Participation of persons with disabilities in political activities in Cameroon

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The right to participate in political activities is a fundamental human right for every citizen in a country, but this right is often not available to persons with disabilities. This study investigated the level of and barriers to political participation of persons with disabilities in the Buea municipality in Cameroon. A qualitative data collection method, consisting of three focus group discussions with 36 persons with disabilities was conducted. Participants were selected from three categories of persons with disabilities- visually impaired, hearing impaired and physically impaired- who were residing in the Buea municipality. The study found that the involvement of persons with disabilities in politics in the area was minimal as socio-economic, cultural and physical barriers hindered their participation in political activities at both local and national levels. The study concludes that there should be conscious efforts though affirmative actions to promote and respect the rights of persons with disabilities and make the political environment more accessible to persons with disabilities in Cameroon.

Keywords: Cameroon, Politics, Participation, Persons with disabilities

Introduction

Political participation involves the ability of individuals to take part in public affairs, to assemble and form associations, to register during elections, and to declare candidacy during national and local elections (Hall & Alvarez, 2012; Krishna, 2013; UN, 2012). Active participation of all citizens in the political process is vital because it helps to maintain trust in the political system (Christensen, 2011; Pahad, 2005). Promoting the right to equal participation in politics is vital for strengthening democracy, promoting social inclusion, fostering economic development and safeguarding the fundamental human rights of all persons (UNHCHR, 2015; (Berrington, 2003; Hall & Alvarez, 2012).

Since political participation increases social inclusion, it is an important human rights-based approach to eliminate marginalization as well as increase the participation of less privileged groups in decision making in society (Hall & Alvarez, 2012; OHCHR, 2015). Thus, if persons with disabilities participate in politics, they are likely to be empowered to make decisions about their lives, including decisions on political leadership (Koroli, 2015). Barriers

restricting the participation of persons with disabilities in political decisions making should therefore be minimized (Meekosha, 1999) to ensure that they are able to exercise this right on equal basis as other members of society (Khasnabis et al., 2010; Schur, Kruse, & Blanck, 2013; Smith & Hutchison, 2004).

In view of the benefits associated with participating in politics, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (UN, 2006) requires that governments take concrete action to remove all barriers preventing the involvement of persons with disabilities in politics (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014). For example, Article 29 of the CRPD states that, 'state parties shall ensure that persons with disabilities effectively and fully participate in political and public life on an equal basis with others, directly or through freely chosen representatives' (2006: 4). This provision can only be achieved if governments make conscious efforts to implement policies that will eliminate all barriers militating against the inclusion of persons with disabilities in socio-economic activities in their community (Human Rights Watch, 2012; International Foundation for Electoral System, 2014).

Disability activism

Throughout history, persons with disabilities have suffered systematic discrimination and exclusion from national issues including issues that directly affect their lives (Schur et al. 2002). Negative perceptions about persons with disabilities and their subsequent placement in 'confined institutions, increased their exclusion from mainstream society, thus limiting their ability to integrate in society and make their voices heard on national issues (Meekosha, 1999). Although efforts at protecting and promoting the rights of persons with disabilities started years ago (Scotch, 1988; Schur et al. 2013), Meekosha (1999) suggests that the UN Declaration of 1981 as the International Year for Disabled Persons marked a major turning point in the lives of persons with disabilities. This declaration provided leverage for persons with disabilities who realized the need to mobilize themselves both at the national and international levels to make their voices heard on injustices against them (Meekosha, 1999).

