

Disability and political participation in Ghana: an alternative perspective

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Persons with disabilities (PWDs) rarely attain political positions in Ghana. This relates more to the scenario of PWDs as candidates contesting for political position than the mere participation as voters. The core objective of this article is to examine the extent to which local politics remain directly accessible to PWDs in Ghana. In specific terms, this study seeks to analyse the context within which PWDs strive for political inclusion into the local government system, to identify and examine the factors impeding the participation of PWDs in local politics. Findings from the survey linked the inadequate political representation of PWDs to multiple factors, namely: (1) stigmatization and negative social perception regarding the capabilities of PWDs, (2) lack of resources, including financial and logistical support, required for effective campaign, (3) accessibility challenges relating to the built environment, communication and information access and (4) educational background of PWDs. Flowing from these outcomes, the prospect of affirmative political action as a ‘gap-bridging’ alternative has been examined. The research methodology was primarily qualitative.

Keywords: disability; politics; Ghana

Introduction

The participation of persons with disabilities (PWDs) in Ghanaian politics has been very low (JMK Consulting Group 2008). This phenomenon is not however peculiar to countries in the developing world. Even, in highly developed countries and relatively socially inclusive states like the USA, Canada and Europe, PWDs remain (relatively) politically marginalized (Schur and Adya, 2006; Alvarez 2012; Prince 2007). According to Schur and Adya (2006), compared to those without disabilities, stigmatization and discrimination associated with disability may combine with isolation and diminished resources to reduce the interest of PWDs in politics.

In Europe for instance, a previous study (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights/FRA 2010)¹ showed that the right to political participation by PWDs with mental health challenges, varied from outright exclusion and limited participation to full participation. According to FRA (2010), the European Court of Human Rights considers exclusion based on disability, as a breach of the European Convention on Human Rights, to which all EU member states remain signatories (2010, 28). Within the last decade, countries such as Austria, Netherlands, Spain, Finland, Sweden and the UK have shifted

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towards full participation of PWDs in the electoral process (2010), irrespective of the nature of disability. In Canada, Prince (2007) has attributed the under representation of PWDs who participated as candidates in municipal, provincial and federal elections, to negative public attitudes about people with disabilities, and lack of resources for candidates with disabilities.

A recent event in Ghana shows the extent to which negative cultural practices and social perceptions impact on the participation of disabled people in politics. After his successful election as the President of Ghana, John Mahama nominated his first batch of ministers for vetting by parliament in January 2013. Among the nominees was Dr Henry Seidu Danaa a lawyer with visual impairment, who was assigned to the Ministry for Chieftaincy and Traditional Affairs. Following the appointment, some local chiefs protested against the nomination (<http://thechronicle.com.gh>: 17 August 2013). Among the chiefs who openly criticized the appointment was the Paramount Chief of Seikwa in the Brong Ahafo Region, Nana Kwaku Dwomo Ankoana II, who described the president's nomination as an 'abomination' (<http://www.modernghana.com>, 17 February 2013). The critics maintained that aspects of the tradition and customs in some traditional areas did not allow PWDs to hold such high offices.

In response to the chief's pronouncement, there was condemnation from a section of civil society organization, especially from the Ghana Federation of the Disabled (GFD) and Amnesty International (<http://www.citifmonline.com>, 4 February 2013). In a press statement, the GFD emphasized that the appointment of a disabled person to a ministerial position was in accordance with the principles of inclusive governance and social justice. The Federation argued that while there was no Ghanaian law restricting PWDs from such public positions, the appointment was based on the competence of the candidate (<http://www.modernghana.com>, 17 February 2013). Indeed, apart from being the first visually impaired lawyer in Ghana, the nominee had also served as the director of research to the ministry for more than a decade. Consequently, the appointment committee of parliament approved the nominee as the substantive minister for chieftaincy and traditional affairs.

To a significant extent, the aforementioned incident provides some insight regarding the extent to which Ghana's democratic governance has deepened since the return to multiparty rule in 1992. Despite the opportunities offered by the current dispensation, PWDs still remain politically marginalized. While the country's current decentralization system is meant to be accessible to all Ghanaians, the participation of PWDs in local governance remains very limited. A contextual analysis (JMK Consulting Group 2008) of the disability situation in Ghana showed that despite provisions in Chapter 5 of the 1992 Republican Constitution which gives equal rights of participation to every citizen, participation among PWDs in governance has been very low.

