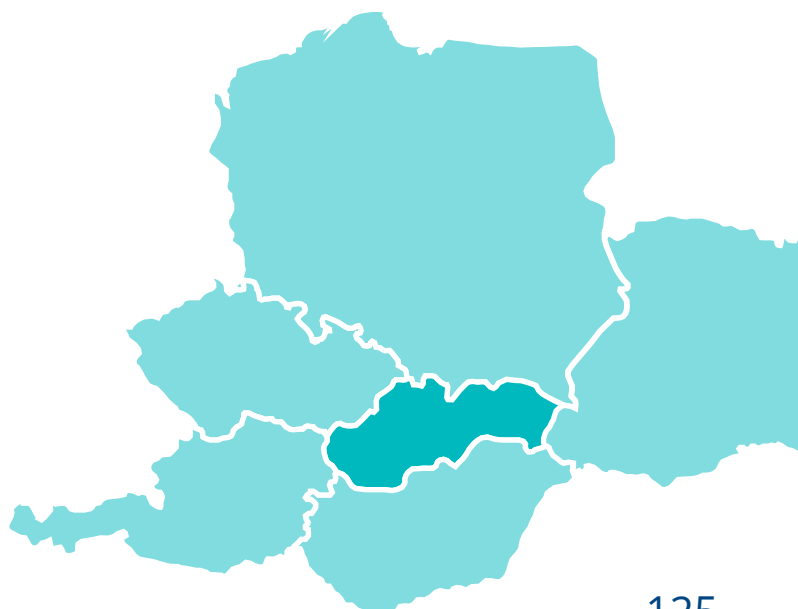
under the supervision of a member of the electoral commission. No digital voting or even voting by mail is available in the European elections. Documents in braille or voting by stencil for visually impaired people are not offered. Here, too, Slovakia must develop offers in the future.

Awareness of the challenges faced by persons with disabilities is steadily increasing in Slovakia. The commitment of individuals and the willingness of Slovaks to help is beyond question. Systemically, however, an absence of guidelines and standards still persists in many places, as does a lack of finances. Precisely in these areas Slovakia can benefit from membership in the European Union, not only from the expertise of other countries, but also from a common legal framework and possible financial resources to solve these issues in the future.

Tomislav Delinić

Head of KAS Offices in Czech Republic and Slovakia

Tamara Zajacová





Malaysia

Rights, Representation, and Reform

In Malaysia, persons with disabilities face numerous difficulties participating in the political process. Whether as voters, election workers or politicians, persons with disabilities often face barriers to their full participation in political life. These challenges are compounded by societal attitudes, physical barriers, and the lack of inclusive policies, making it difficult for persons with disabilities to exercise their rights fully and contribute to the political process. This report examines the challenges faced by both civilians and political protagonists with disabilities in Malaysia. It also surveys the progress that has already been made to ensure their inclusion in the political process, identifying opportunities for further improvement in this respect.

Advancements in supporting persons with disabilities

Malaysia has made significant advancements in supporting persons with disabilities, particularly following the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in July 2010. However, 14 years later, significant gaps remain in enabling equal access to political participation for all Malaysians with disabilities. Currently, an estimated 15 percent of Malaysians (approx. 5.1 million people) live with some form of disability,¹ with this number expected to increase as the population ages. In addition, according to a 2015 National Health Survey, around 29 percent of Malaysians suffer from mental illness.² Unfortunately, mental health data is not



Election day in Malaysia.

always collected in Malaysia's national health surveys. The last survey that asked questions on mental health was the 2015 survey, and while no official statistics have been available since then, the reported numbers have most likely increased, especially during the pandemic.

With a population of about 34 million, the need for concrete policy measures that cover the entire spectrum of disabilities, including mental disabilities, is therefore becoming increasingly urgent.

Lack of political representation and support

Malaysia is a federation comprised of the eleven states of Malaysia, the two Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak, and three city-states. A constitutional monarchy similar to the Westminster system of the United Kingdom, this form of government is classified as a representative democracy.

In Malaysia, the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development is responsible for the care of persons with disabilities, overseeing the policies and programs for their rights and welfare. This ministry plays a key role in supporting persons with disabilities in areas such as employment, healthcare, education, and accessibility, and it works closely with other government agencies to meet these individuals' specific needs.

