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A screenshot of a video in Libyan Sign Language on COVID-19 produced by Zaykum Zayna.

Ensuring People with Disabilities are Involved in Political Life during COVID-19

Overview

The world's one billion people with disabilities have historically been excluded from decision-making processes, including elections. The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened these existing inequalities. People with disabilities may be immunocompromised, rely on personal assistance, and often live in low-income areas with poor access to health care. To ensure inclusive governance during the pandemic response, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) is actively innovating to maintain program continuity and deliver timely support to government and civil society partners.

Thought Leadership

Guidance on Conducting Accessible Virtual Meetings: As civil society and governments institute new measures to respond to stay-at-home orders resulting from COVID-19, it is important to ensure that virtual communication platforms are inclusive of and accessible to all participants. In response to this growing need, IFES published guidance on [Holding Accessible and Inclusive Virtual Meetings](#) as part of its *Inclusion Insights* series in April 2020. This resource compares the accessibility features of the most-used virtual meeting platforms and provides good practices for ensuring inclusive virtual meetings during COVID-19.

How to Ensure People with Disabilities are Included in Political Life during COVID-19: This [article](#), published on IFES' COVID-19 landing page, explores good practices for ensuring inclusion of people with disabilities as voters, poll workers, and other election stakeholders during the pandemic.

IFES COVID-19 Inclusion Brief: This [paper](#) highlights unique barriers to political participation encountered by marginalized groups and identify strategies that can be employed by election management bodies (EMBs), civil society organizations (CSOs), and media to maintain an enabling environment during COVID-19 and in a post-pandemic world. This paper is part of IFES' *COVID-19 Briefing Series* which focuses on identifying, assessing and developing strategies to address fundamental threats to democracy and governance as a result of COVID-19.

#Democracys USAID Twitter Chat: On April 24, IFES hosted [#InclusiveDemTalk](#): Strategies for Maintaining Inclusive Political Processes during the COVID-19 Pandemic. IFES regional teams and partners engaged participants in a discussion on barriers that marginalized groups such as youth, women, persons with disabilities, indigenous people and displaced persons are facing in political and public life as a result of COVID-19. IFES highlighted programming examples to show how IFES and CSO partners are supporting marginalized groups to participate in decision-making processes during COVID-19.



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Program Highlights

Southeast Asia (AGENDA): One of the primary goals of the General Election Network for Disability Access (AGENDA) is to deepen collaboration between DPOs and ASEAN regional bodies to build strong, cross-sectoral advocacy coalitions for mainstreaming disability rights in national laws and public policy. With most in-person events and activities are canceled or postponed due to restrictions on travel and large gatherings of people, IFES is supporting its AGENDA partners to conduct advocacy activities to hold governments accountable for ensuring an inclusive response during the pandemic. *Supported by the Australian Government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL).*

- In March 2020, AGENDA partners from Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam, held a call to discuss the barriers persons with disabilities encounter during COVID-19 and share good practices for advocating for their rights. Partners identified access to information as a primary concern, as many television stations do not include sign language interpretation, and many persons with disabilities do not have access to the internet or other news sources. The call was the first opportunity that DPOs across the region had to share their experiences and learn from their peers. Based on the success of this first call, IFES has organized video calls on a monthly basis with AGENDA partners.



IFES and DPOs participate in a video call to discuss how to adapt AGENDA regional advocacy in the context of COVID-19.

- IFES is conducting research on the implementation of relevant action points from the *ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025: Mainstreaming the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, a regional action plan to mainstream disability rights, during COVID-19. The report will include recommendations on how government stakeholders can utilize action points on disaster risk management, healthcare, political participation and other key areas to address potential governance gaps during health crises.
- With IFES support, AGENDA partners implemented #EnablingApril, a month-long social media campaign to highlight the intersection between the COVID-19 response and the Enabling Masterplan. As part of #EnablingApril, AGENDA partners launched a signature campaign for stakeholders to sign on to support implementation of the ASEAN Enabling Masterplan for disability-inclusive disaster response.
- IFES' AGENDA partner in [Malaysia](#), the National Council of the Blind Malaysia (NCBM), used advocacy techniques learned during an IFES training to ensure people with disabilities are included in the government's COVID-19 response. NCBM's requests, duplicated in a corresponding memo sent by the Malaysia Federation of the Deaf, were submitted to the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development. As a result of NCBM's advocacy, government

communications on COVID-19 were updated to include interpretation in Malaysian Sign Language, 5 million ringgit was made available for food deliveries for older persons with disabilities and other at-risk groups, and an inclusive unemployment policy was developed to support lower-income Malaysians.

