

Assessment of the level of preparedness of independent national electoral commission towards inclusion of voters with disabilities in 2019 election in Nigeria

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Abstract

Election is one of the fora for selecting leaders into various positions of authority, which demands collective representation and participation in governance by every member of a community, state or nation. Hence, it is a right for all with reference to certain criteria as obtainable in communities across the globe. However, some people may have been denied this right because of race, position and differences in physical mental, emotional, sensory and psychological attributes considered to be at variance to the extant laws. Consequently, this study investigated the level of preparedness of the Independent Electoral Commission towards inclusion of voters with disabilities in 2019 general election in Nigeria. The study employed ex-post-facto research design. A sample of 1001 adhoc officers trained for the election was selected from different training zones. Disabilities Voting Inclusive Scale with reliability of 0.75 was used to collect data. The data collected was analysed using descriptive statistic such as percentage and bar chart. The results revealed that physically challenged and albinos were fairly included while individuals with visual and hearing impairment were grossly at disadvantage. It was recommended that the Nigerian electoral body should involve the services of experts in the area of Special Needs while preparing for election. This will ensure that the needs and interest of people with disabilities are adequately taken into consideration during election.

Keywords: General election. Inclusion. Independent National Electoral Commission. Voters with disabilities.

Introduction

The universal adults' suffrage dictates that section of adults can vote and be voted for. However, as political awareness becomes more sophisticated, expansion in the opportunity to vote and be voted began to assume new dimension with a more inclusive political participation. Political alienation across economic power, race, gender and differences in term of physical, intellectual, emotional and psychological diversities begins to disappear given room for more participation of citizens with reference to age in many countries of the world.

Globally over one billion people live with one form of disability or the other and majority of whom live in low and middle-income countries like Sub-Saharan African (Virendrakumar, Jolley, Badu & Schmidt, 2018). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) describes persons with disabilities

as those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual, psychological and or sensory impairments, which interact with various barriers that hinder their effective participation in society on the same basis with others (International Foundation for Electoral System, 2014; United Nation, 2011). The *2011 World Report on Disability* reported that although people with disabilities have the same needs as non-disabled people, they often experience limited access to services including health, education, participation in politics and economic opportunities (World Health Organization, 2011).

Political participation is a fundamental aspect of democratic governance, the rule of law, social inclusion and human rights approaches aimed at eliminating marginalisation and discrimination (United Nations, 2011). Political participation can then be the actions of citizens to seek participation in the process of electing quality and quality leadership to represent them in business of governance (Inclusion International, 2015). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) has taken step towards transforming people with disabilities from state of passivity to fully empowered citizens who enjoy equal rights and protections under national and supranational laws (National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, 2013). Article 29 of the treaty focuses on participation in political and public life. It calls on States to ensure that persons with disabilities can effectively and fully participate in political and public life on an equal basis with others, directly or through freely chosen representatives, including the right and opportunity for persons with disabilities to vote and be elected (United Nations, 2007). With this proclamation, the principles of democracy which believe in inclusiveness and participation should have made person with disability politically viable in process of electing leaders through political education.

Political education is very important as election will not be successful if citizens are not enlightened. The education brings to bear what should be expected from every leader's manifesto through individual and or party, what to be expected at the election venue, registration, voting and its process amongst others. This cuts across physical intellectual, sensory, emotional and racial divide. The various relevant International and Regional instruments to which Nigeria is a signatory to including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) means that the country is legally obliged to set up standards for the full and equal participation of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) in the electioneering process.

Nigeria's electoral management body, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), in a bid to embrace these principles and values has introduced several reforms to the electoral process that take care of people with Special Needs. This is crucial because Nigeria is estimated to have 25 million people with disabilities. According to Centre for Citizens with Disabilities 3,253,169 Nigerians are suffering from one form of disability or the other; 1,708,751 males and 1,544,418 females suffer impairment of sight, speech, hearing, mobility and brain (Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room, 2019). All-inclusive electioneering process is about intimating all major stakeholders on the process of including people with special needs in voting processes before, during and after election.

