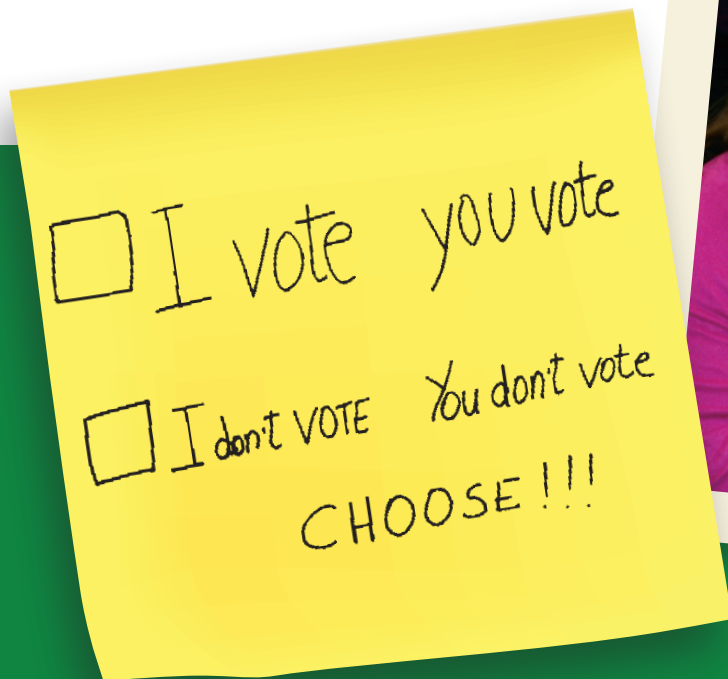




My Voice Matters!

Plain-language Guide on Inclusive Civic Engagement



A guide for people with intellectual disabilities on the right to vote and have a say on the laws and policies in their country

We gratefully acknowledge the UN Democracy Fund for its support
of this project, *Accessing the Ballot Box*





Table of Contents

Background.....	2
Introduction	4
Around the World	6
Why Does My Voice Matter?	8
What Does Political Participation Mean?	9
What Can I Do?	9
CRPD Article 29 in Easy-Read Language	11
What Does Article 29 Mean?	12
Why Isn't My Voice Heard?	13
Making Change Happen!.....	15

Background

This guide is for people with intellectual disabilities and has been developed in plain-language to make it easier for people with intellectual disabilities to understand.

In this guide, we use “people with intellectual disability” and “self-advocate” to mean the same thing.

For Inclusion International, all people with intellectual disabilities are self-advocates. All people with intellectual disabilities can express ourselves and make our ideas and opinions known. Sometimes we need support to do this.



Introduction



This guide is about making my voice heard!

Governments have an obligation to listen to ALL its citizens. This means people with intellectual disabilities too.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is an international agreement that protects my rights. It is often called the CRPD.

Article 29 of the CRPD is about my right to vote and have my voice heard on laws and policies that matter to me.

This guide is part of a project on the right to vote and how people with intellectual disabilities can have their voice heard by the people who make laws and policies that affect us.





LEBANON



KENYA



ZANZIBAR



The project worked in 3 countries: **Kenya, Zanzibar** and **Lebanon**.

In those countries we worked with families, people with intellectual disabilities and their organizations and people in the government to:

- Understand why people with intellectual cannot – or do not – vote.
- Understand why our voice is not heard by our government.
- Help people with intellectual disabilities know about their right to vote and be heard by their government.
- Make guides (like this one!) to help people make change.

Even though the project only looked at three countries, the information can be used by all countries.

Around the World



Many people with intellectual disabilities are not allowed to vote or have no way to make their voice heard by the people who make laws and policies that affect their lives. This might happen because:

- A law says we are not allowed to vote or participate in government.
- People do not believe we have something to contribute
- We do not understand what the laws and policies mean and no one thinks it is important that I understand them
- I don't know how to make my voice heard or change things
- I have never been given an opportunity to be included in my community. I need to go to school, and have a job
- Our families do not feel it is important that we vote or have an opinion on laws and policies.
- People do not value us.

Around the world, we need support to make our voices heard. Our voices matter.

Why Does My Voice Matter?



The decisions that governments make affect my life.

I have opinions on things that are important to me.

People in my country need to understand what is important to me and what I need to be supported to live and be included in my community.

We should have a say in what our governments do and how our communities are organized.

It is important that our governments listen to us.

My participation can help build a community that is inclusive and responds to the needs of people with intellectual disabilities.

Making my voice heard is what makes me an equal citizen. I don't want to be left out!

When my voice is heard we know that ALL voices are heard. This makes our communities better for EVERYONE.