Since 2007, Malaysia has appointed only four out of a total of 70 senators to represent persons with disabilities in the Dewan Negara, the upper house of parliament. These appointments are made by the King and while they symbolize progress in the representation of persons with disabilities, they are not sufficient to reflect the true scope of the challenges faced by Malaysia's disabled among the population. The current system allows senators to serve a maximum of two terms, with each term lasting three years. However, the slow pace of these appointments raises questions about whether the government has truly recognized the urgency for more inclusive representation.

The late Datuk Dr. Ismail Salleh was the first appointed Malaysian senator to represent persons with disabilities. A visually impaired person, he was head of the Bureau of National Economic and Socio-Economic Policy Studies and rose to become the Deputy Director-General of the Institute of Strategic & International Studies (ISIS Malaysia), a government think tank.



Senator Ras Adiba Radzi.

Another example is Bathmavathi Krishnan, an advocate for the rights of persons with disabilities and former senator who has been confined to a wheelchair after a serious accident.

Further examples include Ras Adiba Radzi, a former senator, paralyzed from the waist down following a spinal cord injury, who founded the non-governmental organization OKU Sentral, which advocates for the rights and needs of persons with disabilities in Malaysia. And finally, Isaiah Jacob, the current senator representing the disabled community, was born with congenital hip dislocation.

Their appointments underscore the importance of the voices of persons with disabilities being heard in the legislative process to ensure that the challenges of this community are taken into account when developing laws and policies.

These politicians have contributed a lot to championing the concerns of the disabled population, but the government must recognize that four senators in 17 years is not enough to adequately represent 15 percent of the population. More needs to be done to appoint senators and elect representatives who are advocates for persons with disabilities and who are serious about espousing more effective changes.

Accessibility in the election process?

Despite these advancements, persons with disabilities continue to face significant barriers, particularly as voters in the political process. Accessibility is a key issue.

Many polling stations, government buildings, and political events remain inaccessible to people with physical disabilities, such as wheelchair users. A well-known example is the late Member of Parliament Karpal Singh, who had difficulty attending parliamentary debates due to inadequate building infrastructure. Although a ramp for wheelchairs was eventually installed, it did not meet the standards of MS 1184: Code of Practice on Access for Persons with Disabilities to Public Buildings. This case highlights a larger systemic problem. Delayed and ineffective implementation of necessary building codes and accessibility guidelines by the government continues to impede progress.

Civilian persons with disabilities also struggle with logistical and informal barriers to voting. Polling stations often lack features such as braille ballots for blind voters or sign language interpreters for the hearing impaired. As a result, many persons with disabilities are excluded from participating in elections as they are unable to fully exercise their voting rights or make informed voting decisions. Voters with mental disabilities face additional challenges as election staff are often not adequately trained to provide appropriate support to these individuals. Many people with physical and mental disabilities are therefore dependent on their family members to make voting decisions, as campaign information is often inaccessible to them as well.³

Former Senator Ras Adiba Radzi had emphasized the need for election commission officials and volunteers to attend Disability Equality Training (DET) workshops to better support persons with disabilities during elections. She said, “The ballot paper needs to be visually impaired-friendly with the provision of braille ballot papers, [...] and the table provided for voting must have a suitable height for wheelchair users.”⁴

In addition, political party manifestos are rarely available in braille, making it difficult for visually impaired voters to understand the party manifestos independently. Allocating sign language interpreters and audio-accessible campaign materials, as well as the introducing of braille ballots, would significantly improve the participation of persons with disabilities.



Facilities must be prepared to support persons with disabilities.

Such measures would be crucial to ensure that every Malaysian, regardless of disability, can fully participate in the democratic process.⁵

Advancements achieved and legal protections

Malaysia's legal framework for the protection of persons with disabilities is mainly governed by the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008, which sets out the rights of persons with disabilities and defines measures to support them. A key component of the Act is the establishment of the National Council for Persons with Disabilities, which advises the government on policies and programs. In addition, the law guarantees equal access to public services, transportation, education, employment, healthcare, and recreation and fosters cooperation between the government and the private sector to promote inclusion. The registration of persons with disabilities through the issuance of the "Kad OKU" (a special disability card) also

provides access to specific benefits, recognizes their status, and ensures that these people receive the benefits to which they are entitled.

