Summary report

Disability and local political leadership in Senegal

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Government of Ireland International Development Programme







Report context

Since 2017, Sightsavers has implemented a Citizenship and Political Participation project in Senegal under its inclusive citizenship strategic area, with funding from Irish Aid. The project aims to strengthen the civil and political rights of people with disabilities and promote their meaningful participation in public and political life.

In 2022, 63 people with disabilities were elected in local elections, to diverse roles and in different regions of the country. In 2025, the project invited some of them to participate in a research study in order to document their experiences of taking part in local election campaigns and of serving as elected officials. They also provided valuable reflections and insights on opportunities to strengthen the participation of people with disabilities in local governance processes in Senegal, and beyond.

This report provides background to the study, summarises the methods and key findings, and highlights the opportunities for strengthened participation and voice that the participants identified. These opportunities will form the basis of discussions with local stakeholders about how to address the findings identified in this report.

Background

In Senegal, political participation among people with disabilities remains low due to deeply embedded social attitudes and traditional beliefs about disability. In addition, people with disabilities experience higher levels of poverty, unemployment, and limited access to education and training. These factors hinder their ability to equally participate in public and political life (UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, article 29) — including joining a political party, being selected as candidates or accessing political leadership roles.

Local political leadership is particularly important in Senegal because, under the 2013 Decentralisation Act, municipal and departmental councils are responsible for key aspects of local development, including planning, service delivery, local budgeting and community governance.

Decisions taken by these elected bodies can have a direct impact on disability inclusion and access to services, making meaningful representation at this level especially important. While efforts to promote disability-inclusive political participation have traditionally focused on supporting voter registration and electoral participation, much less attention has been paid to the experiences of people with disabilities as elected representatives.

Following the 2022 local elections, people with disabilities were elected to a range of local government positions, including mayoral, deputy mayoral, municipal and departmental council roles. Among those supported through a Sightsavers inclusive political participation programme, 63 people with disabilities were elected to local government positions. However, little is known about the experiences of elected representatives with disabilities once in office, the barriers and enablers they encounter in carrying out their roles, or the extent to which their participation influences local decision-making and disability-inclusive development.

Methods

This qualitative study examined the meaningful participation and voice of locally elected representatives with disabilities following the 2022 local elections in Senegal.

We held open conversations with people with disabilities who entered office following those elections to understand their experiences and opinions. We also spoke to some of their colleagues without disabilities.

Data was collected in April 2025. Participants were chosen to be representative of roles, gender, and regions. The study included 26 locally elected representatives (19 elected representatives with disabilities and seven without disabilities), with an equal number of men and women (13 each).

Make-up of participants who took part in the study



Key findings

Experiences of local election campaigns

Participants described pathways into elected office as the result of years of community leadership, activism and political engagement. While these experiences, combined with personal determination and supportive networks, helped many candidates succeed, disability-related stigma, inaccessibility and limited resources continued to present substantial barriers.

These early roles, sometimes at a young age, serve as critical pathways to visibility within political parties, which later translate into placement in an eligible position on electoral lists of political parties or party movements. Some professional backgrounds, such as in education and community services, serve as common foundations for political engagement.

> "I started out as a grassroots activist as I was also a member [of] disability organisations. It was from there that I was noticed by the party."
>
> **Male departmental councillor with disability**

What supported political participation and electoral success?

Personal motivation and resilience

Participants described a strong commitment to social change, confidence in their own abilities and, for many, faith, as important sources of motivation and resilience throughout their political journeys. Elected officials with disabilities described how disability can be a source of personal strength, enhanced self-worth and being perceived by others as a marker of resilience and political determination.

> "Being disabled…means being someone who dares, has honour, determination, trusts themselves."
>
> **Female councillor with disability**

Leadership skills and political experience

Elected officials with disabilities sometimes come from families with a history of political involvement or describe themselves as natural politicians with strong leadership skills and long-standing involvement in communities. The capacity strengthening provided through the Citizenship and Political Participation project was described as an asset, strengthening candidates' confidence and ability to assert themselves as legitimate political actors.