When my government understands what is important to me they can make laws and policies that include everyone.

"It's important to be involved so I can get what I need to be involved in the community"

What Does Political Participation Mean?

Political participation is voting and being involved on laws and policies that matter to us. Sometimes it is called civic engagement.

Political participation is about having a say on what is important to me and how I want my country to be. This includes my right to vote and have my voice heard on laws and policies that matter to me.

Political participation is about:

- Making sure governments and political parties in my country include my issues in their priorities
- Voting on election day
- Getting people in the government to follow through on the promises they have made to people with intellectual disabilities and our families.



What Can I Do?

I can:

- Vote
 - ✓ If my country does not let me vote I can work with others to change the laws.
- Join groups that are working on issues important to me
- Work together with others to make sure people in our government are asked questions about disability when they are reviewed by committees at the United Nations
 - ✓ Groups can submit reports to the United Nations. These are called parallel – or shadow – reports



BEFORE Elections

- Talking with political parties and candidates about issues that are important to people with intellectual disability and their families
- Making sure that disability issues are included in the priorities of the people who want to get elected.



DURING Elections

- Being able to vote on election day
- The voting process is easy to access



AFTER Elections

- Making sure that the people elected do what they said they would do for people with intellectual disability and their families.
 - Being involved in making laws and policies
 - Monitoring what the government is doing

CRPD Article 29 in Easy-Read Language

This easy-read version was developed by the Government of the United Kingdom. It uses the language of “disabled people”. We do not like this. We prefer people-first language (ie. person with disability)



Disabled people have the right to take part in politics the same as every one else.

Disabled people have the right to vote by:

- Making sure voting is easy to do and understand.
- Making sure voting is secret.





Allowing support to help people vote in the way they want, when needed.

Making sure disabled people can be involved in non-government organisations and political parties.



Making sure disabled people can join organisations of disabled people.

What Does Article 29 Mean?

Voting is a great way to make my voice heard but not the only way.

If we only look at if I vote we may miss other important ways to make sure my voice is heard in the laws and policies that matter to me.

Article 29 is about a lot of things – not just voting. To summarize, political participation is about making sure that:

- Voting **forms, locations and procedures are easy for me to access**
- I am able to **vote in secret** on the day of elections
- I am supported to get identity cards and birth certificates so that I can register to vote
- **Voting information** such as the location of polling stations and the candidates is available in **accessible formats** – this could be plain language or using pictures
- I can choose who can help me vote. This is sometimes called **Voting assistance**
- I could be elected to **hold public office**
- I can **participate in civil society organizations** which are concerned with the **public and political life** of a country as well as the **administration of political parties**
- I can **form or join organizations** which represent people with disabilities at local, regional, national and international levels.



Why Isn't
My Voice
Heard?



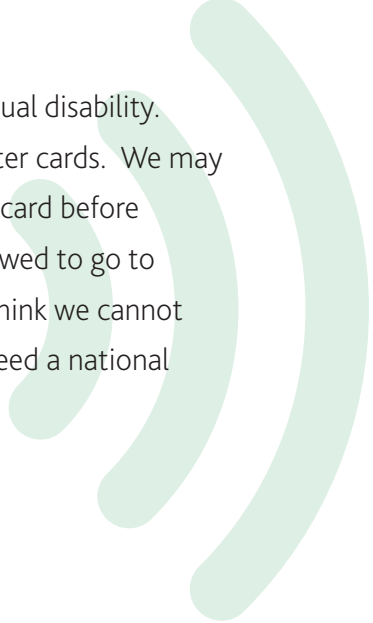
There are many reasons that make it hard for us to vote and have our voices heard on laws and policies that matter to us.

The most common reasons we heard were:

1. We do not have the right to make decisions

- A law may say that we are not allowed to make big decisions – like voting, opening a bank account, signing a contract etc – because we have a disability.
- Our families or others might feel we are not able to make decisions so they do not let us.

2. Our laws or policies do not let us vote

- Some laws say we cannot vote because we have an intellectual disability.
 - We can have a hard time getting national ID card and/or voter cards. We may not have been registered at birth or we may not have had a card before because we have not needed it– we may not have been allowed to go to school or access other services the card provides. If people think we cannot do the same things as everyone else they do not think we need a national identification card
- 

3. We do not have information in plain language

- If we do not have information about candidates and what they want to do or where and how to vote in plain language we are not able to understand and be able to make informed decisions

4. Social and cultural norms

- Many countries think we cannot do things because of our disability. In one country, people said things like:

"I think since their brain is not functioning or since they have a low IQ they cannot be allowed to make any decisions."