Voting is one of the ways that members of political community exercise their franchise to bear their voices. However, participation in electoral processes is more

than just voting, it includes the ability to take part in the conduct of public affairs, the opportunity to register as a candidate, to campaign, to be elected and to hold office at all levels of government, political education and campaign and that are involved in selecting leaders in to various elective offices (Inclusion International, 2015). Nigeria had recently introduced legislation to strengthen the participation of youth, PWDs and IDPs (The Commonwealth, 2019). This is the latest development of all-inclusive election.

The Government of Nigeria in January 2019 signed into law the Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act 2018 to ensure the full integration of PWDs into society, establishing the National Commission for People with Disabilities and giving the Commission responsibility for their social, economic and civil rights. Fifteen per cent of Nigeria's population are PWD. Towards the preparation for the 2019 elections, several policy and legislative provisions were implemented to enable full participation of PWDs in the electoral process. Section 14 of Nigeria's 2010 Electoral Act makes provisions for special measures for PWDs. Notably, 2019 was the first time that the visually impaired were afforded the opportunity to vote independently using a braille ballot jacket. As referenced, provisions were made for magnifying glasses, sign language translation and a priority queue for PWDs. All adhoc members of staff were expected to be given a checklist that focused on identifying and assisting PWDs.

There is provision for training of all INEC and Adhoc members of staff on how to handle sensitive equipment pertaining to people with disabilities. The training manual included section on how to effectively deal with people with disabilities during electoral process which include comportment before, during and after election and how to vote. With these, Nigeria electoral process was positioned at all-inclusiveness. Consequent upon these, it is the expedient to assess the level of inclusiveness of people with disabilities in 2009 election in Nigeria. Hence, this study seeks to assess the preparedness of Independent Electoral Commission towards voters with disability in 2019 general election in Nigeria.

Research Questions

These questions were answered in the course of the study.

1. What are the preparations towards accommodating physically challenged persons in the 2019 electoral process?
2. How were the hearing-impaired persons considered in the 2019 electoral process?
3. To what extent were the visually impaired accommodated in the electioneering process?
4. What are the measures taken to include the albinos in the 2019 electoral process?

Methodology

This study employed ex-post-facto research design. This design is appropriate because variables in focus already received treatment before investigation which allows for assessment. The population comprised all INEC and Adhoc officers during

the 2019 election in Lagos State. These officers partook in the training that was organised by INEC in preparation for the 2019 general election. Simple random sampling was employed to select an intact class across the training venues in the Local Governments. This led to a sample of one thousand and one (1001) INEC Adhoc members of Staff.

The instrument for data collection was Disabilities Voting Inclusive Scale (DVIS) with sub scales on physical challenges, hearing impairment, visual impairment and albinism. The instrument was constructed based on 7-point rating scale ranging from inadequate to adequate. The respondents were expected to rate the level of adequacy of training given by INEC towards PWDs during the 2019 elections. Responses were from 1 to 7, with 1-4 regarded as *inadequate* while options 5-7 was termed as *adequate*. The instrument was validated by two psychometricians from both University of Ibadan and University of Lagos for face and content validity. Thereafter the instrument was pilot tested among 30 INEC officials in Oyo State and the reliability of 0.75 was derived using test retest to ensure stability of the DVIS.

Before the instrument was distributed among INEC officers that were undergoing training, permission was taken from Election officer (E.O.) in each of the Local Governments where training took place. After permission, the instruments were distributed among trained officers present in the locations selected. Prior distribution, the reasons for the investigation was made known to them and some areas perceived to be difficult were duly explain to the officers. Thereafter, the instruments were distributed among the participants. The researchers waited till the participants attended to the instruments. Completed instrument was collected one after the other from the participants. The data was analysed using descriptive statistics, which are percentage and bar chart.

Results

Research Question 1: What are the preparations towards accommodating physically challenged persons in the 2019 electoral process?