Despite this progress, gaps in the enforcement and implementation of these directives persist. Although the law guarantees accessibility, many persons with disabilities continue to face physical and institutional barriers in their daily lives. For example, the law mandates equal access to education and employment, but persons with disabilities often report discrimination in the hiring process or inadequate accommodations in schools and workplaces.⁶ In addition, mental health issues are often overlooked in discussions about disability rights, leaving a large portion of the population with disabilities underserved and under-represented.

Further regional progress in support can be seen in the ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025,⁷ which sets out a framework for the integration of the rights of persons with disabilities across the ASEAN region. A key component of this plan is the ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC), which promotes incorporation in political-security frameworks of member states. The plan focuses on promoting inclusive governance by supporting the participation of persons with disabilities in political decision-making processes, ensuring equal access to justice and including persons with disabilities in disaster risk management and humanitarian assistance. It is also in line with the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, encouraging member states to fully

implement its provisions, particularly in relation to Article 29, which guarantees the political rights of persons with disabilities.

As Malaysia will assume the ASEAN chair in 2025, it would have a special opportunity to demonstrate leadership by advancing the rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities – an area where significant progress is still needed.

Prospects for inclusion

In the years ahead, Malaysia must continue to build on the progress already made by focusing on the full implementation of accessibility standards and significantly expanding support for persons with disabilities in political and public life. Addressing gaps in building infrastructure and policy enforcement is critical to ensuring that all citizens, regardless of ability, can fully participate in society. There is also a need for better data collection on the political participation of persons with disabilities, as this could provide valuable insights into their needs and better guide future policies.

Although Malaysia has made some progress in supporting the political participation of persons with disabilities, particularly through legislative reforms and the appointment of senators with disabilities, this progress remains below the minimum required. The limited representation of interests in parliament and the persistent problems with accessibility in public life signal that more efforts are needed to ensure persons with disabilities can participate fully in social and political life. The government must urgently move beyond

merely symbolic gestures and work to create a more inclusive political landscape in which disabled people can exercise their rights and contribute to shaping the nation's future.

Malaysia has already made great strides, but the country still has a long way to go. To ensure full political equality for persons with disabilities, Malaysia must continue to develop policies and infrastructure aimed at promoting inclusion and recognize that a young nation must constantly adapt to ensure that no one is left behind.

Idzaid Bin Idros

Programme Manager KAS Office Malaysia



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Spain

The most important assessment up front: Spain is remarkably committed to increasing barrier-free accessibility in the European elections. To this end, the Ministry of the Interior has adopted and launched an entire package of measures specifically with regard to the European elections, which is intended to facilitate access “for any person with any disability.” This explicitly includes people with cognitive impairments (in the cerebral area, autism, Down’s syndrome, etc.).

The positive impression begins with the ability to find the relevant information. Within seconds of entering the search terms, you will find clearly structured websites with further detailed information.

On these pages you will first find help with the actual voting process. A completely new signage system has been designed with pictograms showing the location of the polling station, the booths, the opening hours, and the individual voting steps from registration to the description of the ballot and the ballot box. These pictograms comply with the ISO 22727:2007 and UNE-ISO 9186 standards on accessible design of public information. Naturally, this information is also formulated in plain language. A noteworthy facet, the focus is not only on voters with disabilities, but also on facilitating the active participation of these people as poll workers in the polling station. Special manuals have been developed for this purpose.

Overall, these persons can order an access kit containing all relevant papers and documentation, both

in the original version and parallel, for example, in braille, which is distributed to them at the polling station before the actual act of voting. In the polling station, an easily accessible voting booth is placed as close as possible to the table of the electoral commission.

Special support for persons with cognitive impairments deserves emphasizing as well: This includes signage in plain language and in large letters. As a cognitive impairment is not visible on the outside, or often not at first glance, election workers are encouraged to be particularly sensitive and observe the behavior of such persons in order to intervene in a supportive manner. The focus of attention is that these specific limitations manifest themselves in slower speech, in seemingly awkward movements, or even in signs of disorientation and bewilderment. Furthermore, the election assistants are instructed not build up pressure under any circumstances and to speak earnestly, calmly, and clearly.

