

POLICY BRIEF

THE BLIND SPOT IN THE WATCHDOG'S EYE:

Mainstreaming Disability Indicators in Election Observation and Media Reporting

**Joint National Association of Persons with Disabilities
(JONAPWD)**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Civil Society Organizations and the media sit at the centre of Nigeria’s electoral accountability system. Their observation reports shape national and international judgments about whether elections are free, fair, and credible. Yet disability inclusion is still largely missing from mainstream observation and reporting. Standard methodologies tend to treat disability as a side issue rather than a core test of electoral integrity. In practice, specialized disability groups carry most of the responsibility for tracking accessibility, while large observation missions rarely capture detailed disability data. Media coverage often reinforces the gap, focusing on the perseverance of voters with disabilities instead of examining the institutional barriers that make participation difficult. The result is that elections can be declared credible even when many voters with disabilities are effectively excluded.

Credibility should not be defined in a way that leaves out a significant part of the electorate. An election cannot be considered fully legitimate if citizens with disabilities are unable to participate on equal terms. Drawing on stakeholder consultations and field experience, this policy brief argues for the integration of disability indicators into standard CSO observation frameworks and media reporting. It calls for a shift from activity-based visibility to access-based indicators, making independent participation a non-negotiable benchmark for a credible election.

INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria’s electoral process, what is measured is what gets managed. Election observer reports and media coverage define the public understanding of electoral credibility. When accessibility is not measured, the exclusion of persons with disabilities remains invisible in the final verdict on elections.

Although the Electoral Act 2022 provides for inclusive participation, mainstream election observation and reporting rarely capture whether these provisions are implemented in practice. Inclusive election observation does not mean producing separate disability reports. It means ensuring that every observer checklist and every media situation room assess accessibility as rigorously as ballot security and procedural compliance.

Many CSOs conduct voter education campaigns or “inclusive election sensitization” workshops and assume inclusion has been achieved. In reality, most barriers are structural: inaccessible polling units, inaccessible party processes, and discriminatory practices during campaigns.

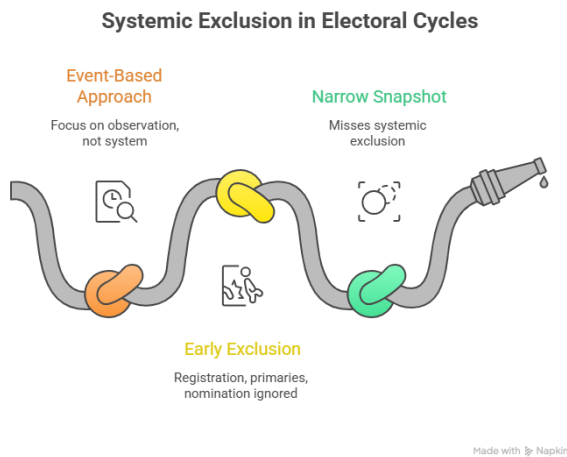
When disability inclusion is treated as a peripheral issue, observer missions risk presenting an incomplete picture of electoral credibility.

Accessibility failures should be treated as electoral integrity concerns, not welfare issues. An election cannot be considered credible if a significant demographic is systemically excluded from meaningful participation.

PROBLEM STATEMENT AND ANALYSIS

1. Treating Inclusion as an Event Rather than a System

Many CSO initiatives address disability inclusion only in the months leading to election day, focusing primarily on observation activities or election-day accessibility.



The Gap

Exclusion begins much earlier in the electoral cycle, during voter registration, party primaries, candidate nomination, and campaign activities. When disability inclusion is introduced late in the cycle, interventions tend to be rushed and fragmented, leaving structural barriers unaddressed.

As a result, election observation often captures only a narrow snapshot of accessibility while missing systemic exclusion.

2. Disability Data Without Consequence - Even where disability data is collected, it is often relegated to sub-sections or annexes of final reports rather than incorporated into headline findings.

The Gap

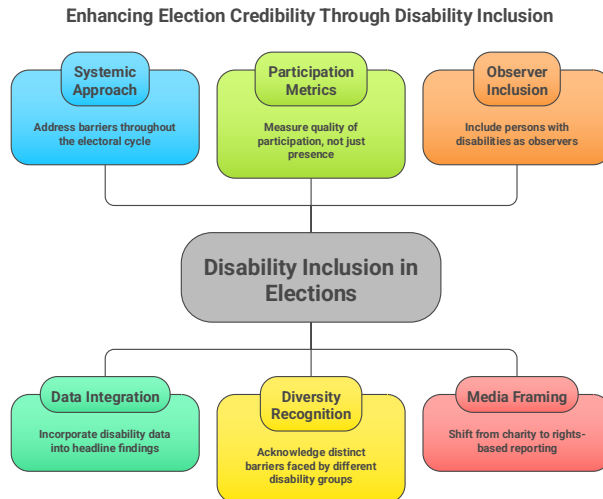
When accessibility failures are separated from core election assessments, they are perceived as secondary concerns. A polling unit without ramps or accessible voting materials may still be described as peaceful and orderly, even though some voters were effectively excluded.

Accessibility failures should be reported as electoral irregularities, not as isolated welfare concerns. Without integration into headline findings, disability data has little influence on assessments of election credibility.

3. Flawed Checklists: Measuring Presence Rather than Participation - Standard observer checklists often emphasize quantitative measures that fail to capture the quality of participation.

The Gap

Observation tools frequently record whether persons with disabilities were present at polling units without assessing whether they were able to vote independently, secretly, and with dignity.



An observer may record a positive response because a voter with a disability was present, even if inaccessible voting cubicles or the absence of assistive devices prevented independent voting.

Effective observation requires moving from

measuring presence to measuring participation.