It is significant to note that since the return to democratic rule in 1992, and prior to the appointment of the first disabled minister in January 2013, neither had a single PWD been appointed as minister of state nor a District Chief Executive (JMK Consulting Group 2008, 47). Since 1992, only a few PWDs have attempted contesting elections as parliamentary candidates while a few (unconfirmed number) have contested district assembly elections. Even the few PWDs who managed to contest in the local elections had to contend with a high level of stigmatization and relative lower access to campaign resources (interview, Director GSPD & former PWD parliamentary aspirant, February 4, 2013).

Currently, there are 216 districts/municipal/metropolitan assemblies in Ghana (www.ghanadistricts.com 08/07/2013). Each assembly is composed of an average of 45 elected and appointed members (interview former Assembly member, January 31, 2013). This puts the figure of local assembly members across the country at approximately 9720. Available records² at the GFD indicate that less than 20 PWDs (interview, Director, March 3, 2013) currently serve in the various district assemblies across the country.³

Operationalization

Disability

For the purpose of this article, the term disability is restricted to the United Nations (UN) definition of the concept. According to the UN, 'disability is an evolving concept and that disability results from the interaction between a person with impairment and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others' (United Nations 2006, 1). To a significant extent, the aforementioned conception of disability has been adapted from the social model of disability (Oliver 1990) which holds that while a person may have a physical or sensory impairment, he or she is not actually a disabled until the person is excluded from full participation in society as a result of barriers created by society. Such social barriers may include stigmatization and discrimination against persons from employment or educational opportunities as result of their impairment. The barriers may also include lack of provision of appropriate technological devices and enabling environment that could hinder the participation of PWDs in societal life.

Thus in contrast to the traditional or medical notion of disability which emphasized a person's physical or sensory impairment, the social conception puts more emphasis on the limitations placed on a person with impairment, through their interaction with society (Oliver 1990). The fundamental implication for the adoption of the UNCRPD is that rather than PWDs having to fit into the way society is organized, it is now considered an obligation for the state and society to make all sectors of social life accessible to PWDs (FRA 2010).

Political participation (accessibility)

As used in this article, political participation or accessibility refers to the active or direct involvement, engagement in politics or public affairs as contestants vying or seeking to be elected as representatives of a particular constituency. This also includes participation in public affairs as government appointees or nominees. This level of political participation is clearly distinguished from the passive or indirect involvement in decision-making or political process as voters. This clarification is considered relevant because discussion on the participation of PWDs politics is often centred on the extent to which they participate in electoral politics as voters (Alvarez 2012, 4).

Alvarez (2012) has noted that the procedure of voter registration and casting of ballot have remained 'the primary ways in which social scientists have defined political participation – primarily because these activities generate data that can be easily gathered and analyzed' (2012, 8). Alvarez emphasized the limitation of such conceptualization and suggested the need to broaden the definition of political participation since the disabled population could also engage in other forms of political activities beyond registration and casting of votes. In the case of Ghana, state and civil society interventions aimed at promoting the political participation of PWDs in the country often focus on the traditional

assumption of creating enabling environment and assistive devices that could enable PWDs to register and cast their votes and rarely targets initiatives that could promote the participation of PWDs as political aspirants.

Methodology

The study mainly relied on qualitative research methods, i.e. a case study. The population for the study included representatives of five major Disabled People’s organizations (DPOs) namely the Ghana Society of the Physically Disabled (GSPD), the Ghana Blind Union (GBU), the Ghana Association of the Deaf (GNAD), the Mental Health Society of Ghana (MEHSOG)⁴ and the Ghana Association of Persons with Albinism (GAPA). The participants were drawn from four districts (municipalities), namely: Tano North, Sunyani East, New Juaben and Akuapim North.⁵ Tano South and New Juaben were purposely chosen because PWDs with previous experience in the district assembly election (as contestants) were known to be residents, while Sunyani East and Akuapim North Districts were conveniently selected because local chapters of the GSPD existed there. This made it possible to have access to PWDs for personal interviews. GAPA and MEHSOG members were however drawn from Accra, the National capital, since the two DPOs did not have branches in the four districts.

A combination of quota and purposive sampling techniques was adopted to select a sample size of 53 respondents of which 45 were PWDs and 8 were local government officials without disability. The quota sampling was meant to ensure that the members of five disability organizations, namely: GSPD, GBU, GNAD, MEHSOG and GAPA were proportionally represented in the study. Besides the quota sampling was also meant to ensure that the outcome of the study reflects the perspectives of the various subgroups within the disability rights movement. The purposive sampling ensured that the perspectives of key informants, particularly persons with practical experience in decentralization system and local politics, were adequately captured. Table 1 captures the category and number of respondents covered by the survey.