- IFES, with AGENDA DPO partners, will produce an *Inclusive Digital Advocacy Toolkit* to highlight opportunities and methods for online and remote advocacy that can be undertaken by DPOs in the COVID-19 context. The digital toolkit will feature interactive activities, including a “choose your own adventure” online game for participants to practice using strategies to advocate with government stakeholders for equal access to rights.
- IFES’ AGENDA partner in the Philippines, CALL Foundation for the Blind, held a series of webinars on COVID-19 impacts on policy platform priorities, including education, accessibility and employment. The webinars were informed by a survey that CALL conducted online and over the phone with over 640 people with disabilities across the country to assess COVID-19 impacts and analyze how well the Enabling Masterplan is being implemented. CALL Foundation also organized a poster making [contest](#) to raise awareness about the Enabling Masterplan among Filipinos.

Bangladesh: IFES’ Students Against Violence Everywhere (SAVE) program in Bangladesh is supporting youth, including young people with disabilities, to combat disinformation and hate speech during COVID-19. As part of this initiative, IFES conducted a [Q&A](#) with Nayem Molla, a young disability rights advocate and SAVE member. In the Q&A, Molla highlights the importance of civic engagement and disability rights advocacy among young people, and shares strategies for young people to stop the spread of disinformation online during COVID-19. *Supported by the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development (DFID).*

“During this time of social distancing and stay-at-home orders, people with disabilities are at the greatest risk of human rights violations, being subjected to violence and hate speech. As we are to stay-at-home, I’m using social media, particularly Facebook, to advocate on behalf of young people with disabilities.”

- Nayem Molla, young disability rights advocate and SAVE member, Bangladesh

Pacific Islands and the Autonomous Region of Bougainville (Papua New Guinea): To collect information on the unique challenges women with disabilities and youth with disabilities face in the context of COVID-19, IFES, in partnership the Pacific Disability Forum (PDF), implemented a short survey to distribute to its regional networks in the Pacific via email and Facebook. Survey respondents included alumni of its *Pacific Power to Persuade: Empowering Women with Disabilities to Influence Public Policy* program and *Engaging a New Generation for Accessible Governance and Elections* (ENGAGE) program in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville (ARoB), among others. Survey results indicated that nearly all participants are relying on technology, particularly smartphones and radio, to access information on COVID-19, including critical health and safety information. The survey also revealed that people with disabilities are more likely to use social media apps to communicate than those without a disability. Survey findings are being used to facilitate the development of a support network among alumni and strengthen avenues for women with disabilities and youth with disabilities to voice their concerns with decision-makers. As part of this initiative, *Power to Persuade* alumnae and new participants across the region developed a COVID-19 crisis and recovery-responsive policy platform,



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and are utilizing the *Power to Persuade* curriculum to design and implement advocacy initiatives. IFES and PDF are also implementing a Strategic Communications and Advocacy Online workshop to train women with disabilities to develop impactful messages on the policy platform. To promote inclusive reporting during COVID-19, IFES and PDF will train journalists in rights-based reporting techniques using IFES' Media Empowering Disability Inclusion and Access (MEDIA) guidelines and training. The training will also provide the opportunity for women advocates with disabilities to learn how to engage



Screenshot from the video IFES produced in Tunisian Sign Language to share information on COVID-19 with Deaf Tunisians.

effectively with media professionals to enhance their advocacy for a gender- and disability-inclusive COVID-19 response. Supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