After years of struggle, disability activists are now proud of the gains they have made in relation to the control they have over their lives and global mainstreaming of disability issues (Bonnie & Hutchinson, 2004; Meekosha, 1999; Scotch, 1988; Schur et al. 2013). However, studies have found that one area in which persons with disabilities have not fared well is their participation in politics (Sackey, 2014). Even in more advanced democratic states such as the United States (US), where persons with disabilities have enjoyed greater autonomy, the participation of persons with disabilities in politics is generally lower than persons without disabilities (Schur et al. 2002). For example, the United Nations Human Rights Commission [UNHRC] (2014) reported that persons with disabilities have unequal access to public and political activities such as voting and being elected to political positions when compared to

other members of society. In the US, for example, persons with disabilities had lower rates of voting in both the 2008 and 2012 general elections than persons without disabilities. It was found that only 7% of persons with disabilities voted in the 2008 general elections and this figure dropped to 3% in 2012 (UNHRC, 2014).

Additionally, studies have found that few persons with disabilities had the opportunity to be elected to higher political offices such as parliament and ministerial positions (Bonnie & Hutchison, 2004; Schur et al. 2013). For example, in Croatia, only seven parliamentarians were persons with disabilities in 2014 out of 151 seats, while the UK and Poland only had three persons with disabilities in their respective parliaments (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014). In 2014, South Africa had 17 members of parliament with disabilities, and in Kenya only 12 of the 24 seats reserved for persons with disabilities were occupied in 2015 (Wanamesi, 2015). In terms of political appointments, such as appointments to ministerial positions, only a few persons with disabilities are considered (Meekosha, 1999). This data should, however, be interpreted with caution due to differences in the definition and meaning of disability among different countries (Hugaas & Tøssebro, 2012).

Several barriers to political participation have been identified. These include: negative attitudes towards persons with disabilities; low literacy; poverty; cumbersome electoral procedures; lack of customized electoral materials; and an inaccessible physical environment (Attanayake, 2015; Baffoe, 2013; Human Rights Watch, 2012; Sackey, 2014). Studies from several countries including Canada (Klein, 2005), Ghana (Sackey, 2014), Zambia (International Labour Organization, 2013) and Vietnam (Human Rights Watch, 2012) have consistently linked lack of financial resources, negative attitudes, low educational attainment and inaccessible physical environment to the low political participation of persons with disabilities. Beside these factors, disability makes it difficult for some persons with disabilities to interact with other members of society, thus limiting interaction with their peers and the opportunities to understand the political process (Meekosha, 1999; Schur et al. 2013). Electoral laws have also disenfranchised some persons with disabilities such as persons with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities from participating in politics because they are deemed incapable of making sound political decisions (Human Rights Watch, 2012; International Foundation for Electoral System, 2014; Sackey, 2014; Scotch, 1988). A strategy towards creating a better understanding of the rights of persons with disabilities and eradicating attitudinal, physical, and institutional barriers will go a long way towards increase the participation of persons with disabilities in politics.

The political system in Cameroon

As a consequence of its colonial history and legacy, Cameroon's political culture and system follow the Westminster and Elysee Systems inherited from the British and French

respectively (DeLancey, 1987; Ngolle, 1996). Since independence in 1961, Cameroon has had only two Presidents. The country was a one party state until the early 1990s when the 'freedom laws' that allowed multiparty politics were introduced (Eyong, 2007; Ngolle, 1996). Since the introduction of multiparty politics, Cameroon has been under the leadership of strong autocratic executive presidents who exercise extensive control over the other arms of government and other institutions (DeLancey, 1987; Mbuagbo & Akoko, 2004; Ngolle, 1996; Schraeder, 2004). The current president has dominated Cameroonian politics for many decades, and continues to crack down opponents perceived as threatening his rule. Thus, there is little space for criticism as elites have been either co-opted or compelled to succumb to the dictates of the president (DeLancy, 1987; Mbuagbo & Akoko, 2004). These conditions seem to have severely curtailed the participation of minority groups such as persons with disabilities in political activities.