The considerable package of measures to increase accessibility is rounded off by a political content offer. Both textually and graphically, it provides an overview of what the respective party programs list on the subject of policies for persons with disabilities.

Ludger Gruber

Head of KAS Office Spain and Portugal



South Africa

Political Inclusion in Post-Apartheid South Africa

“The new South Africa we are building should be accessible and open to everyone... Only then will the rights of the disabled to equal opportunities become a reality” (Nelson Mandela). Some 30 years after the end of apartheid, these words of Nelson Mandela define the guiding principle of South African inclusion policy even today.

South Africa in 2024

In 2024, South Africa is one of the countries with the highest levels of social inequality in the world. This particularly affects persons with disabilities, who are all too often denied access to large parts of South African society. The causes for this lack of inclusion are manifold: One reason is the poverty in many segments of the country’s population, which renders people’s desire for a more inclusive society simply unaffordable. However, in the most industrialized country in sub-Saharan Africa, other causes besides a lack of financial resources play a role. For example, existing sociocultural norms also stigmatize persons with disabilities. In South Africa, inclusion must be addressed in particular against the backdrop of the country’s history. In South Africa, social exclusion and segregation have been promoted in various forms for centuries. Most recently, this occurred during the apartheid era from 1948 to 1994 through the establishment of a racist social system denying people social participation on the basis of their skin color. Black South Africans, for example, were forced to move to and live in newly created, remote areas



Residents in the suburb of Lotus Garden voting at Fusion Secondary School, Pretoria.

known as Bantustans. These Bantustans were often far away from the urban centers, which meant that the residents had only limited access to economic opportunities, education, and healthcare. In particular, persons with disabilities living there often did not have sufficient access to medical care, which contributed to a substantial increase in avoidable secondary and tertiary disabilities, among other things.

The HIV epidemic in South Africa, which began in the late 1980s and reached its peak in 2006, when 282,904 people died in South Africa in that year alone, also had a drastic impact. South Africa's former President Thabo Mbeki repeatedly denied the connection between HIV and AIDS, as well as the fact that AIDS is a disease at all, so that inadequate measures were taken and the number of infected people continued to rise rapidly. Even today in South Africa, women with

disabilities are 2.2 times more likely to be infected with HIV than women without disabilities and men are 1.5 times more likely. In addition, persons with disabilities are ten percent less likely to know their HIV status and be treated accordingly than people without disabilities. Overall, 12.7 percent of the South African population is currently living with HIV.

There is no doubt that the consequences of apartheid policy can still be felt today. This applies in particular to the structural and regional inequality created between different population groups. Even today, it is much more difficult for residents in the former Bantustans to participate in social life. For example, jobs and good health facilities are often far away from their actual places of residence. South Africans with disabilities are particularly affected by this. Firstly, for financial reasons, they are often denied access to inclusion aids that are already available, such as walking aids or a wheelchair. In addition, access to the labor market is often significantly more difficult for many of them. Although legal frameworks offer theoretical protection and support mechanisms, their implementation is often inadequate. Furthermore, the previous political focusing on healthcare and welfare in South Africa has led to inclusion-related issues often being marginalized in the past and even to this day.

The status quo of persons with disabilities in South Africa, however, has hardly been recorded in figures to date. The few statistics available are aggregated at the national level and make little distinction between

different forms and degrees of disability. The accessible data is also often limited to the prevalence of disabilities. This figure amounts to 7.5 percent nationwide, with the number of women with disabilities being higher than that of men. Furthermore, the number of persons with disabilities increases with advancing age. More than half (53.2 percent) of people aged 85+ stated that they had a disability. This data, which was collected in 2011, requires urgent updating and at the same time more differentiation with regard to the various forms and degrees of disability.

Despite the poor data available today and the reality of the lives of South Africans in need of inclusion, the country committed itself to the issue of inclusion at an early stage. In 2006, South Africa adopted the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to safeguard and promote the rights of the disabled, subsequently ratifying it in 2007. In order to implement this UN Convention, the country on the Cape was able to draw on existing institutional frameworks, such as the National Council for Persons with Disabilities (NCPD), which has existed since 1939, and the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC), which was established in 1995. For the further implementation of the UN Convention, the Portfolio Committee on Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities was convened as an institutional component of Parliament in 2009 and the Ministry of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities was established in 2019, after the issue of inclusion had previously been incorporated into the Ministry of Women's Affairs. Today, these institutions advocate in various forms for the concerns of important social

groups in South Africa, such as persons with disabilities, who are not adequately represented in the country's existing policies .