Tunisia: In recognition of the barriers Deaf Tunisians face accessing information during COVID-19, IFES developed a [video](#) in Tunisian Sign Language to share information about the pandemic with Deaf communities. The video is being distributed by the Ministry of Social Affairs. In May 2020, IFES produced a second [video](#)

in which members of the “My Sign, My Voice” working group shared a message in Tunisian Sign Language encouraging Deaf communities to follow health guidelines. In June 2020, IFES organized a series of webinars for Deaf Tunisians as part of the electoral sign language lexicon, “My Sign, My Voice” project. The webinars provide a platform for members of the Deaf community to discuss how they have been impacted by COVID-19. The [first webinar](#), which featured advocates who are Deaf or hard-of hearing, focused on the social and economic impacts of COVID-19 on Deaf Tunisians. The [second webinar](#) highlighted the lack of representation of Deaf people in the media and recommendations for addressing this gap. The [third webinar](#), which featured a Deaf moderator for the first time, addressed barriers to and opportunities for civic engagement of Deaf Tunisians during COVID-19. Recommendations from the webinars are being used to inform IFES’ future programmatic approaches. IFES also created “Voices of the City” (Sout Al Madina), a [comic book](#) and series of [animated civic education videos](#) which include interpretation in Tunisian Sign Language and feature Deaf people as characters. The animated videos, which have been published on [Facebook](#) and [YouTube](#), address issues related to democracy, local governance, rights, elections, advocacy and citizenship. The videos have also been integrated into IFES’ civic education curriculum and shared with nearly 200 Deaf and hard-of-hearing persons during IFES-led civic education sessions held in August and September 2020. Supported by USAID.

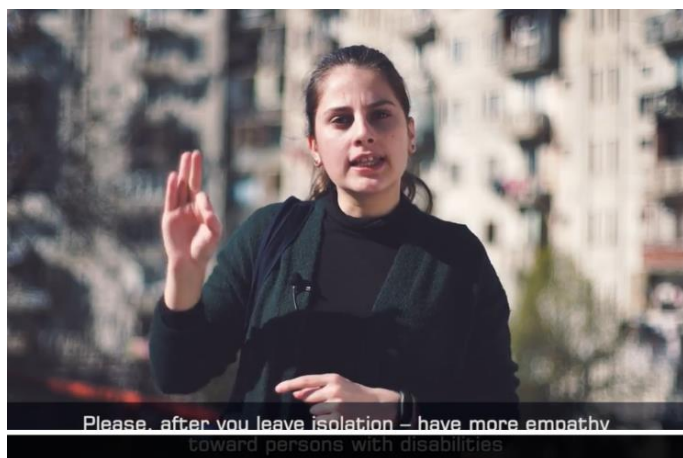


Cover of “The Voices of the City” (Sout Al Madina) comic book which features Deaf characters in front of the Tunisian Parliament building holding a sign which reads “The rights of Deaf and hard-of-hearing persons are an obligation and not a favor.”



Libya: Zaykum Zayna, a Libyan DPO which IFES helped to establish in 2012, developed [videos](#) in Libyan Sign Language to explain the impacts of COVID-19 to Deaf Libyans. IFES sponsored Facebook posts of the video in order to share information on COVID-19 more widely. IFES is also supporting a *Power to Persuade Online* pilot with women with disabilities in Libya, which is anticipated to take place in October. *Supported by USAID.*

Myanmar: IFES and Future Stars, a self-advocacy organization of persons with intellectual disabilities, are developing an easy-to-read guide on how to stay safe while participating in political and public life. Recognizing that IFES' DPO partners are encountering increasing mental health challenges in the COVID-19 context, IFES plans to host a virtual talent show and song writing contest for people with disabilities to build community, increase interest in participation, and showcase their unique talents. The talent show will be part of IFES' Rock the Vote campaign, which will be conducted virtually. IFES is also working to develop a braille civic education comic book to raise awareness among first-time voters about the importance of participating in democracy and elections. The comic book will include information on voter list updates, countering disinformation and hate speech, and inclusive participation, and will be available in three languages, including Myanmar, Kachin and Kayin. IFES' DPO partners will distribute these civic education materials, Ministry of Health pamphlets, disposable masks and hand sanitizer to their target communities. IFES is also supporting Shwe Min Thar Foundation, a national DPO, to develop a mobile app with information on COVID-19 that will also be repurposed to deliver voter education messages. IFES also updated its voter education curriculum to be run online by DPO partners in Myanmar. In September 2020, Future Stars piloted the civic education curriculum and is currently training persons with intellectual disabilities to lead trainings of their peers. *Supported by DFID, Global Affairs Canada (GAC), Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA), DFAT, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and USAID.*



Screenshot from the PSA video produced by IFES featuring Tatia Datashvili, a young woman sign language user in Georgia.