Apart from a political system which has hampered the development and growth of civil rights movements and political activism, generally, persons with disabilities face additional barriers. They are one of the most vulnerable groups in Cameroon (International Centre for Evidence in Disability, 2014). Many persons with disabilities in Cameroon lack access to education and employment, thus resorting to begging on the streets as a source of livelihood (Mayer, 2007; Mbibeh, 2013). These factors are potential barriers to participation in socio-economic and political activities. However, few studies have explored this issue. The need to examine the issue is therefore imperative. This study investigates the extent to which persons with disabilities in the Buea municipality in Cameroon participate in politics with a view to exploring the barriers limiting their participation.

Methodology

A qualitative approach using focus groups was adopted in an effort to generate data on the involvement of persons with disabilities in political activities in the Buea Municipality. Focus groups provided an ideal platform for the participants and the researchers to interact freely and this enabled participants to share their experiences on their political participation.

The target population were persons with disabilities living in the Buea municipality in the South West Region of Cameroon. Participants were selected from three disability groups: visually impaired, physically impaired and hearing impaired. These three groups were well organized and had formed associations in the study area, so it was easy to target them via their respective associations.

A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit participants who were considered capable of providing information on the level of involvement of persons with disabilities in politics as well as barriers hindering their involvement. The researchers had two meetings

with the leaders of the three disability groups. The purpose of the first meeting was to explain the purpose of the study and eligibility criteria to the leaders. The leaders invited prospective participants to the second meeting. During the second meeting, prospective participants were screened, those eligible selected, and taken through the informed consent process. Thirty-six participants, 12 from each of the three disability groups, were selected for the group discussions. Table I below summarizes the demographic characteristics of participants. The majority of participants (20) were women, and a little over one-third were between 21 to 30 years; the mean age was 30.2 years. About 42% were unemployed, with only 8.3% employed in the public sector. In terms of education, nearly half of the participants had no formal education; the highest educational attainment was vocational education (306%).

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of participants

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age		
≤ 20	8	22.2
21-30	14	38.9
31-40	6	16.7
41-50	5	13.9
>50	3	8.3
Mean	**30.2**	
Education		
No formal Education	17	47.2
Primary	8	22.2
Vocational	11	30.6
Employment		
Government/Civil servant	3	8.3
Trading	5	13.9
Farming	2	5.6
Apprenticeship	7	19.4
None	15	41.7
Other	4	11.1

Method

Three different focus group discussions were organized with each disability group. An interview guide, which covered the following broad themes was used to guide the group discussions: extent of participation of persons with disabilities in politics; involvement in decision making; and barriers to participation. The discussions were audio recorded with permission from participants. With the exception of hearing impaired participants who used sign language, all participants spoke Pidgin English which is the main language spoken by

people in Buea. An interpreter translated the sign language by voicing into an audio recorder.

Data management and analysis

The audio-recorded responses of each of the discussions were transcribed verbatim and separately by the researchers. The data was analyzed by performing inductive content analysis (researchers developed themes by studying the trends of responses). The researchers read through the transcripts to ensure that transcriptions were done accurately and also to be familiar with the responses. The researchers developed a coding system based on the research questions, and this was used to mark out themes and ideas relevant to the research questions while reading the transcripts. The coding system involved the use of colours and letters to represent research questions and discussion groups respectively. There were three research questions and each was assigned a colour. Letters were used to differentiate themes from each of the three discussion groups. It means that each research question was assigned a colour and a letter was assigned to the group. After identifying the themes, the researchers met and discussed the emerging themes, and based on the codes, similar themes from the three group discussions were grouped together. Relevant quotes from each of the groups were identified and linked to their respective themes.

Ethical considerations

The researchers obtained approval from Disabled Peoples' Organizations (DPOs) in Buea before the data were collected. Also, a written informed consent, translated from English to pidgin, was used to seek consent from all the participants. The researchers respected the rights of participants to voluntarily participate in the study and ensured that the aims of the study were clearly explained to all participants before data collection. Participants were assured anonymity and no reference was made to their names in the data. All participants signed the informed consent before they participated in the study.