Table 1. Category and number of respondents covered in the survey.

Category of respondents	Number of respondents in the four districts					Subtotal
	New Juaben	Akwapim North	Sunyani	Tano North	Other (Accra)	
<i>Disability organizations</i>						
GSPD	3	3	2	3	1	12
GBU	2	4	2	2	1	11
GNAD	2	2	4	2	1	11
MEHSOG	–	–	–	–	4	4
GAPA	–	–	–	–	4	4
<i>Other institutions</i>						
Reps of municipal and district assemblies	2	1	2	1	–	6
Social welfare department	1	1	1	1	1	5
Total						53

Participation of PWDs in Ghanaian politics

Generally the level of participation by PWDs in politics is very low in Ghana. Besides, there is no affirmative policy or any other system that promotes PWDs' political participation both at the local and national levels. While candidates or elected representatives with mobility-related impairments such as wheelchair users, the blind and the partially sighted may encounter accessibility-related challenges relating to the built environment, political aspirants with hearing impairment would have difficulties interacting with or campaigning for votes from the hearing public.

Even though PWDs could influence the outcome of national development agenda as part of civil society, without necessarily running for political office, the spirit of the National Disability Act and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) to which Ghana remains a signatory, support both direct and indirect representation. Article 29 of the Convention for instance obliges states parties to guarantee the political rights of PWDs in the following terms:

- (a) To ensure that persons with disabilities can effectively and fully participate in political and public life on an equal basis with others, directly or through freely chosen representatives, including the right and opportunity for persons with disabilities to vote and be elected, inter alia, by: (i) Ensuring that voting procedures, facilities and materials are appropriate, accessible and easy to understand and use;
- (ii) Protecting the right of persons with disabilities to vote by secret ballot in elections and public referendums without intimidation, and to stand for elections, to effectively hold office and perform all public functions at all levels of government, facilitating the use of assistive and new technologies where appropriate. (UNCRPD Article 29)

Thus while PWDs could still have their concerns captured in national development programmes without necessarily participating directly in politics, within the disability rights movement, self-representation is preferred to the system in which the interest of PWDs is represented by non-PWDs. This preference is well captured by the 'nothing about us without us' slogan of the international disability rights movement.

In the mid-1990s, in line with the spirit of self-representation and principles of participatory development, the movement advocated for a quota inclusion of PWDs among government appointees to the district and municipal assemblies. Between 1996 and 2000, following the lobbying, the then National Democratic Congress (NDC) Government included some (unspecified number) PWDs in the assemblies (interview, Director⁶ GSPD, February 4, 2013). The initiative was however abolished after the 2000 general elections. In 2010, as part of the submissions made to the Constitutional Review Commission,⁷ the GFD proposed an affirmative action to ensure the representation of PWDs in parliament and appointments to other public positions. This proposal has not yet been adopted by the state.

Findings from the four districts

Findings from the fieldwork indicated that, the four districts namely: New Juaben, Akuapim North, Sunyani East and Tano North had a total number of 220 assembly members. These included both elected members and government appointees. Out of the total, those who contested for their positions constituted 164 which amounted to 74.6% of assembly membership. There were 56 government appointees which approximated to 25.4% of assembly members in all the four project districts.

Out of the 164 elected members, there were only 3 PWDs. Thus PWDs accounted for less than 2% of all elected assembly members in the four districts while non-PWDs represented about 98%. With regard to those appointed by the government, there was only 1 PWD out of 56 appointees. Table 2 shows the total number of assembly members while Table 3 sums up the composition of elected members. With regard to the figures for the individual districts, there was no PWD out of the total number of 53 elected assembly members in the Akuapim North District Assembly (interview Administrative officer, February 12, 2013). Similarly there was no PWD among the 24 government appointees in the assembly. Thus out of the total of 77 assembly members in the district, none was a PWD. In the case of Tano North District, out of the total of 36 assembly members, 25 were elected while 11 were government appointees (interview Admin officer, 2013). There was no PWD among the elected members. However there was 1 PWD among the 11 government appointees.

Out of the total of 49 assembly members in the Sunyani East Municipal Assembly (interview Admin officer, Sunyani, February 25, 2013), there was no PWD among the elected neither was there a PWD among the government appointees. The New Juaben Municipal Assembly had a total of 58 assembly members, 35 were elected while 23 were government appointees. Out of the four localities studied, it was only New Juaben municipality which had two PWDs in the assembly. The two representatives had contested and won their seats. There was no PWD among the government appointees (interview Assembly member, social welfare officer, Koforidua, February 28, 2013). There was one PWD in the municipality who had lost his seat after two successful terms.

