

Ensuring Access of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) with Disabilities to Political Life



Syrian refugees with disabilities attend an IFES workshop on political participation in Turkey

In 2016, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that there were 22.5 million refugees and 65.6 million forcibly displaced persons. This is the highest population of global refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) on record, and it is likely that the number will increase due to conflict and natural disasters. Women's Refugee Commission estimates there are 13.2 million people with disabilities who are displaced around the world. In many countries, collecting accurate information on refugees is challenging, and few organizations collect data on refugees with disabilities. An IDP with a disability lives under conditions in which

their own government either cannot or refuses to provide basic rights such as basic services and security. A refugee with a disability has fled their home country in hopes that they will gain access to more security, rights and disability inclusion via another government or international protection. All persons have the right to participate in political life, according to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) Article 29. However, IDPs and refugees with disabilities may encounter additional barriers as a result of their citizenship status and risk being denied a voice in political and economic decisions.

Reaching Refugee Status

In states where governments are unable or unwilling to ensure human rights, persons attempt to access protection by crossing an international border. Escaping violence, gaining access to proper documentation and therefore reaching refugee status is extremely difficult for persons with disabilities. Persons with physical disabilities may not be able to transport themselves. Persons with visual disabilities, without a sighted guide or assistive devices, may not be able to travel independently or navigate new territories. People with auditory disabilities might not hear warning signs or the onset of a conflict without others notifying them. Persons who have experienced trauma or who have intellectual disabilities might not have access to services that enable them to access justice.

IDP or Refugee?

IDPs and refugees are persons who have been forced away from their homes and communities due to violence and natural disasters. IDPs do not cross international borders, staying in their own country; refugees do cross internationally recognized borders. While all states are responsible for upholding human rights, IDPs and refugees often do not have access to services or political representation. As a refugee, a person has access to a state that may have assumed international obligations and can act as a substitute provider of rights while their home country fails to do so.

Increasing Political Participation

IDPs and refugees are often missing identification papers. As a result of security issues and minimal warning or notice, documents are lost or forgotten when they are forced to flee. Persons may not have access to documentation at birth, such as a birth certificate. Without proper identity documents, IDPs cannot register to vote or run for political office, affecting participation in their communities. Refugees might not have rights that protect their ability to participate in the political life of their new communities and often do not have a voice in what happens in their home communities. Following the steps below can assist in increasing political participation for both IDPs and refugees with disabilities:

- **Reduce Conflict and Insecurity:** IDPs and refugees often must escape areas of intense violence and oppression. IDPs may experience widespread and far-reaching violence while refugees may experience contracted violence within refugee camps. This ongoing insecurity can affect access throughout the entire electoral cycle. Priority should be placed on conflict resolution so voters and candidates feel safe registering to vote, traveling to polling stations, during voting, and attending political events and voter education trainings.
- **Provide Missing Adaptive Equipment:** When persons with disabilities are successful in leaving conflict or disaster areas, they are likely to have lost necessary equipment such as assistive devices and medications. In order for IDPs and refugees to participate in elections and political life independently, they need to have access to any adaptive equipment they may have misplaced during transit. Access to equipment enables participation in public life. Provide replacement equipment whenever possible and temporary access when resources are minimal. For persons with physical disabilities, provide wheelchairs, crutches or canes. For persons with chronic health disabilities provide access to medication. Provide glasses or magnifying glasses for persons who have low vision. Refugees may have more opportunities to access adaptive equipment than IDPs through international policies and institutions that work in refugee camps.
- **Facilitate Registration:** When possible, set up registration centers in locations that are accessible to persons with disabilities, such as shopping malls or community centers. Where there is active conflict, officials can supplement the data collected during registration by creating mobile voter registration sites. Mobile registration can help provide access to IDPs and refugees, who may have conditions that restrict their access to public areas. In refugee camps, ensure a registration center is in a well-known and easily accessible location for persons with disabilities. In [Ukraine](#), IDPs have the right to vote and voter education materials are provided in accessible formats, ensuring IDPs with disabilities are included.



Almost 2,000,000 IDPs are living in Nigeria. A man with citizenship registers to vote through accessible registration facilities.



IFES-produced voter education message for IDPs in Ukraine.

- **Increase Physical Accessibility:** In locations where there are refugee and IDP camps, accessible [polling stations](#) and community group meetings rooms are often limited. Use accessible buildings in close proximity to refugee and IDP camps. If this is not possible, provide safe and accessible transport. Participating in community meetings and discussions allows refugees to voice their opinions and learn about opportunities to engage in public life outside of the camp. Refugee camps can be alienating and increase solitude, especially for refugees with disabilities. Increasing accessibility to the wider community increases their ability to participate in important decision-making processes and elect local officials.
- **Increase Access to Information:** IDPs and refugees, in particular those residing in camps or settlements, often lack information about political processes in a language they understand. Ensure campaigns and voter information are made available to persons with disabilities in multiple accessible formats, such as audio, braille, and easy-to-read. If refugees and IDPs with physical and visual disabilities are living far from a camp's borders or away from the camp's central resources, have personnel travel to the persons with disabilities. This decreases the hardship faced by traveling to access resources and information. Provide sign language interpreters when conducting voter education activities. Speak with persons with intellectual or developmental disabilities individually so they can ask questions to clarify the information provided.
- **Promote Camp Meetings:** Despite inclusion efforts, refugees and IDPs living in camps often lack access to decision-making processes. Increase opportunities to engage in public life within a camp by coordinating weekly meetings. Meetings empower refugees and IDPs with disabilities to advocate for their specific needs while engaging with other individuals living in the camp.
- **Raise Awareness:** Greater levels of empathy and understanding benefit entire communities faced with conflict and displaced persons and are especially important for IDPs and refugees with disabilities, who are facing extreme levels of discrimination and marginalization. Negative social attitudes towards persons with disabilities that originate in their home communities follow them as they relocate, either as an IDP or refugee. This is compounded when resources are scarce and accommodations and services for persons with disabilities can be viewed as especially difficult to provide. Raise awareness of their lived experiences by empowering persons with disabilities as leaders.