Study Area

This study was conducted in Buea, a municipal council and presently the headquarters of the South West Region of Cameroon. Buea has an estimated population of above 200,000 inhabitants, made up mainly of the Bakweri people. The town shares boundaries with the City of Limbe to the south west, Tiko municipality to the south east, Muyuka municipality to the east and Idenau district to the west. Buea is a rural town and lagged behind other municipalities in terms of socio-economic development. The life expectancy in the area is 50 years, and between 60%-75% of the youth have access to education. Over 80% of the people

in the area are peasant farmers who use rudimentary tools for farming. The region has a high rate of youth unemployment (Eyong, 2007). In terms of political participation, xplained that most people in the area did not vote in the previous elections because they did not have fate in the political system. For instance, in 2007, less than 50% of registered voters voted in the parliamentary elections (Ngwane, 2014).

Results

Responses from the participants revealed a number of themes relating to the level of participation of persons with disabilities in politics and barriers hindering their participation. The themes relating to the extent of participation of persons with disabilities in politics were as follows: involvement in decision making; inclusion in political appointments; and involvement in electoral processes.

Involvement in decision making

The discussions revealed that participants thought it was unlikely for persons with disabilities to be involved in decision making in Cameroon because they are not considered capable of making good decisions. Almost all the participants in the groups agreed that their involvement in decision making was minimal because they were not valued as equal members of society:

> I can't attest that I have seen any disabled involved in decision making in this country. The chance is not there. We are not valued at all so there is no point someone in authority will call you and ask for your view on important national issues it has not happened in this country [Person with physical disability].

> No one in government does consult with us disabled. The government does not see us as individuals who can provide solutions to some of the problems confronting the country. We are capable but just that we have not been given the opportunity to do so [Person with hearing disability].

> Disability is seen as a challenge to making good decisions. That is what people think and this has gotten into the heads of people. We are not valued and neither are we considered when it comes to making of decisions [Person with physical disability].

> Most people are ignorant when it comes to disability in this country. They don't see us as equal humans who have the capacity to reason and offer ideas so they have limited our ability to participate in politics of this country. There is no point worrying myself

if I won't be allowed to share or contribute towards the development of my own country [Person with visual disability].

Responses from the participants also indicated that DPOs were neither involved nor consulted on issues at the local and national levels. They were never considered as stakeholders who could contribute to their community. A participant attributed this to the lack of laws promoting the rights of persons with disabilities in Cameroon. Some participants expressed their views in the following quotes:

Our association has been in existence for a long time but they don't recognize us as people who could make our views known on national issues. We have registered and they know us but they don't seek our opinions on national issues (Person with physical disability)

Let's not talk about national on this issue. Just at the local assembly, they don't involve our representatives to participate in stakeholders' meetings. They are with us and should know that we exist. At times I go there but they will tell me when they need us, they will call us, but they never did (Person with visual disability)

In this country, there are no laws protecting the rights of persons with disabilities so politicians are not obliged to come to us for our views during policy making. We have fought and written to parliament, the presidency and other international organizations to push for us but nothing has happened (Person with physical disability)

It is clear that from the family to the national level that persons with disabilities in the area were left out of decision making because of perceptions about disability.

Political appointment

Investigating whether persons with disabilities were considered for political appointments by the government, all the participants in the three groups unanimously responded in the negative, and emphasized that it was unlikely:

It has been impossible for us to be given any governmental or ministerial appointment or even appointment into the local assembly. The government doesn't consider us when it comes to making political appointment and giving people the chance to be part of the administration.

This [giving persons with disabilities political appointment] can't happen in this country at the moment. I am a student and I think even if I finish my education they

will not accept me because they have no interest in having a person with disabilities occupying higher position in this country. I hope things change in the future.

Participants indicated that they had no knowledge of any person with disability who contested for political position. All the participants agreed that it would be difficult for a person with disability to take such a bold initiative due to the inherent barriers in society.