Factors accounting for the low participation

The following have been identified among the major factors accounting for the low participation of PWDs in politics:

- (1) Stigmatization and negative public attitudes towards people with disabilities
- (2) Lack of material (financial resources)
- (3) Accessibility-related hindrances relating to the built environment (for people with mobility impairments) and communication needs of PWDs (especially for deaf and blind people) and the
- (4) Impact of education background of PWDs.

Stigmatization and negative attitudes as a barrier to political inclusion of PWDs

Over 95% of PWDs who participated in the study maintained that stigmatization and negative social perception regarding the capabilities of PWDs play a major role in their

Table 2. Total number of assembly members in the four districts.

	No. of elected Assembly members	No. of appointed members	Subtotal
<i>District/municipality</i>			
Akuapim North	53	24	77
New Juaben	48	10	58
Sunyani East	38	11	49
Tano North	25	11	36
		Grand Total	220

Table 3. Composition of elected assembly members in project districts.

District	No. of male assembly members without disability	No. of female assembly members without disability	Male PWD members	Female PWD members	Total	Percentage of PWDs
Akuapim North	46	7	0	0	53	0
New Juaben	46	10	2	0	58	0
Sunyani East	38	11	0	0	49	0
Tano North	24	0	0	0	25	0

marginalization from politics. These findings corroborate with the work of Schur and Adya (2006), Alvarez (2012) and Prince (2007). Stigmatization and negative social perception are among the major challenges confronting PWDs in Ghana. This negative attitude is rooted in local religious beliefs, tradition and customs. The protest by local chiefs against the appointment of the visually impaired minister (as noted in the introduction) is a case in point. In many local communities, physical and sensory impairments such as blindness, deafness, mental illness, albinism, etc. are believed to be punishment caused by the gods. Thus in many Ghanaian communities PWDs are not allowed to be chiefs, even if they are born to a royal family (Slikker 2009; JMK Consulting Group 2008). Even in the current secular democratic dispensation this tradition can be said to have impacted negatively on the low participation of PWDs in politics. In this regard, even where PWDs aspiring to contest for political office are highly educated, and have the resources to finance their election campaign, they may feel discouraged to venture into politics. Even though a few PWDs were able to win district assembly elections, these were isolated cases. In fact, there have been recorded cases (JMK Consulting Group 2008) of PWDs being mocked for daring to contest for assembly positions. In the majority of cases, PWDs never fared well in those elections.

Lack of financial resources as an obstacle to political inclusion of PWDs

Article 42 of Ghana's 1992 Constitution and national Disability Act grants equal rights of participation to every citizen. This includes the right to vote and stand for elections. However, in reality, the contest for political office comes with enormous financial cost (Asante, Victor, and George 2011). It is very expensive to undertake a sustainable political campaign in Ghana. This includes the cost of mobilization and publicity via TV and radio advertisement, printing of banners, flyers, posters, bill boards and organization of political rallies. Besides, modern political campaigns also require means of transportation and extensive telecommunication.

While the cost of political campaign remains exorbitant, the majority of PWDs in Ghana are not financially endowed enough to meet such cost. Lack of employment due to inadequate education and lack of training in employable skills have served as obstacles to their economic independence. This has contributed to the economic marginalization of PWDs. Moreover, the majority of PWDs in trade usually find themselves in the informal sector of the economy where they find it difficult to access credit to either start trade or

expand their business (JMK Consulting Group 2008). PWDs often find it difficult to access loans because they often do not have the collateral required by the financial institutions (JMK Consulting Group 2008).

It is therefore not surprising that about 90% of the respondents (interview PWDs Sunyani and Koforidua, January/March, 2013) considered the lack of financial resources as one of the major challenges obstructing the participation of PWDs in local politics. They emphasized that in recent times the cost of running an effective political campaign has increased considerably. Thus considering the relatively lower economic status and low living standards in the disabled community (Kassah 2008), only a negligible proportion of PWDs would be able to afford the cost of maintaining an effective electioneering campaign apparatus.

Even though the National Disability Act, and the Labor Act 651 of 2003, has provisions to ensure the employment of PWDs, these statutes have not been implemented. The Labor Act for instance provides for the establishment of centres of disablement in every district, to ensure the registration and employment placement of PWDs. The Disability Act also makes provision for tax rebate for employers who recruit PWDs. In the case of the Disability Act, the legislative instruments supposed to guide its implementation are yet to be developed.