Table 1

INEC preparedness towards including the Physically Challenged Persons in 2019 electoral process

SN	Physically Challenged	Inadequate	%	Adequate	%
1	Voter education	434	43	567	57
2	Finding or getting to polling unit	476	48	525	52
3	Getting inside polling place (e.g., steps)	434	43	567	57
4	Waiting in line	427	43	574	57
5	Reading or seeing ballot	392	39	609	61
6	Understanding how to vote or use voting equipment	364	36	637	64
7	Communicating with election officials	448	45	553	55
8	Thumb printing the ballot paper	329	33	672	67
9	Priority for timely and immediate voting on arrival at the polling unit.	434	43	567	57
Average		415	41	586	59

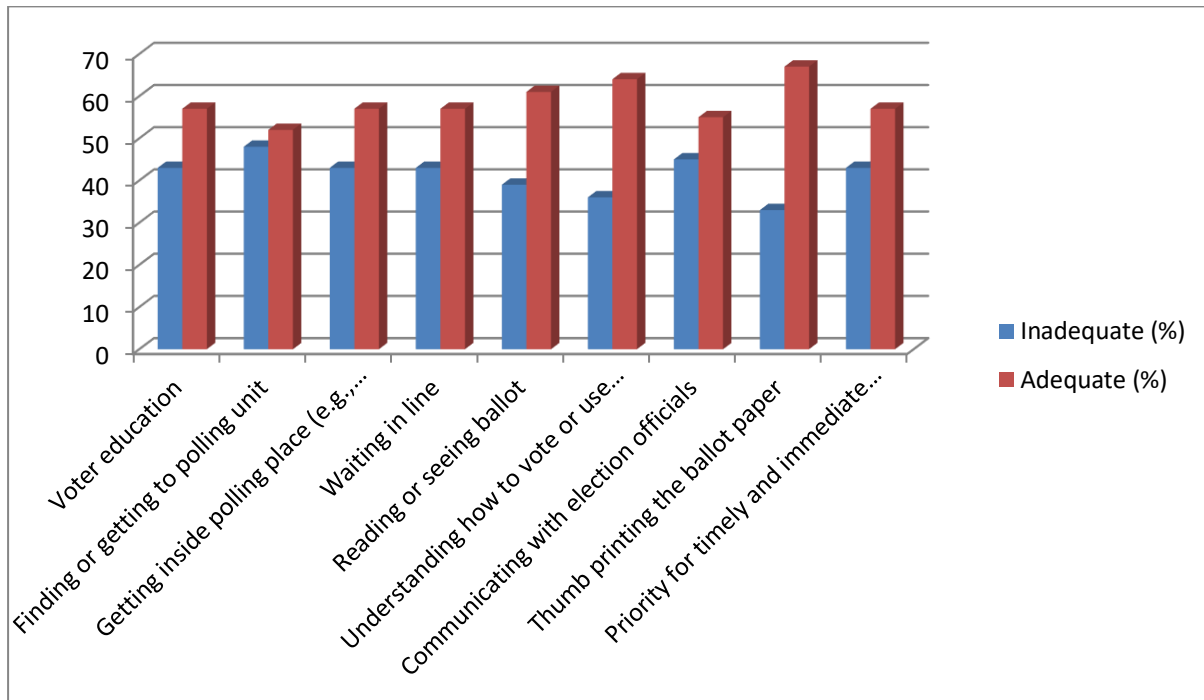


Figure 1: Responses on Election Training towards Physically Challenged.

Observation from Figure 1 shows that 41% of the electoral officers perceived the training as inadequate. However, the remaining 59% perceived it as adequate for the physically challenges persons towards 2019 general elections in Nigeria.

Research Question 2: How was the hearing-impaired persons considered in the 2019 electoral process?

Table 2

INEC preparedness towards including the hearing-impaired persons in 2019 electoral process

SN	Hearing Impaired	Inadequate (%)	Adequate (%)
1	Voter education with sign language interpreter	693 69	308 31
2	Finding or getting to polling place	623 62	378 38
3	Getting inside polling place (e.g., steps)	413 41	588 59
4	Waiting in line	420 42	581 58
5	Reading or seeing ballot	420 42	581 58
6	Understanding how to vote or use voting equipment.	455 45	546 55
7	Communicating with election officials	546 55	455 45
8	Thumb printing the ballot paper	392 39	609 61
9	Other type of difficulty	595 59	406 41
10	Priority for timely and immediate voting on arrival at the polling unit.	399 40	602 60
11	Sign language interpreter for hearing impaired	630 63	371 37
Average		508 51	493 49