Voting and electoral processes

The group discussed the involvement of persons with disabilities in electoral processes both at the local and national levels. Responses indicated that persons with disabilities were generally apathetic towards voting because they felt that their needs were not being addressed by politicians.

> I have never voted in any election in this country. My situation will always be the same   so there is no need for me to go there and vote. No one thinks about me and they do not want to help us to have good life. I always encourage my other colleagues to also stay away from voting [Person with visual disability].

> I am yet to get a candidate who will go there and address my needs. I have got better things to do than to go out there to vote. It is not necessary to me because we are treated as strangers in this country [Person with physical disability].

> I have not seen any positive arrangement that our leaders have for persons with disabilities. It makes no sense at all supporting them to come to power. Whether the president or the mayor, they are all the same and they do not think about us who are suffering [Person with physical disability].

People would surely develop apathy to politics if they do not have confidence in the political system, especially if they have the perception that their needs are not being considered by politicians. Thus, the apathetic attitude of persons with disabilities in the area towards politics is expected.

Barriers to participants

Communication barriers

Some of the groups, especially those with hearing and visual impairments, mentioned that language barriers limited their ability to partake in politics. Information on national issues

was not presented in accessible formats which meant they could not follow what was happening in the country:

> I don't follow anything that goes on in this country. Right now I don't know what is going on in government or this town. There are no interpreters so I'm not able to understand whatever the government or local authorities are doing [Person with hearing disability].

> I know nothing that is happening. Since our leaders have not factored us in their plans by involving us and giving us consideration in a medium through which we can also follow what they are doing, there is no point wasting my time following national issues. All I   think about is how I can survive and take care of my family. I don't know and really don't understand the political system [Person with visual disability].

Similarly, communication barriers made it difficult for some of them to exercise their voting rights. For example, information on electoral materials was inaccessible to people with visual impairments, thus making it difficult for them to understand. Two visually impaired persons remarked:

> I can't vote in any of our elections because I don't know what is written on the ballot paper. It is secret balloting and I want to vote without anyone assisting me. If we are practicing democracy, then everybody should be given the chance to participate equally.

> I don't like a situation where I will go to the polling station and somebody has to hold my hand and help me vote. What if the person didn't vote for my preferred candidate? We have to respect privacy so until ballot papers are also provided in braille, I will never vote in any elections.

Similar observations were made by participants with a hearing impairment:

> Only few know sign language in this town and when you go to the polling stations there is no one there to direct you. It becomes frustrating so the best thing to do is to stay away from elections since I can't communicate with any electoral officials.

> I wish I could follow the campaigns and the plans the leaders have for us before I decide to vote. However, since they don't use sign language in any of their campaigning, I'm forced to stay away. I can't vote when I don't know the plans the person has for us.

Understanding the political process, including campaign messages, contributes significantly towards political participation. Lack of a clear understanding of the political process would create doubts among persons with disabilities who have little trust in the political system due to the way they have been treated.

Negative perceptions

Some of the participants mentioned that due to negative perceptions about the capabilities of persons with disabilities, they were shunned by members of society, and this has contributed to their exclusion from national and local politics:

> In this country, people think disabled persons are cursed so at no point will they consider involving us in what they are doing. The more you try to go close to people, the more they distance themselves. This has made us to fear trying to get closer to those in authorities [Person with physical disability].

> I would have loved to be active in national issues but it is not safe to do so in Cameroon. At every step you try to go closer somebody pushes you back. They don't think we also have good ideas that can help in building of the country. Our culture limits our ability to participate in national affairs [Person with hearing disability].

In most societies, persons with disabilities are viewed in traditional ways as they are looked down upon as individuals incapable of making any effective contributions. Negative perceptions about disability in turn discourage them from participating in politics. Their abilities are doubted and consequently they are not interested in national affairs.

