

Opening Doors



IFES works to promote equal rights, justice and political participation for persons with disabilities around the world.

Today, 15 out of every 100 persons in the world, or 978 million people, live with a disability.

IFES works towards fostering partnerships among disabled person's organizations (DPOs), civil society and governments. IFES strives to remove barriers which prohibit full participation of persons with disabilities as voters and candidates. When barriers are removed, voters with disabilities are afforded their full rights as citizens.

Since 1997, IFES has focused on taking a leading role to ensure persons with disabilities can cast a ballot with dignity and privacy. In 1998, IFES established the only online global resource on political and electoral rights of persons with disabilities, www.electionaccess.org.

IFES has successfully implemented disability programs in every region of the world. This includes building ramps to polling centers in Armenia, developing tactile ballot guides in Ghana, training persons with disabilities to be election observers in Bangladesh and increasing the capacity of DPOs in Guinea to educate their community on the rights of persons with disabilities.

IFES' most recent project is on a regional scale. IFES is working to expand the leadership capacities of Indonesian DPOs so they can work with partners in Cambodia, Malaysia and the Philippines to ensure disability rights are on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' agenda.

A true democratic process sees each citizen, voter or candidate, participate.





IFES has worked in 133 countries and promotes electoral access for persons with disabilities in every region of the world.

Advocacy

IFES believes promoting and strengthening international standards on access to the political process creates incentives for countries to adopt new methods of increasing access. By promoting international standards, awareness among key stakeholders increases and once-vulnerable communities are then empowered to demand their right to participate in the democratic process.

From 2006-2008, IFES made recommendations to the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe on how to increase the participation of persons with disabilities in national and local elections in Kosovo. IFES helped create audio cassettes which helped blind voters make their candidate selection.

IFES also worked with the Lebanese Physical Handicap Union (LPHU) on the “My Rights Campaign” which lobbied Parliament to increase participation of persons with disabilities in the political process.

“It is time to bring this sordid chapter of prejudice, bias and discrimination to a close, and one way we can do this is by ensuring that persons with disabilities are able to effectively exercise the power of their vote.”

— **Leila de Lima,**
Chairperson of the Commission on
Human Rights, Philippines

Every LPHU recommendation was passed and incorporated into Lebanon’s 2008 Election Law.

For the 2010 national elections in the Philippines, IFES educated election administration officials from a human rights-based perspective. As a result, the election commission resolved to facilitate participation of persons with disabilities, elderly, illiterate and detainees. On Election Day, media reports indicated a significant turnout of persons with disabilities whose participation was possible due to express lanes and assistance at the polling station.



Participation

Over 80 percent of the world's persons with disabilities live in developing nations. For these citizens, participation in the electoral process often gets overlooked.

In Honduras, IFES worked with the Supreme Electoral Tribunal of Honduras (TSE) in creating partnerships, training poll workers and building mobile access ramps so persons with disabilities could participate in the November 2009 general elections. The TSE, with IFES' assistance, signed an agreement with three major organizations committed to promoting the rights of persons with disabilities, which consisted of 69 member organizations spread throughout the country.

The TSE also trained poll workers in 11 of 18 departments (states) to assist persons with disabilities on Election Day. To ensure voters had a degree of privacy and independence, tactile ballots were also made available. In addition, mobile access ramps were constructed and delivered to 112 voting centers

within those 11 departments so voters in wheelchairs could cast their vote. These simple initiatives improved access for persons with disabilities and increased their participation in and awareness of the electoral process.

Inclusion by participation is a requirement for a strong democracy. A government cannot be truly representative if an entire segment of the population is excluded from casting a ballot for their elected officials.

“It has been a first, but firm step, which gave us the strength to institutionalize and create systems which support persons with disabilities in future electoral processes.”

— **José Saúl Escobar Andrade**,
Magistrate President,
Tribunal Supremo Electoral



Leadership

The launch of IFES' www.electionaccess.org in 1998 marked the establishment of the first online global resource for political and electoral rights of persons with disabilities. To this day, it is still the only site which houses such information.

The website includes a country-by-country review of various legal documents and regulations (constitutions, election laws, polling station manuals, etc.) which determines the extent of inclusion and access for persons with disabilities. The website offers model programs in developing nations, ground-breaking research, articles and more. By housing a comprehensive collection of national and international policy and practice, IFES seeks to increase transparency and promote awareness of global standards.

