

Ghana – 2000 – General Elections

Hello. I'm Jerry Mendez and I am an inclusive development specialist and consultant living outside of Washington. For 10 years I worked for the International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES) from 1997 until 2007. I started there as their disability advisor. I became a senior advisor for human rights and then the Director of Strategic Business Development. Today I'm going to talk about, for this stories of democracy project, I'm gonna talk about something we started at IFES in 1997 called the Global Initiative to Enfranchise Citizens with Disabilities. These were activities that, the activities I'm going to discuss, were implemented between 1998 and 2002 and they were designed and implemented by IFES. The first of the three was a global initiative to analyse election laws which led to activities at the country level and I'll focus on one Ghana and then also an activity at the global level. And that was a project to try to create global standards for the electoral participation and the electoral rights of citizens with disabilities.

So let's start at the beginning. One the series of activities called the Global initiative to enfranchise citizens with disabilities began in 1997, and the purpose was to advance the electoral rights in participation of citizens with disabilities. It is still in operation at IFES. In 1997, IFES staff person Rebecca Reichert obtained the first grant for Ipi from the United Nations. To launch this project. It was about \$10,000, and the purpose of that money was to include persons with disabilities in the monitoring of elections in the Dominican Republic. The United Nations Office knew of me and recommended me to IFES, and that's how I began my tenure there. This effort was also supported by then IFES Vice President, Jeff Fisher. Jeff had been a domestic election officer in the United States and therefore knew first hand about the intersection of US elections and the Americans with Disabilities Act, enacted in 1990, and Fisher supported this effort at first because he did not see disability access issues surfaced in global elections for people with disabilities.

In the earliest years, funding was received from the United Nations. As I said from Finland. And then by 2002, from the US Department of State after that, this became a project funded in large part by the US Agency for International Development. One of the first activities we conducted was an analysis of election laws. IFES had its own library which contained copies of election laws, and we conducted an analysis of every law we could obtain to determine what, if any, legal. What, if any, laws contained barriers to the full and equal participation of people with disabilities? This effort was funded by the Foreign Ministry of Finland. The research identified several significant concerns, including the following: voters with visual impairments were denied the right to vote independently and in secret. Pejorative language was used to disenfranchise citizens

who are deaf and those with mental disabilities. And there was no mention of access for voting for citizens with mobility impairments in most laws. This research influenced subsequent activities, including the following two that are highlighted in this presentation. The research at that time was conducted by then IFES intern Daniel Nadel. Dan is now a senior diplomat at the US Department of State and the Human Rights advocate.

The first activity I'll discuss is at the national level and there was election monitoring in Ghana by citizens with disabilities. This happened in 2000. And I supported what is believed to be the first effort in the world by citizens with disabilities to monitor their own country's elections. IFES worked with and provided funding to local organizations, including Action on Disability and Development based in Tamale in northern Ghana and that is the local branch of AUK based organization. And funding to the Ghana Federation of Persons with Disabilities. And the purpose of these investments in these two organizations was to recruit, train, equip and deploy 77 persons with disabilities to monitor national elections in several cities and towns. Monitors included citizens who were blind citizens who were deaf. Citizens with mobility impairments, including wheelchair users, 45% of the monitors with disabilities were women.

Generally, these citizens monitored elections at polling places where they voted in their own communities in the capital Accra, and in nine towns in northern Ghana. One positive side effect of monitoring where they lived and voted was that their community saw these citizens with disabilities as visible supporters of democracy in their country, in their communities. And it was not how they often viewed citizens with disabilities. This was a positive step. This first initial effort to buy citizens to monitor their own elections was funded by the Swedish International Development Agency. Among the findings and suggested solutions that the monitors identified were the following. The denial of the right to a secret ballot to voters with visual impairments. Which led to strategies suggested strategies to develop and test a tactile or Braille ballot that can be used independent of assistance. The lack of physical accessibility of some polling stations. Which led to the suggestion to develop standards for the selection of polling places at future elections in Ghana. Apparent low turnout of voters with disabilities, which led to the suggestion of steps which elections and disability organizations together can take to increase voter registration, voter turnout and voter education. In subsequent elections in Ghana. The apparent lower than average number of citizens with disabilities who are registered to vote in Ghana was also noticed with steps which elections and disability organizations can take to address this concern. And the lack of voter education and voter information available accessible to voters with hearing or visual disabilities. And finally, the issue of citizens with psychiatric or mental disabilities and the potential for their electoral enfranchisement.