Lack of protective laws

Some participants commented on how the lack of laws to protect the rights of persons with disabilities in Cameroon has denied them the opportunity to exercise their rights. According to some participants, because there were no laws protecting the rights of persons with disabilities, they were unable to exercise their rights to political participation:

> There are no laws promoting our participation in politics in this country. The laws are silent and even if you are maltreated in trying to be part of politics, nothing is done so it is better to move away from there than to force yourself to an area you are not welcome [Person with visually disability].

> The laws do not respect us disabled people as equals to those without disabilities so when it comes to access to government, we are highly excluded and no one comes to our aid. I tell you persons with disabilities in Cameroon have nothing to do with politics. [Person with physical disability].

> I will be happy to go to a programme where I will find an interpreter signing for me but there is nothing like that in this country. Our leaders have decided not to make laws that will involve us in whatever that they are doing. It is very sad that we the disabled have no opportunity to be part of national issues [Person with hearing disability].

There is no legislation in place in the country to safeguard the rights of persons with disabilities. In such a society, they are bound to be excluded from national affairs or to have their rights to access basic services denied.

Level of education

Participants in all the groups acknowledged the importance that formal education plays in politics, and agreed that their level of education was a major factor limiting their chance to participate in political activities. Many of the participants mentioned that they were unable to attain higher education because the education system in the country was not accessible to persons with disabilities. Some participants shared their views:

> I know that our level of education is low that is why the government does not consider us during political appointments. Look in Cameroon, there are few government schools for the blind and it is only few private individuals who have vocational schools which are very expensive to attend. Even if you attend such schools, that is the end and no university or polytechnic will give you admission. We have limited access to education and that is our main problem [Person with visually disability]

> Education is important and people look at that when appointing people into office but disabled people in this country have no access to quality education. We only go to school so as to read and write and that is all. I want to go to school so as to become somebody but the chance is not there [Person with hearing disability].

Higher education, especially tertiary education, increases one's chances in life, and enhances possibilities of understanding the nuances in politics and successfully navigating the political landscape. Since persons with disabilities in the study area generally have low formal education, it would difficult for them to participate in political activities.

Poverty

As stated previously, most of the participants had limited access to formal education, and as a result, many of them were unemployed. Since political activities require huge financial outlay, without employment, it is unlikely that persons with disabilities would have the required financial resources to contest for any political position. Participants agreed that politics in Cameroon was expensive and so they could not engage in politics:

> No person with disability can contest in election in this country. Where will that person get money to campaign? Elections are very expensive and you need financial support in order to achieve this objective but we disabled are poor already and I don't think anyone will think of making such a decision to contest in any elections [Person with visual disability].

> It is not easy to win any election in this country if you don't have money or you are not well connected. No one will be ready to listen to you unless you have the finances to buy your way through. I can say for a fact that no disabled person can contest for election in this town. I know them and I can see how they are struggling to survive [Person with physical disability].

As indicated in the demographic characteristics, many of the participants were unemployed or engaged in low pay jobs. They were therefore unlikely to have the financial resources to engage in politics.

Inaccessible physical environment

Participants who are visually and physically impaired, complained that the physical environment was inaccessible, constraining their movement and limiting openings for them to participate in politics. For example, some participants highlighted how polling stations were inaccessible and also far from where they lived:

> I can't move because of how our environment is. It has been difficult for me to vote during elections due to open gutters. They put the polling stations in place without thinking that there are people in the community who can't see (Person with visual disability).

> The polling station for my electoral area is far and I'm unable to walk there myself to vote. Some of the polling stations are far but there is no transport arrangement made to take us to go and vote so I can't risk my life like that. Even if I'm knocked down by a car on my way to going to vote, no one knows me (Person with visual disability).

> I'm in a wheelchair and I cannot move freely to go and vote. It would have been different if I could walk but my inability to walk doesn't allow me to go and vote. It would have been good that everyone gets the opportunity to vote but the way our environment is limited my ability to vote during any elections [Person with physical disability].