Georgia: IFES developed a series of [PSAs](#) featuring young women with different types of disabilities advocating for equal access to rights and inclusion in political and public life. In the PSAs, the young women share how they have been impacted by COVID-19 and the resulting stay-at-home orders. By sharing their experiences at a time of increased solidarity in response to COVID-19, these stories seek to raise awareness about barriers faced by people with disabilities in Georgia to build a more inclusive and accessible society. *Supported by USAID.*

Nigeria: IFES supports the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in conducting specialized voter outreach to persons with disabilities to promote their active participation throughout the electoral process. In addition to general restrictions on travel and events due to COVID-19, in-person events with persons with disabilities face an additional challenge of often requiring assistive aides in settings that allow a limited number of participants. IFES is responding to this by adapting outreach plans in Nigeria to focus on radio call-in shows and other remote methods accessible to persons



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with disabilities. IFES is also helping INEC integrate health best practices into its electoral plans in ways that maintain access for all voters and ensuring voters are aware of these adaptations through accessible voter education messaging.

Europe Regional: IFES is integrating disability into its regional Europe [webinar series](#) on planning and holding elections during the COVID-19 pandemic. The [first session](#) of the series, which focused on the administration of elections and included 140 participants from over 25 countries, featured Karine Grigoryan, president and executive director for the Agate Rights Defense Center for Women with Disabilities in Armenia. In her remarks, Grigoryan emphasized the importance of inclusion in the electoral process, particularly for elections held during the pandemic, and provided recommendations for EMBs to ensure equal access to political and electoral rights for people with disabilities during the pandemic. The [fourth session](#) of the webinar series focused on promoting access and inclusion of people with disabilities in the electoral process. The event included remarks by Virginia Atkinson, IFES' Senior Global Inclusion Advisor, and featured simultaneous interpretation into ten languages, including American Sign Language, as well as sign language in Armenian, Georgian, Macedonian and Russian.

Pakistan: IFES is supporting the Special Talent Exchange Program (STEP), our local DPO partner, to implement [Power to Persuade Online](#) for with women with disabilities in Pakistan. Adjustments to the in-person *Power to Persuade* training methodology were informed by a survey STEP conducted with participants to assess their access to technology at home and any reasonable accommodations they might require in order to participate in an online training. Survey results indicated that most respondents have access to a smartphone, yet their access to a separate room or quiet space to participate in an online training is limited. The majority of respondents had never participated in an online training, however, all respondents expressed interest in participating. Two-thirds of respondents requested the training include sensory breaks and several respondents also requested sign language interpreters or personal assistants. In light of the COVID-19 context and in response to survey results, IFES and STEP updated the curriculum to focus on building participants' capacity to identify the government bodies in charge of the COVID-19 response for their advocacy efforts; to identify current COVID-19 response policies and any gaps in these policies that impact women with disabilities; and to integrate advocacy strategies for participants to engage in while remaining safe at home during the pandemic. IFES is working to organize a virtual conference early next year with *Power to Persuade* alumnae from South Asia and select guests from the Pacific Islands. *Supported by GAC.*



IFES' logo for the *Power to Persuade Online* pilot in Pakistan.



Sri Lanka and Bangladesh: Throughout August and September 2020, IFES led a series of remote TOT sessions on its' *Power to Persuade* methodology for IFES staff and partners in Sri Lanka, *supported by USAID*, and Bangladesh, *supported by DFID*. The methodology for both trainings was updated to integrate advocacy strategies for participants to engage in while remaining safe at home during the pandemic. Since the training in Bangladesh included some men with disabilities, in addition to women with disabilities, the curriculum was updated to feature a session on being an ally.



Kyrgyz Democracy Camp alumni encourages other young people to adhere to COVID-19 lock-down precautions.

Kyrgyzstan: For the last 20 years, IFES has held Democracy Camps in Kyrgyzstan to empower young people with the critical skills and confidence to become the next generation of leaders. Recent Democracy Camp alumni have held a series of Instagram Live sessions focused on how to deal with the isolation and anxiety brought on by the global lockdown, hygiene measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19, and ways young people can protect the planet by not

littering. Youth with and without disabilities joined the Live sessions and encouraged young people to support each other during this unprecedented time. *Supported by USAID.*