It is equally imperative to note that, to a significant extent, success in Ghana politics depends partly on the extent to which candidates provide for the private (material) needs of their constituents (Ayee 2008; Bratton and Van de Walle 1994; Asante, Victor, and George 2011; Amundsen 2011). These demands may range from (but not limited to) school fees of their wards, hospital bills, money for food, funeral expenses and host of other tangibles. The relatively lower economic status of the majority of PWDs (Slikker 2009; Kassah 2008) hardly makes the affordability of such political 'clientelism' feasible for most PWDs. Thus even in a situation where disabled political aspirants are able to get sponsorship to finance their political campaigns, sustaining their support base could be very challenging (interview former Assembly member/PWD, Koforidua, January 31, 2013) in the midst of the prevailing 'patron-client' relationship associated with Ghanaian politics. Thus, coupled with stigmatization, the cost of sustainable and effective campaign also impedes prospective PWDs aspirants from venturing into active politics.

Environmental and communication/information accessibility-related challenges

The various categories of PWDs face different accessibility challenges. While deaf and blind people face peculiar communication challenges on account of their visual and hearing impairment, persons with mobility impairment such as wheel chairs users have difficulty accessing an 'unfriendly' built environment. Thus even in a situation where aspiring PWDs politician meets other conditions such as adequate financial resources and educational background, these communication and environmental challenges become additional obstacles. PWDs who use wheel chairs will, for instance, find it difficult accessing inappropriately designed centres and platforms where political rallies and conventions are held. Deaf and hard-of-hearing politicians will also find it difficult interacting with the hearing public and participating effectively in political debates without the services of sign language interpreters or assistive technology devices such as Communication Access Real-time Translation (CART). In a similar vein, blind politicians will find it challenging accessing information such as policy documents without brailing services.

The implication of the communication challenges is that prospective PWDs politicians would not be able to better articulate the development concerns of their constituencies or react appropriately to the arguments and proposals of their opponents. While the use of assistive technology devices has proved effective in bridging the communication barrier between PWDs and non-PWDs, such interventions have not been properly developed in Ghana. For instance, there are only few sign language interpreters in Ghana, most of whom are not properly trained or certified. Similarly assistive technologies for blind persons such as the use of braille machines are rare in the country. Many public places remain inaccessible to PWDs. An accessibility audit undertaken in 2007, for instance, showed that, even the National House of Parliament was not accessible to PWDs with mobility impairment (JMK Consulting Group 2008). Similarly there is no assistive device available to make the translation of parliamentary proceedings understandable to the deaf and hard of hearing, as there is not a single CART service in the country. It is significant to reiterate that while the National Disability Act (715) and the UNCRPD (which Ghana has ratified) make provision for such services, the laws have not been implemented.

These concerns have been among the advocacy issues championed by the disability rights movement. Since the 2004 general elections, there has been some collaboration between the GFD, the National Electoral Commission (NEC) and the Coalition of Domestic Election Observers (CODEO), aimed at making national politics inclusive for PWDs. This collaboration has partly succeeded in making tactile ballots available for blind voters, and providing sign language interpreters for deaf persons at selected voting centres. It also ensured that voting centres were relatively accessible to wheel chair users and other persons with mobility impairment. Also, since 2004, some PWDs have been included among CODEO observers (participant observation 2008/2012).

At best, the aforementioned accommodations have been geared towards creating enabling environments for PWDs to cast their vote, rather than participating in the election as contestants. It is expected that with the appointment of the first disabled person⁸ as a minister of state, the requisite enabling environment would be created to make the political inclusion of PWDs a reality in Ghana.

Relationship between education and political participation by PWDs

Several studies have linked the level of formal education to participation in politics. Hillygus (2005) has identified three contending perspectives that link formal education to political engagement. These include: the civic education hypothesis, the social network hypothesis and the political meritocracy hypothesis. According to Hillygus (2005), 'the most prominent explanation for the link between education and political participation is the civic education theory' (Hillygus 2005, 27). In the words of Hillygus, 'the civic education hypothesis is rooted in the belief that education provides both the skills necessary to become politically engaged and the knowledge to understand and accept democratic principles' (Hillygus 2005, 27). The proposition is that educated persons participate in politics at higher rates because their educational background enables them to understand the abstract subject of politics (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993 in Hillygus 2005). Hillygus however maintained that not just any education but rather a civic education is what endowed citizens with the capacity to appreciate and participate more in politics, as compared to those without education.