Key questions include:

- Could a blind voter vote independently?
- Could a wheelchair user physically access the polling unit?
- Were assistive devices available and functional?
- Were polling officials trained on accessibility procedures?

Without such indicators, observation data provides only a partial picture of electoral inclusion.

4. Standard Checklists Ignore Disability Diversity - Mainstream observation frameworks often treat persons with disabilities as a homogeneous group.

The Gap

Different disability groups face distinct barriers. Voters with visual impairments require tactile ballot guides, Deaf voters require interpretation support, and persons with mobility impairments require physically accessible polling units.

Generic “disability inclusion” indicators fail to capture these differences, resulting in incomplete and misleading data.

5. Exclusion from the Observer Role

- Persons with disabilities are frequently the subjects of observation but rarely serve as observers themselves.

The Gap

Domestic observation recruitment processes rarely prioritize persons with disabilities as field monitors. As a result, observation teams often lack lived experience that could help identify accessibility barriers.

Observers without direct experience of disability may overlook issues such as inaccessible entrances, poorly positioned ballot boxes, or inadequate assistive devices.

Inclusive recruitment strengthens both the quality and credibility of observation missions.

6. Media Framing: Charity versus Rights - Media reporting on disability and elections often focuses on individual stories of resilience rather than institutional accountability.

The Gap

Coverage frequently highlights the determination of voters with disabilities to participate despite barriers, reinforcing a narrative of personal struggle instead of systemic failure. These framing shifts attention away from the responsibility of institutions such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to provide accessible electoral processes.

Rights-based reporting requires journalists to ask why barriers exist and who is responsible for removing them.

Voices from the field: The Illusion of Inclusion for Voters with Disabilities

What are the persistent gaps between the intentions of mainstream organizations and the lived realities of voters with disabilities?

Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) are frequently invited as workshop participants or validation attendees but rarely engaged as co-designers of observation methodologies. Many initiatives emphasize visible activities such as trainings or stakeholder meetings without addressing structural barriers to participation. Engagement often concentrates on well-established OPDs in major cities, leaving rural voters with disabilities, women with disabilities, and persons with intellectual disabilities underrepresented.




What do stakeholders emphasize?

Stakeholders consistently emphasized the need to move from symbolic inclusion toward co-created and rights-based approaches.



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Disability Inclusive Policy Options

Option	Description	Consequence
 Symbolic Inclusion	Focus on visibility through isolated activities.	High Risk: Participation barriers persist
 Add-On Indicators	Insert generic questions into observation tools.	Weak Impact: Produces superficial data
 Systemic Mainstreaming (Recommended)	Integrate indicators into core frameworks.	High Impact: Makes accessibility non-negotiable

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RECOMMENDATIONS

To Mainstream CSOs:

Measure Access, Not Activities - Shift monitoring frameworks from activity-based indicators toward access-based indicators. Priority metrics should include:

- Percentage of accessible polling units
- Availability and use of assistive devices
- Percentage of voters with disabilities able to vote independently
- Accessibility of voter education materials

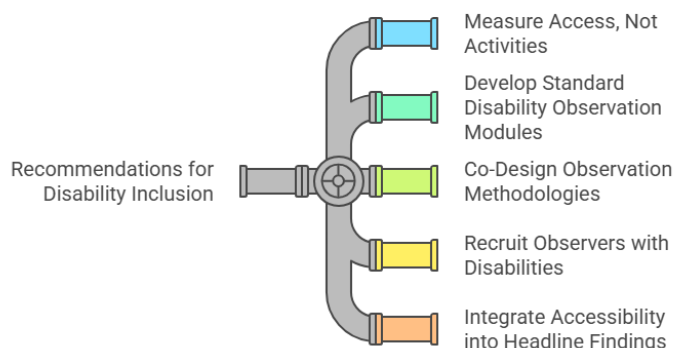
Develop Standard Disability Observation Modules

- Domestic observer coalitions should develop standardized disability observation modules that can be integrated

into all major observation missions. Standardized tools will improve comparability of data and ensure disability indicators are consistently measured.

Co-Design Observation Methodologies - Organizations of Persons with Disabilities should be engaged at the design stage of observation missions, not only during implementation.

Recommendations to Mainstream CSOs for Disability Inclusion in Election Observation



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Recruit Observers with Disabilities - Observer recruitment processes should actively include persons with disabilities in order to strengthen data quality and credibility.

Integrate Accessibility into Headline Findings - Accessibility failures should be reflected in overall assessments of polling unit performance and election credibility.

To the Media

Adopt Rights-Based Reporting Guidelines - Editorial policies should shift from sympathy-based



reporting toward accountability reporting focused on institutional responsibility. For example, instead of focusing solely on the resilience of a voter who crawled to a ballot box, journalists must investigate why the polling unit lacked a ramp.

Strengthen Data-Driven Reporting - Media organizations should use election observation and administrative data to report on patterns of exclusion rather than isolated human-interest stories.

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To Donor Agencies

Fund Accessibility as Core Programme Infrastructure - Accessibility should be treated as essential programme infrastructure, with dedicated budget lines and minimum accessibility standards.

Fund the Full Electoral Cycle - Short-term project funding encourages last-minute inclusion efforts. Long-term support enables sustained engagement and structural improvements.

IMPACT

From Visibility to Credibility: Mainstreaming disability indicators shifts inclusion from a special-interest concern to a core standard of democratic accountability. When watchdog institutions consistently measure accessibility, disability inclusion becomes part of how elections are judged, not an afterthought.

This shift moves election observation beyond asking whether persons with disabilities voted to examining whether elections were genuinely accessible. When accessibility becomes a standard measure of electoral integrity, inclusion stops being optional and becomes expected.

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