Nepal: IFES supported its DPO partner, Nepal Disabled Women Association (NDWA), to conduct an online and phone survey on the impacts of COVID-19 on women with disabilities in Nepal. Evidence is being used to inform future advocacy and programmatic approaches. NDWA also organized a policy dialogue with elected officials and media to discuss impacts of COVID-19 on women with disabilities. The dialogue focused on sectors from the policy platform developed by women with disabilities during IFES' *Power to Persuade* training held in August 2018. In May 2020, IFES conducted a [Q&A](#) with NDWA's Samjhana Ghimire, who supports implementation of IFES' *Power to Persuade* program. The interview focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on Nepali women with disabilities and NDWA actions to ensure equal access to services and information for women with disabilities during COVID-19. NDWA is also partnering with the Association of Youth Organizations Nepal (AYON) to create scripts for animated spots on rights during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Supported by USAID.*

Ukraine: IFES continues to [support](#) the Central Election Commission's (CEC) election access working group that brings together DPO representatives to meet with the CEC. Since the pandemic began, they have conducted virtual meetings on issues surrounding amendments to the electoral code, mainstreaming accessibility into the CEC's draft strategic plan, and analyzing the accessibility requirements in the newly adopted election code. With IFES support, the working group was established in December 2019 as a consultative forum for CEC, civil society, DPOs and other relevant stakeholders to discuss, review and provide input on laws and regulations, provide guidance on physical accessibility of polling stations, voter education materials and other CEC initiatives to ensure the rights of persons with disabilities. In July 2020, IFES' partner organization, the Group of Influence, produced [videos](#) to inform internally displaced persons (IDPs), migrants and other Ukrainian citizens without registration about new legal procedures to allow



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them to vote in the 2020 local elections. The videos, which mainstream disability by including images of persons with disabilities alongside other citizens, depict voters wearing masks as a safety precaution to prevent against COVID-19. *Supported by DFID, GAC, and USAID.*

Lebanon: IFES is conducting research with Lebanese DPOs and CSOs to explore the impact of COVID-19 on the country's revolution from the perspective of people with disabilities, women, LGBTI people and refugees. IFES is also supporting partner organizations to develop a photo gallery and videos highlighting political advocacy before and after COVID-19 and will be conducting crisis management trainings on how to continue intersectional advocacy during and after the pandemic. *Supported by DRL.*

Armenia: In Armenia, IFES and DPO partner, Agate Rights Defense Center for Women with Disabilities, adapted IFES' polling station audit methodology to include an online training for people with different types of disabilities. The online training focused on building participants' knowledge of COVID-19 health and safety measures in order to ensure safe and inclusive participation in polling station audits during and post-COVID-19. In June 2020, IFES, the Central Election Commission (CEC) and several DPOs organized a webinar on strategies for ensuring accessible and inclusive participation in political life during COVID-19. As a result of the discussion, a working group will be formed for the CEC, civil society, DPOs and other relevant stakeholders to develop a strategy for ensure disability-inclusive elections in Armenia. *Supported by USAID.*

North Macedonia: IFES' subgrant partner in [North Macedonia](#), the Association for Promotion and Development of an Inclusive Society (INKLUZIVA), used advocacy techniques learned during an IFES training to ensure people with disabilities are included in the government's COVID-19 response. As a result of this advocacy, measures were instituted to ensure access to support services including personal assistants during lockdown orders and to promote inclusion of people with disabilities in the distribution of relief packages by municipal governments. IFES also supported INKLIZIVA to adapt its sensitization training methodology for online implementation with people with disabilities in North Macedonia. *Supported by USAID.*

Bolivia: With IFES support, Bolivia's Plurinational Electoral Body is adapting their in-person poll worker cascade trainings to online trainings using a virtual platform. As part of the online trainings, IFES is supporting the development of video tutorials with sign language interpretation to ensure materials are accessible for all participants. *Supported by USAID.*



A man and a woman using a wheelchair wear masks as a safety precaution to prevent against COVID-19 during a polling station audit in Armenia in June 2020.



A screenshot of a voter education video produced by the Malawi Election Commission ahead of the June 2020 elections which included sign language interpretation.

Malawi: In May 2020, the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC), with support from IFES, produced a series of inclusive voter education [videos](#) as part of the “My Country, My Choice” campaign to inform voters of electoral procedures ahead of the June 2020 Presidential elections. The videos, which included sign interpretation, provided information about MEC measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and enhance the effectiveness of the electoral process. *Supported by USAID.*



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