Contrary to the civic education theory, the political meritocracy hypothesis (Hermstein and Murray 1994; Luskin 1990 in Hillygus 2005) holds that it is intelligence, rather than mere education, that accounts for the higher rates of political engagement. In response to the civic education theory, Nie, Junn and Stehlik-Barry (1996 in Hillygus 2005) also maintained that education is not necessarily the underlying factor for political participation. To Nie, Junn and Stehlik-Barry (1996 in Hillguys 2005) while formal education is important to political participation, it is the proximity to a social network of political elites and the extent to which educated persons are mobilized that play the most crucial role. While the three perspectives differ in depth of analysis, there is a general consensus that education plays a fundamental role in political socialization, interest articulation and interest aggregation, which are crucial for political engagement.

Moreover, not only does education enhance self-confidence but also the participation in modern politics (as contestant) requires adequate knowledge in development issues ranging from socio-economic matters to science and technology, agriculture, health, energy, environment, etc. Obviously, to be a successful politician in contemporary times, one must be able to digest and articulate such development issues, which are often documented and stored in written text. With good education aspiring politicians could understand such development issues and the link to better interest articulation. Thus even though the attainment of formal education is not a legal prerequisite for contesting political office or venturing into active politics, persons with significant levels of education are likely to perform better as politicians.

Against this background, it is relevant to point out that PWDs in Ghana are less educated relative to non-PWDs (JMK Consulting Group 2008). In their contextual study of the disability situation in Ghana, the JMK group attributed the gap to lack of effective special and inclusive education systems in the country. The study for instance showed that:

Special schools for the deaf and the blind are very limited in Ghana thus further compounding their life chances. Statistics show that there are 10 residential primary and junior secondary schools for the deaf, 1 primary and junior secondary day school and 1 residential senior secondary technical school in Ghana. These institutions use the regular school curriculum. All subjects are studied, with the exception of Ghanaian languages and French. Assessment of pupils and students are the same as in regular schools ... 3.5 percent of children with hearing impairment have access to education compared to the national average of 6 percent for PWDs. For females with hearing impairment, the situation is quite worrisome given their present enrolment rate. (JMK Consulting Group 2008, 47)

Even though special and inclusive education policies exist, much of the provision is not implemented because the assistive technology and human resources required for the implementation of such policies are not available. The study (JMK Consulting Group 2008) also found that many PWDs abandoned school because of long distance of commuting from home to schools, while other PWDs did not get the necessary family support to attend school or further their education. Other PWDs, according to the study, abandoned their education as a result of stigmatization and derogatory remarks by their peers. Furthermore, in view of the pervasive stigmatization towards PWDs, some parents refuse to send their disabled wards to school (Slikker 2009; JMK Consulting Group 2008). In fact, there have been instances of many parents hiding their disabled children in their homes (JMK Consulting Group 2008). Ultimately, the implication of inadequate education on political

participation of PWDs is that, as compared non-PWDs, only few PWDs aspiring for political positions are likely able to better articulate the development concerns of their constituencies.

Bridging the gap: the prospects and challenges of affirmative action

Affirmative action usually involves a national legislation or state policy that seeks to grant specified quotas in relation to socio-economic and political opportunities to specific subgroups in order to bridge existing disparities in a given state (Thomas 2007). Affirmative action usually involves the granting of specific quota of desirable socio-economic outputs such as educational, political and employment opportunities. For instance, in response to an advocacy initiative for employment by the disability rights movement, the government may, by a national employment policy or constitutional amendment, legislate that 5% of all public sector jobs must be reserved for PWDs. Thus affirmative action is usually regarded as an inclusive policy which compensates for past discrimination and bridges inequality gaps between various groups.

In Africa, Uganda has been among the countries with affirmative political seats for PWDs and women. The country for instance has five seats in parliament reserved PWDs, while sign language and Braille are now recognized as official languages in parliament, and courts of law (Kandyomunda et al. 2012).

As previously noted, the NDC Government included some PWDs among its appointees to the various district assemblies, between 1996 and 2000. According to the former director of GSPD (interview February 4, 2013) who also served as a government appointee in the Tano North District Assembly, the system was abandoned after the 2000 general election, which was won by the New Patriotic party (NPP). This is partly because the previous initiative was not an official National Policy but based on the prerogative of the NDC Government. According to the respondent (Kandyomunda et al. 2012), the previous initiative worked mainly on partisan basis thus PWDs who were appointed belonged to the then ruling party.