Interim assessment:

A lot has happened institutionally in South Africa since 2007 and the institutional representation of the interests of persons with disabilities is probably stronger today than ever before in the country's history. Nevertheless, there is often a lack of implementation of various measures on the ground that actually render life easier for persons with disabilities in their everyday lives. While various initiatives across the country are trying to structure educational and health facilities more accessible to persons with disabilities, there is a lack of funding and central coordination to make these initiatives the success they deserve.

Political participation

To gain a deeper insight into how political inclusion works in South Africa and what challenges the country is facing, we had the opportunity to speak with Liezl Linda van der Merwe. Ms. van der Merwe was elected to the South African National Assembly for the first time in May 2012 at the age of 33 for the long-standing KAS partner party, the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP). Since June 2024, Ms. van der Merwe has been a member of the Committee on Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities of the National Assembly of South Africa and she has been championing the inclusion of persons with disabilities for many years.

KAS: *How has the political participation of persons with disabilities – i. e. political inclusion – developed since the end of apartheid in South Africa? What were the most important improvements and setbacks?*

Liezl van der Merwe: Since the end of apartheid, there have been both significant advances and setbacks in the political participation of persons with disabilities in South Africa. The adoption of the 1996 Constitution, the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act of 2000 played a crucial role in strengthening the rights of persons with disabilities and promoting their inclusion in political processes. In addition, South Africa ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in November 2007. The aim of this convention is to ensure that universal human rights and related freedoms are respected for persons with disabilities as well. In 2019, the area of responsibilities relating to persons with disabilities was therefore transferred from the Ministry of Social Development to the new Ministry of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities in order to better meet the needs and requirements of the disabled. In a series of further developments and reforms, South African Sign Language was most recently recognized as the country's twelfth official language in 2023.

With regard to political inclusion, according to a survey conducted by the South African Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in 2011, this is seen as mostly successful by the South African

public at large. However, despite these achievements, the broader political and social integration of persons with disabilities has not yet been completed.

KAS: *What are the biggest challenges that persons with disabilities face today when participating in political processes? How can these challenges be tackled in the future?*

Liezl van der Merwe: Persons with disabilities face several major challenges when it comes to participating in political processes. These include physical barriers to accessing facilities, a lack of awareness of their rights within the groups concerned, and insufficient representation of their interests in political structures. For example, many polling stations are still inaccessible to people with physical disabilities and political information is often not available in accessible formats such as braille, large print, or audio.

In addition, negative societal perceptions and prejudices sometimes discourage persons with disabilities from participating in political activities or seeking political office. The underrepresentation of persons with disabilities in political offices and mandates further exacerbates the lack of advocacy for their rights in public discourse.

As already mentioned, future efforts must focus on improving the infrastructure in public buildings and polling stations to ensure that they meet accessibility standards. On the other hand,

this also includes providing barrier-free voting options such as online voting and mobile voting devices to increase voter turnout among this group of people. Training election officials on the rights of persons with disabilities is important as well to combat stigmatization and to promote inclusive practices in political processes. Public awareness campaigns should aim at changing societal attitudes to create an environment in which persons with disabilities feel enabled to participate in political activities. Finally, advocating for policies that support disability-inclusive legislation and representation, including promoting the election of candidates with disabilities, will contribute to greater inclusion and better advocacy for the rights of persons with disabilities.

KAS: *How do persons with disabilities actively shape political processes themselves?*

Liezl van der Merwe: Persons with disabilities are actively involved in shaping political processes in South Africa. For example, by working in civil society organizations or participating in political campaigns. During the last parliamentary term, for example, the Deputy Minister of Social Development was particularly present in public as a person with a visual impairment. Remarkable examples of the diverse commitment of persons with disabilities include

1. Advocacy and civic movements: Many persons with disabilities are active in civic movements that advocate for their rights and seek to

promote social inclusion politically. Organizations such as “Disabled People South Africa” (DPSA) and the “South African Federation for Mental Health” play a key role in political advocacy for the rights of persons with disabilities, for example in supporting legislative reforms or raising public awareness.