Following this election, I was using money from Finland, funded a workshop where representatives of the Ghana Federation of Persons with Disabilities and Action on Disability and Development met with officials from the Ghana Elections Commission. To share findings from their monitoring effort, this was the first substantive exchange between these two entities between citizens with disabilities and their election Commission. Also, IFES funded a second workshop where blind citizens work with the Ghana Election Commission to develop a pilot project to enable blind voters to vote independently and in secret. They developed a folder into which the ballot was inserted. The folder contained on its cover tactile cues including rubber, cement and cutouts that enable blind voters to identify. Where their candidate was positioned in order and where to mark the ballot and then to remove the ballot themselves from the folder and insert it into the ballot box. This pilot was successfully scaled nationally.

In subsequent elections, with funding from the United States government, a positive and cascading impact of this election monitoring effort by Ghanaians with disabilities was not a member of the international observers, was a member of the Sierra Leone Election Commission. This individual witnessed the election monitoring effort by citizens with disabilities and invited IFES to come to Sierra Leone to work in it to advance disability access in forthcoming elections in that country. A major concern in Sierra Leone, this is post conflict, was that many individuals had their hands cut off. As an act of terrorism during the conflict, many of these individuals lived in refugee camps and Ivis went with the election Commission to those camps to identify and work with those citizens and get their input about how they could vote independently and secret. And how their toes, instead of their fingernails, could be marked to indicate that they had voted. This led to a very successful second intervention.

Looking back, the Ghana effort was also an early example of what we would now refer to as inclusive development and localization. Example, I first used donor funds to meaningfully involve historically marginalized people to design International Development agendas, interventions to shape their own destiny, to shape their own inclusion, and we provided direct support to local organizations to advance inclusive goals. Building on IFES research on election laws and its national experience in Ghana and elsewhere. Ivis and the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, I. E. A, convened, designed and convened a global conference on the electoral rights of citizens with disabilities. This conference was held in Sweden in 2002. Attending the conference in Sweden were representatives of 40 organizations, including 14 organizations representing citizens with disabilities, including the Heads of National Federations of Persons with disabilities from multiple countries, as well as leaders of organizations representing persons who are blind persons who are deaf and blind.

Persons who are deaf persons with psychiatric disabilities, persons with physical disabilities and persons with intellectual disabilities. Other attendees included election officials from the Global, North and South. Three members of Parliament from the global representing the Inter Parliamentary Union, and election and democracy experts from organizations such as the OSCE, IFES and IDEA.

The outcomes of the conference over several days conference attendees drafted, finalized and signed what became known as the Bill of Electoral Rights for Citizens with Disabilities. An ambitious effort to rewrite and make disability inclusive the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The Bill of Rights addressed the spectrum of electoral and political rights, including the right to register and vote and the right to compete for and hold elective office. The conference also included a number of breakthrough moments and outcomes. The first is what I'll call, inclusive budgeting. I puts in ID as budget from again from Sweden. Included cost to cover travel and per diem expenses incurred by the disability leaders from global health. This even today is often not done at global conferences, and it ensured what we'll call the concept of the importance of being in the room. The conference emphasized and exemplified the importance of being mindful of who is in the room and who needs to be in the room when decisions are made about persons with disabilities and other marginalized groups. The phrase in use, now coined by the disability rights movement, is nothing about us without us. Many election officials present in Sweden have never met their, quote, "disability counterparts" from their own country. And very few, if any, had met an advocate for the users and survivors of psychiatry as an organization present was called. This proved important to ensuring that the conference attendees address the rights of citizens with mental impairments, including those who had spent time. In mental institutions, sometimes against their will.

The conference also, like the Ghana election monitoring effort, represented another early example of inclusive development. One participant at the conference was Bengt Lindqvist, a blind parliamentarian from Sweden, who is also at that time, the UN Special rapporteur On for persons with disabilities, after the conference. Mr Lindqvist shared with me that his participation in this conference will influence what would become the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, ensuring that it included the guarantee of political rights. At that time, draughts of the UN Convention did not include political rights for persons with disabilities, so the conference helped to provide that breakthrough language and moment. Final thoughts. It is exciting to note that this initiative at IFES continues to this day, 25 years after it began, and that it has influenced the practises of numerous other election democracy building organizations. And even funding organizations.

I am particularly pleased that International IDEA has chosen this topic. To spotlight this oral history, stories of democracy project. So I thank them very much. If anyone listening to this wants more information, they can feel free to contact me at my username, which is my full name, JerryMendez@gmail.com. Thank you very much for your attention today.