Consequently, in its 2008 advocacy strategy document, the GFD (2008) resolved not only to build the capacity of PWDs to apply and stand for political office but also to advocate for the appointment of PWDs to higher political offices. The federation acknowledged that there were few PWDs in high positions in government even though many of them qualified for such positions. The federation sought to impress upon the government, through the Public Service Commission to:

- (1) Reserve at least 1% of all appointments to senior positions such as chief directors and deputy directors of ministries; heads of departments and agencies to qualified PWDs.
- (2) Ensure that every state ministry, department and agencies (MDAs) have at least 1% of employees who are qualified PWDs.

Subsequently, the federation submitted the proposal to the National Constitutional Review Commission in 2010. The proposal has not however been considered among the ongoing legislative amendments in the country. It is assumed that the appointment of Dr Henry Danaa, as the minister of the chieftaincy and culture, remains a major outcome of the aforementioned advocacy efforts. If institutionalized, affirmative action could encourage PWDs to go into active politics. By so doing, PWDs could contest political positions on the ticket of the various political parties.

Counter arguments and challenges to affirmative action

Despite its inclusive appeal, there is no unanimous position on affirmative action. According to Thomas (2007), there have been some dissensions in countries like the USA and India where affirmative policies such as employment and university admission quotas were enacted. The opposition to affirmative policies has been based on the argument that they may serve as another form of discrimination against those excluded from affirmative quotas while sacrificing competence and efficiency for political expediency.

According to Thomas (2007), affirmative action can sometimes lead to inter-group tensions i.e. between the beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries of affirmative policies. Based upon his analysis of similar affirmative initiatives in the USA, Thomas observed that while beneficiaries of affirmative policy may be competent or possess the skills required for a position, they do not usually get due recognition for their efforts, as a result of a perception of favouritism. Some critics of Uganda's system have noted that quota seats allocated to women MPs failed to meet its goals due to faulty design and implementation. The critics maintained that efforts should rather be geared towards education of the populace alongside capacity building and financial support for perceived marginalized groups.

On the contrary, affirmative action, far from being a form of reverse discrimination, could function as a form of distributive or compensatory justice that also ensures diversity through socio-economic and political inclusion. Affirmative policies could provide pragmatic avenues through which historical and pervasive socio-economic and political discrimination could be addressed. It is against such a background affirmative action usually emerges. Data collected for this study showed that 42 (PWDs) out of the 53 respondents representing about 80% of the research participants support affirmative action. The following reasons were given by the proponents:

- (1) That, coupled with widespread stigmatization and discrimination, and in view of numerous societal or cultural barriers militating against the socio-economic progress and participation of PWDs in politics, it would be difficult for PWDs to be represented in national politics through mainstream elections, and
- (2) That affirmative action remains a more pragmatic approach through which the disabled population can actually be represented at the various levels of governance and ensures that decisions on national development capture the concerns of the disabled population.

Nine participants (PWDs) took moderate positions and argued that they would support some form of time-bound or temporal affirmative action on condition that interventions are put in place to ensure that a level playing field enables PWDs to contest mainstream elections. To this end:

- (1) PWDs would gain more confidence and respect if they contest the mainstream elections as opposed to affirmative seats.
- (2) That appointment should be based on competence rather than disability.

While the latter support affirmative action their ideal preference is to contest on equal level with non-PWDs. They nonetheless clarified that considering the level of negative cultural beliefs, stigmatization and discrimination against PWDs, some forms of affirmative action could enhance the mainstreaming of PWDs into politics.

One respondent, i.e. the presiding officer (a non-PWD) for Akuapim North District, however argued strongly against affirmative action because in his view, it could also be a

form of reverse discrimination against non-PWDs. To the respondent PWDs willing to enter into politics should contest established seats.

Legal obstacle to affirmative action

There are two important laws that provide possibilities for aspiring politicians to vie for elected position at the district assembly and parliamentary level, respectively. These are the Local Government Act 462 of 1993 and the 1992 republican constitution. The former is subsidiary to the latter. Both laws provide the legal framework for political decentralization in the country. Article 94 of the 1992 constitution outlines the criteria for contesting parliamentary elections whereas Section 5 of the Local Government Act provides the basis for membership of District assemblies. None of these statutes have affirmative clauses permitting the inclusion of PWDs.

At present, it is not certain as to whether 1992 Republican Constitution or Section 5 of the Local Government Act of 1993 can be amended to obligate the inclusion of PWDs among government appointees to the district assemblies or guarantee quota seats for PWDs in parliament. Section 5 of the Local Government Act provides the following guidelines for the composition of Assemblies:

- (1) In accordance with Article 242 of the Constitution, a District Assembly shall consist of:
 - (a) The District Chief Executive,
 - (b) One person from each electoral area within the District elected by universal adult suffrage in accordance with Regulations made for the purpose by the Electoral Commission,
 - (c) The member or members of Parliament from the constituencies that fall within the area of authority of the District Assembly, except that that member or those members shall not have a voting right and
 - (d) Any other persons not exceeding thirty percent of the total membership of the Assembly appointed by the President in consultation with the traditional authorities and any other interest groups in the district.
- (2) The members appointed under paragraph (d) of subsection (1) may be reappointed.