2. Running for political office: A number of persons with disabilities are running for election at the local, provincial, and national levels, giving them the opportunity to directly influence policy and represent their communities. But again, it is important to emphasize: Their numbers are not even remotely representative of the South African population!
3. Involvement in political campaigns: Persons with disabilities take part in political campaigns, either as candidates or as campaign workers, and in doing so advocate for inclusion policies, among other things. Social media is used to counteract stereotypes about persons with disabilities, mobilize broad support for inclusive social policy, and repeatedly put politicians’ election promises on the political agenda.

KAS: *Which initiatives to improve the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the political sphere have particularly impressed you recently?*

Liezl van der Merwe: A recent initiative that improves the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the South African political sphere is the Universal Ballot Template (UBT). Developed by the Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC) in collaboration with the South African National Council for the Blind, the UBT is an innovative tool to assist people with visual impairments. It enables blind and visually impaired persons to vote confidentially and independently, in line with the right to vote enshrined in the South African Constitution (Section 19 (3) (a)). The UBT supports other groups as well, including older people, people with motor disabilities, people with visual impairment, and people with low literacy skills, to ensure that these groups of voters can exercise their rights as citizens.

Though already in place since 1994, one initiative that I still consider essential is the opportunity for voters to use the so-called “special vote.” This option allows persons with disabilities and pregnant women, among others, to vote from home. To do so, these people must register in advance with the IEC Electoral Commission and can then cast their vote under the supervision of an IEC employee. Efforts like these have a direct impact on ensuring that all citizens, regardless of their physical abilities, can participate in democratic processes. This underscores the South African Electoral Commission’s commitment to fulfilling the constitutional rights of all South Africans.

Outlook for our future work

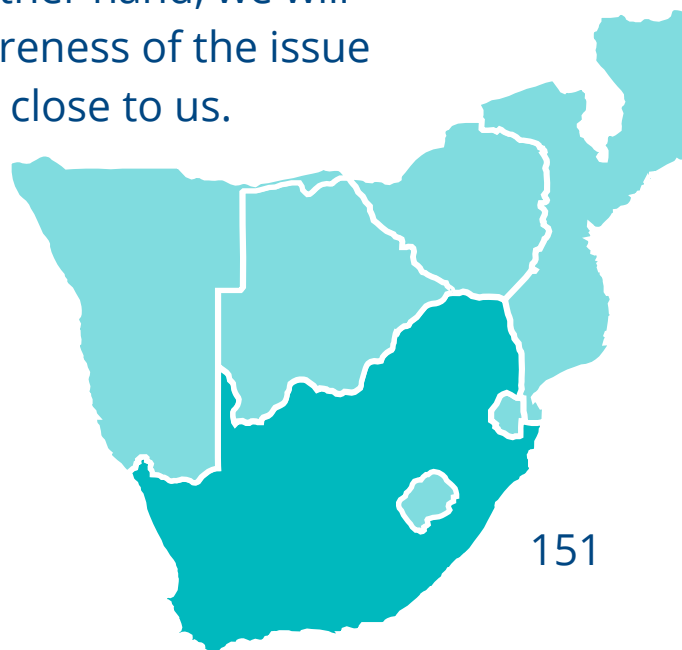
In South Africa, the important topic of inclusion remains between the poles of several goals achieved (particularly in the area of legislation) and a multitude of opportunities as yet untapped. The latter applies in particular to inclusion in political processes. The slogan used by the South African government since 2012, “South Africa: breaking new ground,” which is intended to symbolically describe South Africa on a local and international level, reflects the mentality of the rainbow nation. Openness, tolerance, empathy, and a willingness to embrace change are the best prerequisites for making a reality Mandela’s vision of an inclusive South Africa – characterized by equal opportunities for persons with disabilities. This will only succeed if everyone works to overcome existing barriers. In the future, the country project of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung will focus more strongly than before on the issue of political inclusion. It will do so on the one hand by carrying out educational measures with deaf young people in the coming funding period, measures that highlight the importance of inclusive democratic processes and demonstrate ways in which deaf people can exercise their rights within these processes; on the other hand, we will also use the project to raise awareness of the issue among political decision-makers close to us.

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