> I crawl on the floor and in this town it is always raining so I can't move through the rain and go and vote for someone who will not help me in anyway. Voting and election issues are not in my plans. I have other issues to focus on than that [Person with physical disability].

Physical barriers are major obstacles to the participation of persons with disabilities in socioeconomic activities. Consequently, there are no doubts that physical barriers would serve as obstacles to political participation of persons with disabilities in the study area.

From the narratives, it is therefore possible to see the interplay of an intricate web of interdependent factors responsible for the low participation of persons with disabilities living in the study area in political activities. However, the impact of these factors on individual persons with disabilities would vary depending on the type of disability and the socio-demographic characteristics of the individual.

Discussion

The study assessed the level of participation of persons with disabilities in political activities in the Buea municipality in the South-West of Cameroon. The findings of the study indicate that several interrelated factors–inaccessible physical environmental, lack of anti-discriminatory policies and laws, poverty, low formal education, communication barriers, negative attitudes, and lack of confidence in politicians– limit the participation of persons with disabilities in political activities. These findings are consistent with those from previous studies on the political participation of persons with disabilities. For example, Hall & Alvarez (2012) reported that barriers such as negative attitudes, lack of formal education, poverty and inaccessible physical environment are responsible for the low participation of persons with disabilities in the US. Similar findings were identified in Canada (Klein, 2005), Ghana (Sackey, 2014), US (Bonnie & Hutchinson, 2004), Australia (Meekosha, 1999), US (Schur et al. 2002) and US (Scotch, 1988).

It has been observed that the right to participation in politics is inseparably linked to access to other rights. For example, the rights to freedom of expression and opinion, to education, to information and to employment are all very important to one's ability to participate in politics (UNHRC, 2014). Thus, the participation of persons with disabilities in political activities is

very much related to their participation in other spheres of life. The inability persons with disabilities to exercise their right to education and employment, for example, could limit their chances of being active participants in politics, and this seemed to have contributed greatly to the exclusion of persons with disabilities in the study area from politics. Studies by Attanayake (2015), Meekosha (1999) and Sackey (2014) found that access to higher political office is usually based on merit and one's level of education, but persons with disabilities are unable to meet these requirements for higher political appointments, consequently limiting their chances of political inclusion. Additionally, not having the chance to participate in other activities in their community, reduces their chances to interact with their peers, an important opportunity to build experience, self-esteem and to understand the nuances in the political landscape.

The finding that the electoral process is not accessible to persons with disabilities in the study area suggests that persons with disabilities in the area are unable to exercise their rights to participate in political activities on an equal basis as other members of their community. This finding corroborates studies by Bonnie & Hutchinson (2004), Hall & Alvarez (2012) and Khasbnabis, Heinicke & Achu (2010). These studies found that barriers relating to inaccessible information, communication and inaccessible physical environment have hindered access to political participation for persons with disabilities.

Because of doubts about the capabilities of persons with disabilities, there is little interest in their development leading to low investment in their education (Human Rights Watch, 2012). Many persons with disabilities therefore have low educational attainment and are unemployed, hence, lacking the means to engage in activities that require huge financial investment such as politics. According to Miller (2010), the ability model, which links socioeconomic status to political participation, is one of the most widely accepted models for explaining the level of participation of people in politics. According to the model, people with higher socioeconomic standing are mostly likely to be active participants in politics than those with lower education, because they have the time, financial resources, and/or civic skills to participate. Persons with disabilities generally lack these qualities–they are poor and do not have time for politics as they are often preoccupied with meeting their basic needs (Human Rights Watch, 2012; Sackey, 2014; Meekosha, 1999; Scotch,1988).