Thus in practical terms the quest for affirmative action could include the following possibilities:

- (1) Amendment of the Local Government Act (462) of 1993⁹ to include a provision that would obligate the governing parties to include a specific quota of PWDs among government appointees, or reserved seats that would be contested only by PWDs in a given locality.
- (2) Amendment of the 1992 Constitution¹⁰ or passage of a subsidiary legislation that could ensure the reservation of 'quota' seats in parliament for PWDs.

Another possibility is the amendment of the National Disability Act (715) of 2006, to include a provision that would obligate incumbent government to have a definite proportion of PWDs among its political appointees. With the country's ratification of UNCRPD, government is obligated to ensure that its disability legislation and policies are

Table 4. Composition of appointed assembly members in project districts.

District	No. of male assembly members without disability	No. of female assembly members without disability	Male PWD members	Female PWD members	Total	Percentage of disabled
Akuapim North	16	8	0	0	24	0
New Juaben	18	5	0	0	23	0
Sunyani East	–	–	0	0	0	0
Tano North	6	4	1	0	11	9.1%

in tune with the convention. As noted in the introductory session, the UN Convention supports the participation of PWDs, both as voters and contestants for political office.

Conclusion

The baseline study from Tano North, Sunyani West, New Juaben and Akuapem North has shown a correlation between the low political representation of PWDs within the district assemblies and stigmatization against PWDs. The study also identified lack of resources including financial and logistical support among the major variables that obstruct PWDs from contesting for political positions. These include resources for sustainable political mobilization and effective campaigns. Other factors include accessibility-related challenges relating to the built environment for persons with mobility impairment and communication and information accessibility challenges for the people with various kinds of physical and sensory impairments.

All the variables identified affect both males and females PWDs. Nonetheless within the realms of international development, it has been noted that females with disability face double discrimination on account of both disability and gender (United Nations 2006). Analysis of the data from the four districts supports the existing perception. There was no female with disability out of the 220 assembly members in the four districts. Thus, neither was a female PWD found among the 164 elected members nor among the 56 government appointees. Table 4 provides a statistical summary of the data disaggregated by gender. The relatively lower participation of females PWDs (as compared to male PWDs) follows the general pattern in mainstream national politics. Out of 133 women who contested for parliamentary seats in the 2012 general election only 29 got elected into the 245 sinner parliament. The 2008 parliamentary elections followed a similar trend with 18 female MPs out of 200 MPs.

It is relevant to note that various legal challenges would have to be overcome if an affirmative political action is to become a reality in Ghana, in the future. Nonetheless the disability rights movement could count on its previous experience in policy advocacy as it did for the passage of the Disability Act in 2006, to make the quest for affirmative action a reality. Furthermore, the disability rights movement could support the capacity building of PWDs seeking to venture into active politics. Considering the increasing numbers of disabled population, and impact of the their increased population on the electoral fortunes of political parties, PWDs could also use their numbers as bargaining

tool to compel the various political parties to mainstream their concerns in their manifestos. Nonetheless, the success of any radical changes to a political culture, through legal options, certainly requires a national consensus.

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Notes

1. The study focused on the right to political participation of persons with mental health challenges.
2. The federation relies on the feedback from the registered members of its member organizations. However not all PWDs in Ghana are registered members of the disability organizations that compose the federation.
3. A nationwide survey is yet to be carried out in this respect.
4. GBU, GNAD and GSPD were the founding members of the GFD.
5. Tano North District and Sunyani East Municipal Assemblies are located within the Brong Ahafo Region while Akuapim North and New Juaben are in the eastern region of Ghana.
6. The respondent was a former PWD parliamentary aspirant and assembly member of Tano North District. He was also the former director of the GSPD.
7. The Constitution Review Commission (CRC) was set up by a Constitutional Instrument 2010 (C.I.) 64 as a Commission of Inquiry to conduct a consultative review of the operation of the 1992 Constitution.
8. Dr Danaa, first PWD (visually impaired), was appointed by the NDC Government in February 2013.
9. The Local Government Act 462 of 1993 provides a legal framework for political decentralization in Ghana.
10. The 1992 constitution is the most supreme law of the state.

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