> “Everyone knows that I am a political actor...we are born leaders and this is embodied from an early age."
>
> **Male deputy mayor with disability**

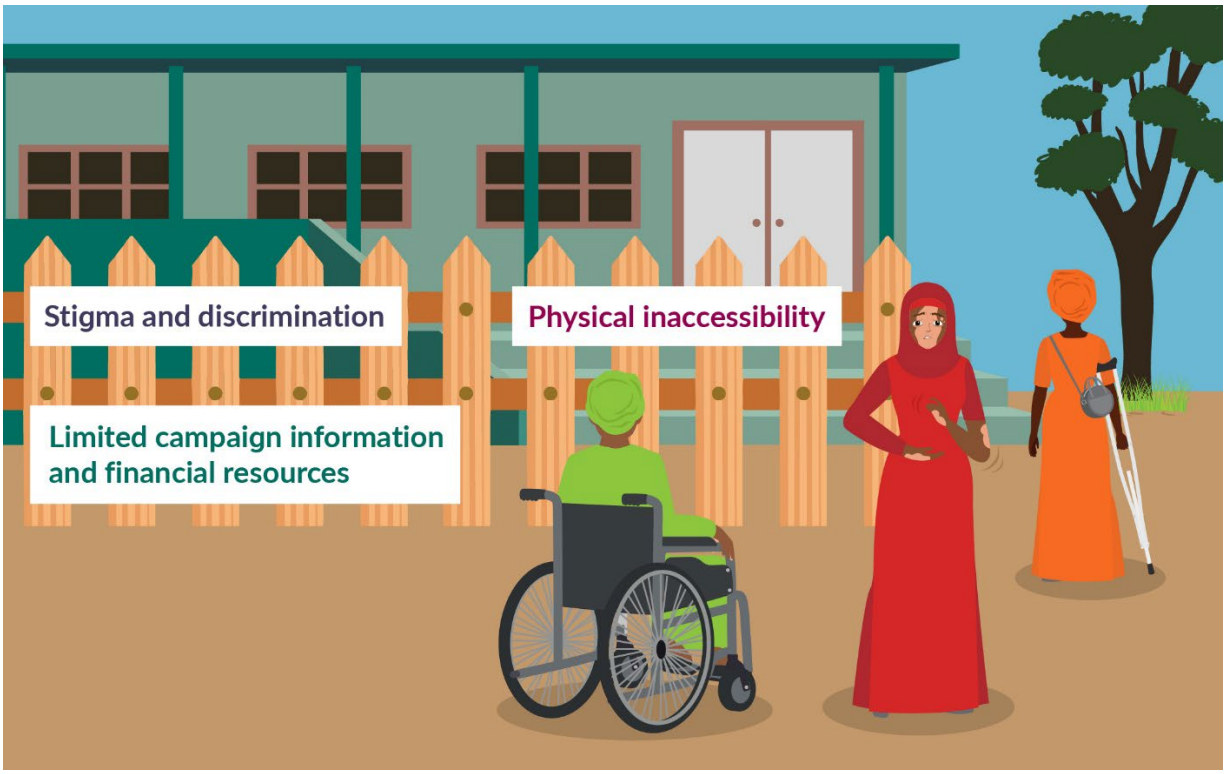
Supportive environments

Positive engagement from communities, support from party leaders, access to media

platforms and the provision of reasonable accommodation helped create more inclusive campaign experiences.

What barriers did candidates face?

Barriers faced by candidates include stigma and discrimination, physical inaccessibility, and limited campaign information and financial resources



Stigma and discrimination is a common experience during election campaigns. Skills, leadership potential, and even the right of people with disabilities to participate in public life, is sometimes questioned. Overt disability-related discrimination ranges from refusals to include people with disabilities as candidates to more subtle forms of exclusion, and sometimes threats.

> "God made me come out on top, but under very difficult conditions with a lot of threats and stigmatisation...There was a real underestimation of my candidacy because of my disability."
>
> **Male mayor with disability**

Physical inaccessibility poses a significant challenge in campaigns, from inaccessible staircases and podiums, lack of ramps at town halls and polling stations, to lack of accessible transport — severely limiting candidates with disabilities' ability to engage with the electorate.