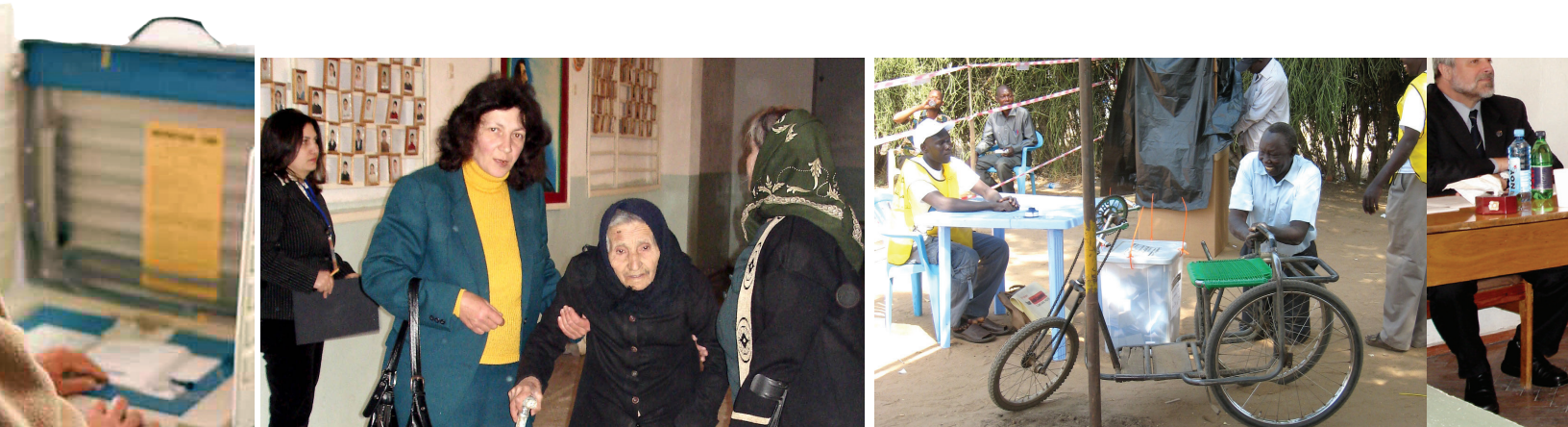
IFES' worldwide experience provides a unique perspective on the challenges facing each country as they attempt to increase access for citizens with disabilities. Using our experience and knowledge of the electoral cycle, we developed a set of best

practices which help anticipate obstacles and identify needs to improve the democratic rights of persons with disabilities.

Four common questions each election management body should ask are:

1. Is voter registration information in an accessible format?
2. Are poll workers trained on the rights of persons with disabilities?
3. Are there enough tactile or braille ballots?
4. Are wheelchair ramps built to ensure access to polling centers?

As a Nongovernmental Organization Observer to the Council of Europe's Committee of Experts on Increasing the Participation of People with Disabilities in Political and Public Life, IFES recognizes persons with disabilities as rights-holders who can and should participate in the political process to the same extent as any member of society.



Commitment

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) is the most comprehensive international agreement that addresses the rights of persons with disabilities.

The UN adopted the CRPD in 2006 and it is currently signed by 149 countries and the European Union. By signing the CRPD, nations commit to increasing access to the political process for persons with disabilities.

The CRPD details how disability rights should be interpreted and applied. Article 29 commits states to guarantee political rights and access to persons with disabilities.

This means that states should ensure “persons with disabilities can effectively and fully participate in political and public life on an equal basis with others.” This includes the right to vote by secret ballot, without intimidation and stand for elections.

The second area requires states to promote an environment where persons with disabilities can equally and fully participate in political life, without discrimination. Governments must also encourage participation in public affairs. IFES works to build the capacity of local organizations and associations which promote democratic participation.

“States parties shall guarantee to persons with disabilities political rights and the opportunity to enjoy them on an equal basis with others.”

— **Article 29,**
2006 UN Convention on the Rights of
Persons with Disabilities



About IFES

The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) is the global leader in election assistance and democracy promotion.

IFES promotes democratic stability by providing technical assistance and applying field-based research to the electoral cycle in countries around the world to enhance citizen participation and strengthen civil societies, governance and transparency.

Every IFES project is staffed by national and international personnel while partnering with local election management bodies and civil society organizations. This homegrown approach ensures that the expertise offered by IFES fits the needs of the country or context and the benefit of assistance outlasts the life of the project. Our work is nonpartisan and also includes projects that:

- Help citizens participate in their democracies
- Increase politicians' accountability to the electorate
- Strengthen government institutions

Since its founding in 1987, IFES has worked in 133 countries — from developing to mature democracies.

For more information, visit www.IFES.org.



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