WFD case study: Building a coalition for change to respond to issues faced by people with disabilities in Uganda

Executive summary

Poorly implemented legal protections and societal stigma has resulted in significant barriers to meaningful political participation of people with disabilities (PWDs). The establishment of a coalition for change, facilitated by WFD, brought together civil society organisations, youth organizations, members of parliament, government officials, and PWDs, to advocate for significant changes.

Context

Over the years, Uganda has taken steps to incorporate the rights of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) within their national and legislative framework. The 1995 Constitution and National Policy on Disability 2006 recognise the rights of PWDs to attain their full potential. In line with participation of PWDs in politics, the Parliamentary Elections Statute of 1996 guarantees five positions for PWDs in Parliament, two of which must be female. This act also recognises the use of sign language for the deaf in Parliament. In the same vein, the 1997 Local Government Act provides for representation of PWDs at all local government levels for both males and females. Internationally, Uganda is a signatory to several conventions which provide for protection of the rights of PWDs. These, for example, include the 2008 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Despite Uganda taking steps to incorporate disability inclusion within its legislative framework, the laws in place have several loopholes and are implemented poorly. This, along with societal stigma, and tokenism by way of positive rhetoric which is not supported by political action, has resulted in significant barriers to meaningful political participation by PWDs. When it comes to elections, PWDs face significant challenges before, during, and after the electoral cycle both as voters and candidates. In the previous general elections, voting for PWD representatives was conducted by way of the electoral college as is prescribed by the law. However, this process was hampered by inadequate dissemination of the electoral laws and guidelines for electing representatives of PWDs at national and local government levels. As a result, only those who were familiar with the system for participating in the electoral colleges (either as candidates or voters) took part in these elections. The non-inclusive manner in which PWD representatives are elected has resulted in frustration among those who wish to participate in this process. The process has been noted to be non-transparent, expensive, and unmanageable. As a result, democratic competitiveness for disability-specific positions in Parliament and local councils has been significantly compromised.

What's changed?

In light of these challenges, WFD supported the establishment of ‘coalitions for change’ by bringing together PWD youth leaders, their representatives, PWD advocates, government representatives and civil society actors under their umbrella organisation National Union of Disabled Persons of Uganda (NUDIPU) to discuss issues related to PWD inclusion. Through the establishment of this coalition, civil society actors were able to lobby for changes to enable political participation for
PWDs, with significant results. Uganda Parliamentary Forum on Youth Affairs (UPFYA) members committed to spearhead efforts to support the PWD legislative agenda. In particular, they committed to review the recently passed Persons with Disabilities (PWD) Act 2018 and have it re-tabled for discussion in Parliament. This follows countrywide concerns that the huge gap between MPs representing PWDs and their constituents resulted in this Bill being passed without sufficient consultation with PWDs, despite strong criticism of the inadequate protections set out in this piece of legislation. They also committed to start efforts to advocate for a National Youth PWD representative in Parliament. UPFYA successfully lobbied to have an entire session during the National Youth Moot Parliament dedicated to putting forward strategies to promote increased participation of PWDs in politics. This resulted in proposals to amend the National Youth Council (NYC) Act (2010) to include representation of youth PWDs at all levels and to provide for a national MP representing PWDs. By amending the NYC Act 2010 and reviewing the Persons with Disability Act, Uganda will take a significant leap towards promoting equality of opportunity and encouraging full participation of PWDs in economic and social activities. These changes have been achieved by CSOs scrutinising the performance of parliament and policies on PWD issues and advocating for it in a ‘coalition for change’ facilitated by WFD.

The participation of PWD parliamentary representatives in the ‘coalition for change’ also resulted into MPs presenting a motion to increase budget for PWDs.

**WFD approach to support coalitions for change**

Coalitions for change are informal ways to gather support to bring about policy changes through existing governance structures. Understanding how to engage with different parliamentary committees, networks and debates through which political parties influence decisions made by those representing them in parliament, is therefore critical to influencing how these policy changes can occur. Coalitions for change are powerful tools that harness the power of individuals and civil society to become change agents and forge alliances. They use different strategies, such as advocacy to influence decision makers directly, and campaigning to mobilize public opinion by influencing attitudes and behaviours, which in turn might exert influence over decision makers.

In Uganda, WFD has supported the establishment of a coalition of change, composed of civil society organisations, youth organizations, members of parliament, government officials, and individuals. It has facilitated the organization of a series of roundtables and dialogue sessions that have created a space for the coalition to come together. The establishment of this coalition ensured that a safe policy space was created and facilitated so that PWDs could engage with each other and with other stakeholders, including both state and non-state actors, to influence law and policy for PWDs in a meaningful way. These engagements within the coalition were highly interactive and enabled participants to share experiences and concerns/fears associated with PWD participation in political processes. MP representatives worked within the coalition to map out strategies to meet the PWD legislative agenda. After each engagement, a report highlighting the policy implications and recommendations from the discussion was produced and used to inform further actions of the coalition. A number of ideas and initiatives were discussed, including the auditing of labour laws,
bringing back the PWD Act, hosting a youth parliament for PWDs, auditing political parties on their inclusion of PWDs, and advocacy for a minister of PWDs.