

Expanding Disability Rights through Political Participation

There are many effective ways to advocate for disability rights. From signing a petition to engaging in a discussion with stakeholders, making meaningful changes to society starts with participating in public life. Political participation provides the opportunity for disability rights advocates to connect with decision-makers.

Why Participate in Political Life?

Building an inclusive society begins with recognizing rights of all citizens. Participating in political life means engaging in society, whether at the level of your neighborhood, town, or at the national level.



A DPO advocate in Sri Lanka provides recommendations on inclusion of persons with disabilities in a new constitution.

Source: IFES

The goal of political participation is to have a voice in the way that the government and policies affect your daily life. These efforts culminate in the achievement of initiatives in sectors outside of politics, everything from inclusive education to [independent living initiatives](#). Participation in political life reflects the diverse set of goals of persons with disabilities. **Political participation is the method by which persons with disabilities are empowered to access to rights and can ensure implementation and enforcement of those rights.**

How Do You Participate in Political Life?

Although it may seem contradictory, political life is more than participating in politics! In fact, citizen engagement can take many forms, several of which are described below.

Civil Society

Civil society groups advocate on behalf of initiatives that are important to them. Disabled persons' organizations (DPOs) are a critical component of civil society, as they empower persons with disabilities to engage fellow citizens on issues such as [employment](#).

Advocacy efforts, such as [lobbying](#), are actions undertaken by civil society to change policies made by governments or other institutions. Signing a petition is one way for civil society groups to voice their concerns to officials. In some countries, petitions can be used to call a referendum on the constitution, which could result in changing laws on guardianship or instituting an employment quota for persons with disabilities.

RightsNow! Action Plans

In Armenia, Kenya, Mexico, and Vietnam, the RightsNow! Consortium supported the development of advocacy action plans by local DPOs. RightsNow! partners -- including Mobility International USA, Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund (DREDF), the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), and US International Council on Disability (USICD) -- trained citizens with disabilities to draft plans to make changes in their communities.

In Mexico, many action plans focused on educational programs and on increasing awareness of mainstreaming students with disabilities in schools. In order to change education policies, participants noted that the first step should be to write to the Secretariat of Public Education. Then, DPOs planned to meet with elected officials.

In this case, DPO representatives noted that engaging with government officials was a necessary step to realizing inclusive education policies in Mexico.

Creating an action plan, for example, allows DPOs to determine which issues are important to them and how they might address those issues. Many [action plans](#) require [communicating with elected officials](#) who have access to resources and information and can make decisions on how those resources are utilized. The calloutbox to the left highlights one example of action planning.

Running for Office

Serving in government is another way to participate politically. [Politicians with disabilities](#) and without disabilities are in a position to put legislation in place to support rights of persons with disabilities. They can also implement and enforce laws, perhaps working toward ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) or harmonizing domestic legislation to be in line with the CRPD.

Voting

Electoral access is a critical component of [political participation](#). On Election Day, voting is a visible form of citizenship. It also provides opportunities for persons with disabilities to be leaders in the community, for example, by taking part in an election access observation or by serving as a member of the election commission.

Importantly, voting results in selecting leaders of local and national governments. The people who are elected into office are those who will be in a position to respond to petitions, meetings, and other encounters with civil society. Conversely, if a politician is not supporting, for example, ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), voters can elect to remove that person from office.