International Foundation for Electoral Systems

# Five Principles for Using Technology to Support Election Access and Inclusion

According to the World Health Organization, approximately 16 percent of the world's population—over one billion people—have a disability. Though they compose a large portion of global and national populations, citizens with disabilities remain severely[1] underrepresented in elections and political processes. Ensuring that technology is accessible and inclusive can be a powerful way to engage persons with disabilities in the political lives of their communities.

Principle #1: Inclusion

Inclusion means that all persons with disabilities are able to access election technology, including electronic voting machines, biometric voter registration processes, and online sources of information, on an equal basis with others. It may also be helpful to think of inclusion as "representation." For example, are persons with disabilities represented (or included) when technology for elections is developed, procured, and used?

Three components of inclusion are important to consider when developing or using election technology:

1. **Inclusion in the content.** Persons with disabilities should be represented as equal citizens alongside other people in videos, social media, radio spots, advertising, news, or other public materials that are shared through technology.

2. **Inclusion in the process.** Do persons with disabilities help develop, procure, test, or use election technology? Persons with disabilities and their representative organizations are best placed to identify both barriers and solutions relevant to their communities.

3. **Inclusion in outreach**. When an election management body (EMB) uses technology to connect with the public, this technology should be accessible to citizens who have different types of disabilities.
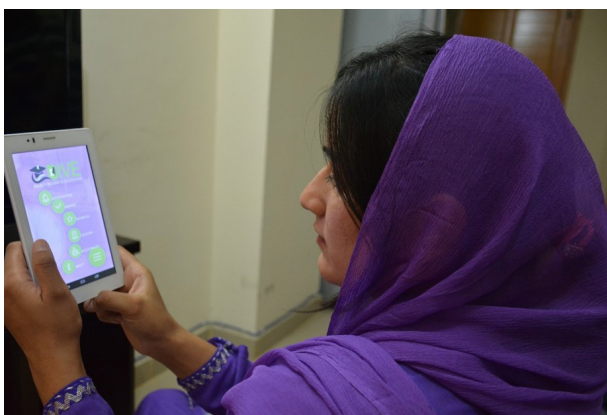
In Pakistan, the Special Talent Exchange Program (STEP), a disability rights organization, developed an Android mobile app to connect persons with disabilities with information on disability rights.

Principle #2: Independence

Technology should support the right of persons with disabilities to act independently in elections. Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) says that voters with disabilities should be able to vote by secret ballot, including when using voting machines. Voting by secret ballot protects the voter from coercion or retaliation for their political beliefs and helps ensure that elections are free and fair. For voters with disabilities, being able to vote independently, without assistance from others, is one of the biggest challenges to a secret ballot. Technology can help mitigate this barrier, for example, voting machines should be designed so people with visual disabilities can use them without assistance from others.

1 World Health Organization (2023) https://www.who.int/health-topics/disability#tab=tab_1.

People with disabilities have a right to independently access election information, including campaign material, so they can understand the election process, know where and when to vote, and make informed decisions about their vote. Equal access to information is a cornerstone of effective political participation.

Principle #3: Accessibility

The CRPD protects the right of persons with disabilities to access the same information and enjoy the same services during elections. For the purposes of this learning series, "accessibility" means that people with all types of disabilities can easily and independently use all technology available in electoral processes. Accessibility options for different types of disabilities might include allowing users to select font size and color contrast options on websites, providing captions or subtitles on videos, and ensuring that online content and applications are compatible with screen readers and other types of assistive devices. If these accessibility options are not integrated into EMB websites or applications, technology can create barriers to participation in political life.

Principle #4: Intersectionality

People with disabilities also have other identities that impact the way others perceive them and the barriers they experience. Identities such as age, class, ethnicity, gender identity, indigeneity, race, religion, or sexuality can influence the way persons with disabilities interact with technology. People with disabilities who live in rural areas may have less reliable internet access. Older persons with disabilities may be less comfortable using new technologies. An Indigenous person with a disability may not have access to accessible technology in their language.

An intersectional approach also acknowledges that no single, universal technology solution applies to all persons with disabilities in all contexts. Accessible technology solutions should be flexible and tailored to the social, economic, and political context in which they will be applied. In some cases, multiple technology solutions may be necessary to meet the needs of all voters.

Principle #5: Universality

Universal Design principles encourage the development of products and environments that are usable by all people without the need for adaptation. EMBs should seek out election technology solutions that can support the largest number of voters possible. When designing new election technology systems, EMBs should consider the needs of the most marginalized and under-supported voters instead of designing for a hypothetical "average" user. Technology that is designed for traditionally marginalized users can be used by everyone. If EMBs support accessible technology from the beginning, they will find that the technology ultimately benefits everyone, including voters without disabilities.

Resources

Afsenah Rigot, Design from the Margins

Digital Impact Alliance, *Principles for Digital Development*

North Carolina State University, Center for Universal Design

Victoria Austin and Catherine Holloway, Assistive Technology (AT) For What?

Read and download Five Principles for Using Technology to Support Election Access and Inclusion on www.IFES.org.

IFES's **Learning Series on Disability-Inclusive Election Technology** provides EMBs and civil society with guidelines and recommendations to ensure the technology they use, procure and develop is fully accessible for persons with disabilities.

Learn more at Learning Series on Disability-Inclusive Election Technology.

Follow @IFESDisability to stay up to date on IFES's work on inclusion of persons with disabilities.

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