Although education and employment could boost their chances of participating in politics, traditional perceptions about disability and the associated stigma would be a major obstacle. As a result, the few who have attained higher education are unable to engage in politics. Negative perceptions about the causes of disability has greatly influenced attitudes towards the inclusion of persons with disabilities in society (International Foundation for Electoral System, 2014). Even family members can reject their relatives with disabilities because of the stigma and would exclude them from holding traditional or leadership positions in their communities (Human Rights Watch, 2012; Baffoe, 2013). Thus, if family members would

reject their relatives with disabilities, one should not expect them to be accepted by the larger community. Mayer (2007) and Mbibeh (2013) agree with this viewpoint, arguing that the exclusion of persons with disabilities from participating in activities in their communities, begins with their families.

The finding indicating that persons with disabilities in the study area were exhibiting political apathy due to lack of confidence in politicians addressing their concerns is consistent with the study conducted by Hall & Alvarez (2012). This study assessed barriers to political participation of persons with disabilities in the US and reported that the perception among persons with disabilities is that their needs have not been adequately represented in national development agenda and this has created political apathy among them. Similarly, studies by Attanayake (2015) and Sackey (2014) in Sri Lanka and Ghana respectively found that there is disinterest in politics among persons with disabilities due to the lack of any noticeable improvement in their living conditions. In fact, political apathy due to the lack of confidence in the political leadership, is not limited to persons with disabilities. As Ngwane (2015) reported, residents in general in the Buea municipality are apathetic towards politics because the area has received little attention in terms of development.

Implications for policy making

Equal participation in decision making is the cornerstone of every democratic society because collective and active involvement of every citizen promotes collective responsibility and advances social transformation (Hall & Alvarez, 2012; Krishna, 2013; Klein, 2005; Pahad, 2005). For persons with disabilities who have faced exclusion and who have been marginalized for a long time, political participation would possibly open up opportunities for them to participate in other spheres of life (Meekosha, 1999). In view of this, actions towards their inclusion should be paramount to advocates and the state. Actions that would reduce negative perceptions about disability, such as educating the general public about the capabilities of persons with disabilities and the importance of an inclusive society should be pursued. Public education creating awareness about the need to embrace persons with disabilities as equal members of their community may increase their acceptance and inclusion in decision making. This will be effective if there are inclusive policies discouraging discrimination while encouraging persons with disabilities to participate in politics and other social activities. For example, affirmative action such as appointing some persons with disabilities to ministerial positions can be implemented. Such individuals can act as role models for others and break the myth surrounding disability.

Also, for persons with disabilities to take advantage of inclusive policies, government should invest in their education so that they can gain the knowledge and skills required to participate in society. Implementing policies and practices such as inclusive education and training

teachers in special needs education to make the educational system in Cameroon accessible to persons with disabilities, may increase access to education for persons with disabilities in the area. Furthermore, the political system in Cameroon requires significant transformations to make it accessible to all citizens irrespective of their socio-economic background. Opening up the political system to make it more tolerant to dissenting views will go a long way towards encouraging the participation of minority groups. Finally, as suggested by Human Rights Watch (2012) in Peru, electoral procedures need a lot of changes to make elections accessible to persons with disabilities. Presently, Elections Cameroon (ELECAM) does not consider the needs of persons with disabilities when preparing materials for elections. So, voting materials are not in formats that are accessible to persons with disabilities, especially those who are visually impaired.

Conclusion

The aim of the study was to assess the extent of participation of persons with disabilities in political affairs in the Buea municipality of Cameroon. The study found that persons with disabilities were generally apathetic to politics and many barriers obstructed participation. The study found that persons with disabilities and their organizations were not involved in decision making and so their views were not as well considered in decision making. Despite the fact that political participation is a fundamental human right for citizens of Cameroon and despite the fact that collective decision making is important in any political dispensation, persons with disabilities in the study area have been excluded. They have lost an important mechanism that would have helped them to engage various political actors and duty bearers to advance their interests. Civic rights are fundamental to every human being and so persons with disabilities cannot continue to be neglected from participating. It is therefore essential that pragmatic measures such as public education to change perceptions about disability and affirmative action   are undertaken to promote the political rights of persons with disabilities.

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