> '"You want to go to certain platforms, climb up on platforms to speak, but you can't do it. You can't climb up on platforms with your wheelchair."
>
> **Male councillor with disability**

Limited campaign information and financial resources. Difficulties accessing campaign information, inadequate support from political parties and campaign costs created significant challenges. The media sometimes provides strong coverage but can also exclude people with disabilities and limit opportunities to speak on political issues.

> "No one wanted to help us and, even if they wanted to help us, they said they couldn't. So, we had to rely on our own resources."
>
> **Male councillor with disability**

While these experiences shaped candidates' ability to secure election, participants emphasised that election to office was only the beginning. Once elected, they faced a new set of opportunities and challenges in influencing local decision-making and advancing disability inclusion.

Experiences of serving as elected officials

Once elected, participants enter local political systems that require them to engage in council planning processes, negotiate budgets, and oversee the delivery of public services.

Participants identified four key roles they play in local governance:

1. Advocates and defenders of disability rights.
2. Translators of lived experience into concrete policy action.
3. Educators and alliance builders.
4. Role models who show what people with disabilities can achieve.

The four key roles participants can play in local governance



Participants reported using a range of different strategies to advance disability inclusion:

- Mobilising lived experience of disability as a source of credibility, expertise, and authority, was described as a central strategy.
- Using evidence gathered during visits to local communities to advocate for specific policy measures and targeted budget allocations.
- Being persistent in council meetings, deliberations and budget voting sessions as a core disability inclusion advocacy strategy across all study sites.
- Engaging strategically in informal advocacy, particularly through building relationships with key roles such as mayors, commission chairs, and senior administrators.
- Alliance-building and the sensitisation of non-disabled colleagues emerged as an important strategy for addressing the under-representation of people with disabilities in decision-making structures.
- Engaging in budgetary processes was a particularly important strategy for translating inclusion from rhetoric into practice.

Challenges in advancing disability inclusion

While participants described positive changes in accessibility and attitudes, they also highlighted a number of constraints that limited their influence.

- Inaccessible office spaces, which was gradually improving, mainly due to sustained advocacy targeting senior officials.
- Rigid governance and legal processes limited what local councillors could achieve, even when strongly motivated. This was because advancing disability inclusion required coordination across multiple sectors, stakeholders and government systems. Significant budgetary constraints limited the allocation of adequate resources to disability-related issues.
- Unequal distribution of power within council decision-making structures and the limited influence of ordinary councillors towards those in leadership positions, particularly on disability-related issues.
- Insufficient information and technical knowledge of newly elected officials, which prevented them from engaging effectively with local governance planning, budgeting and policy implementation processes.
- Economic instability was a major personal barrier associated with being elected as a councillor, particularly as roles were unpaid.

Opportunities to strengthen the participation of people with disabilities in local governance

Study participants identified a number of opportunities for strengthening how people with disabilities can participate in local governance processes.

Local government

- Improve the accessibility of public spaces, information and communications.
- Ensure that the rights of people with disabilities are reflected in local planning and budgeting processes.
- Establish mentoring schemes between experienced elected representatives and newly elected representatives with disabilities.

National government

- Strengthen the development and implementation of disability legislation and policy commitments that enhance inclusion in local government.
- Ensure adequate resources are allocated to disability inclusion.
- Establish systems for collecting disability data to monitor representation in local politics

Civil society, including organisations of people with disabilities and development partners

- Expand leadership and governance capacity building for people with disabilities.
- Continue awareness-raising to address stigma and discrimination, in particular with policymakers and voters.
- Document and share the stories of disabled elected representatives in order to inspire others to stand for election.

Political parties

- Increase the number of candidates with disabilities, particularly women and those seeking leadership positions such as mayors and committee heads.
- Increase the diversity of party candidates, to include women and people with a wider range of impairments.
- Train party members and officials on disability in order to address and counter negative stereotypes.