"Since they are regarded as fools, anything they say will not be taken into consideration."

5. Understanding My Rights

- I have the same rights as everyone else. We need to educate people so they know this.

6. Realizing my Rights

- I need support to realize my rights. I may need help to make decisions. My community needs to have a law or policy so I can have the supports I need to make my rights real.

7. Not important to me and my family

- I'm worried about other issues. My family and I work hard to make sure I can go to school, or get a job. We worry about what to do so I can live in the community or how I will take care of myself after my parents are gone. Political participation does not always seem as important as these more immediate things.

8. We are excluded

- We are excluded at school and in our communities. We do not get basic civic education and do not understand why it is important. When we are excluded in one part of our life we are likely to be excluded in other parts.

**Making
Change
Happen!**

It can feel overwhelming to understand how to make our voices heard. Here are some ideas to get us started.

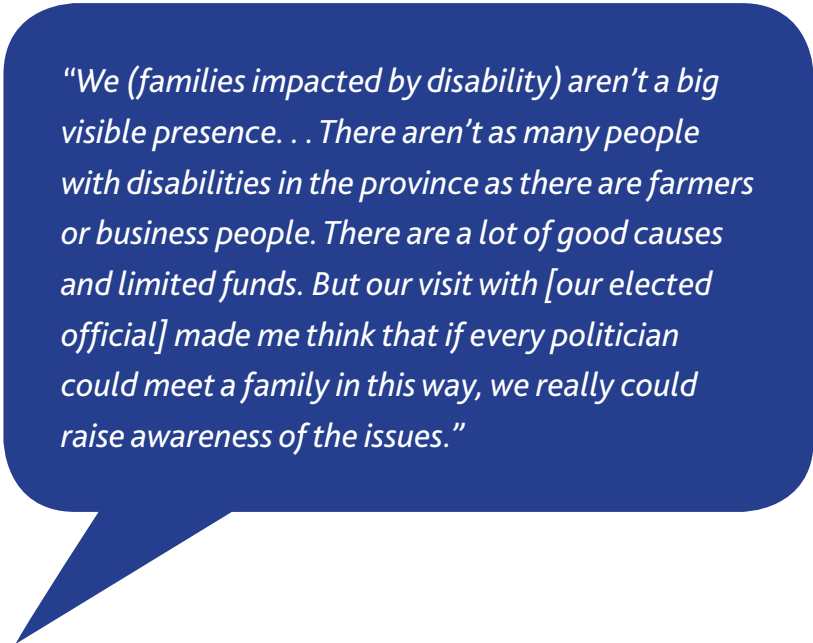
Get informed!

- Ask our families, our friends, people we trust and/or organizations about this issue
- Find out if laws in our country stop us from voting
 - ✓ Work with an organization to use the check list that will tell us if our country is following the CRPD. The check list is in the full report.
- Learn about organizations in our country working on things that are important to us



Make our voices heard

Talk with our elected officials or government representatives. Our representatives are there for us. They have an obligation to listen to us and hear our opinions on issues that matter to us.



“We (families impacted by disability) aren’t a big visible presence. . . There aren’t as many people with disabilities in the province as there are farmers or business people. There are a lot of good causes and limited funds. But our visit with [our elected official] made me think that if every politician could meet a family in this way, we really could raise awareness of the issues.”

We cannot do this alone. Talk with other groups. We need other groups to understand us and what is important to us.

We can:

- Participate in events on civic engagement and political participation
- Share information on issues important to us
- Raise awareness on rights
- Talk about the barriers that get in our way
- Recommend solutions

Change laws and policies

People make laws and policies and we can change them too.

Sometimes it can feel like too many things need to be changed before we make a difference.

Change takes time. Start by focusing on one or two key problems and move from there.

We are already doing this whether we know it or not!

Fighting to make sure we can go to school, or have a job or live in our communities is a form of political participation.

Work together

We need to work with others to make a difference.

- Work with others who have expertise in the issue and help raise their awareness about disability issues.
- Start a group focused on disability rights and political participation.

Be an ADVOCATE

- Identify specific goals we want to achieve.
- Identify the key issues that we are encountering.
- Identify some solutions
- Be clear (as possible) about what we are willing to accept, especially if we cannot get exactly what you want.
- Identify people who may be able to help.
- Identify the people that we need to speak with to achieve results.

Take ACTION

- What is the vision for the future?
- What are the opportunities?
- What information do we have?
- What information do we need?
- Who else can help you?
- Do it in small steps. Have short and long term goals
- Identify what actions or steps need to be taken to achieve each of these goals.



