



Disability Equity in Politics and Elections in Solomon Islands

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Disability equity is a stated priority area for the Solomon Islands government and its key international development partners, including Australia. Around 16 per cent of men and 17 per cent of women in Solomon Islands live with a disability. Older people and rural residents report higher rates of disability, with the most prevalent disability reported being difficulty seeing (SINSO 2017). People with disabilities face widely acknowledged barriers to accessing education, healthcare and employment (PDF 2018). Less explored, however, is the underrepresentation and underparticipation of citizens with disabilities in politics and elections.

Disability access in the 2024 elections

On 17 April 2024, Solomon Islands held its first ever joint elections, with national parliamentary elections, most provincial assembly elections, and the Honiara City Council elections held at the same time. Both the authors were accredited observers, for Development Services Exchange and The Australian National University–Solomon Islands National University (ANU–SINU), respectively. We both observed at one of three polling stations set up at Tuvaruhu Community High School within the Central Honiara constituency.

Care had obviously been taken in the selection of the polling station site. Importantly, it had ramp access for voters. Yet, this apparent commitment to accessibility was not fully reflected across the process. We observed a voter using a wheelchair struggle to locate their name on the roll – a small-font printout of which had been placed high on a wall.

The 2024 Solomon Islands elections could be characterised as an exercise in disability inclusion but not disability equity. The policy framework exists to facilitate the participation of people with disabilities, but the practice did not always reflect this. The ANU–SINU election report (Wiltshire et al. 2024) found there was no access for people with disabilities at more than a third of polling stations observed.

Eight per cent of observation reports recounted instances of forced assistance, disproportionately targeting voters with disabilities. While assistance with voting was usually provided to voters with disabilities at their request – mostly reported by observers for voters with blindness or low vision – this often came at the expense of safeguards. One observer recounted of a deaf voter: ‘Her polling process was not as secret as

everyone else’s.’ The report recommends introducing minimum accessibility standards for polling stations to better accommodate elderly voters and those with disabilities, particularly in rural and remote constituencies, with mobile polling options to further increase accessibility (Wiltshire et al. 2024).

Barriers before polling day

Focusing on accessibility on polling day, however, can obscure other barriers. In a citizen survey carried out by the ANU–SINU observation team, 15 per cent of respondents mentioned ‘medical issues or disabilities’ as a reason people in their community were unable to register to vote (Wiltshire et al. 2024). This aligns with the personal experience of one of the authors (Kelly), who only registered to vote for the first time ahead of the 2024 elections after finding the process inaccessible prior to that. It is clear that a significant cohort of people with disabilities is excluded from the electoral process at the registration stage. As such, efforts to engage people with disabilities in the electoral process need to also focus on ensuring they are included on the roll.

Meaningful participation

The ability of people with disabilities to engage in the electoral process as voters is crucially important, but it is not the full story. Meaningful participation encompasses people with disabilities not just voting (and observing) but being employed as polling and counting officials, standing for election as candidates, being actively involved in campaign teams, and acting in leadership roles within political parties. This is far from reality in Solomon Islands. There have been members of parliament with disabilities, with one notable example being the long-serving David Sitai, who became blind and a wheelchair user during his parliamentary tenure. Yet, Sitai’s experience also highlights a lack of accommodations for people with disabilities in politics, which contributed to his resignation (Chevalier 2021). A focus on disability equity means facilitating opportunities for participation at all levels of access and decision-making in elections.

It also means facilitating political engagement beyond elections. While statistics on Rural Constituency Development Fund expenditures are often not collected, we know from feedback that

these funds are disproportionately difficult to access for people with disabilities. Often, processes to access these funds are opaque and hard to navigate. This puts people with disabilities at a significant disadvantage, perpetuating and entrenching inequities within these systems and further limiting access to government services for marginalised populations.

Developments towards equity

Recently, there have been positive developments in moving towards disability equity in Solomon Islands. After signing the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) on 23 September 2008, the Solomon Islands government finally ratified the convention on 22 June 2023. Prominent Solomon Islanders with disabilities, such as Jabez Manaika, the country's first blind radio presenter, are changing public perceptions of what life with disability looks like (Clayton and Campanella 18/8/2024). Furthermore, civil society organisations like People with Disability Solomon Islands have been persistently advocating disability equity. With the ratification of the UNCRPD and increasing visibility of Solomon Islanders with disabilities in public life, it is an opportune time to revisit policy frameworks on disability equity — in politics and elections and beyond — to ensure they are fit for purpose and have appropriate mechanisms for implementation.

Also in 2023, the Australian Government — Solomon Islands' most significant development partner — released its International Disability Equity and Rights Strategy (DFAT 2023). Designed to mainstream disability equity initiatives across Australian development programming, it aims “not just for a seat at the table, but for a change in our systems and processes so people with disability can contribute fully and meaningfully” (DFAT 2024:7).

These efforts at the government and development partner level are important, as disability equity is a fundamental building block to development. When disability equity is prioritised, everyone can access the rights of full citizenship. This can be enabled by an approach to disability programming in politics and elections that is by, not for, people with disabilities.

Such an approach could include:

- civic awareness on the importance of equal citizenship, with a focus on people with disabilities, that takes place across the whole electoral cycle
- disability liaison officers within electoral

institutions who can design and lead training and support recruitment initiatives

- a voter registration drive specifically targeted at people with disabilities
- provisions in the Political Parties Integrity Act to facilitate the inclusion and active participation of people with disabilities in political parties
- consideration of temporary special measures, such as reserved seats for people with disabilities or the establishment of an advisory board to parliament on the needs of people with disabilities
- a comprehensive review of national policy in relation to disability led by people with disabilities that focuses on alignment with the UNCRPD.

Initiatives led and designed by people with disabilities are the most effective means of combating barriers to access and opening more space for participation in politics and elections — not just as voters, but as officials, campaigners, political party executives, candidates, and elected representatives.

Author notes

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