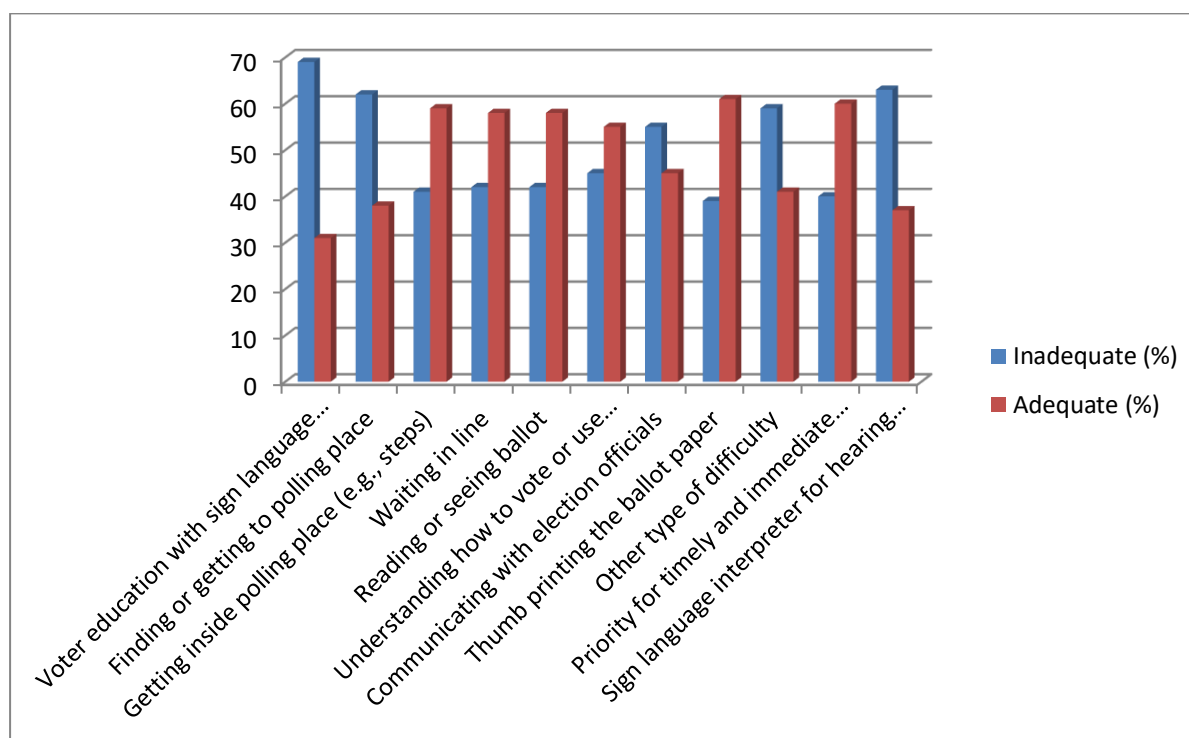


Figure 2: Responses on Election Training towards Hearing Impaired

The analysis from Figure 2 shows that 51% of the respondents feel the training given with regards to hearing impaired citizens in preparation for 2019 election was inadequate while 49% observed the training as adequate.

Research Question 3: To what extent were the visually impaired accommodated in the electioneering process?

Table 3

INEC preparedness towards including the visually challenged in 2019 electoral process

SN	Visually Impaired	Inadequate	%	Adequate	%
1	Voter education with braille reading	651	65	350	35
2	Finding or getting to polling place	574	57	427	43
3	Getting inside polling place (e.g., steps)	490	49	511	51
4	Waiting in line	497	50	504	50
5	Reading or seeing paper with magnifying lens	504	50	497	50
6	Understanding how to vote or use voting equipment	518	52	483	48
7	Communicating with election officials	490	49	511	51
8	Thumb printing the ballot paper	511	51	490	49
9	Other type of difficulty	553	55	448	45
10	Priority for timely and immediate voting on arrival at the polling unit.	350	35	651	65
Average		514	51	487	49

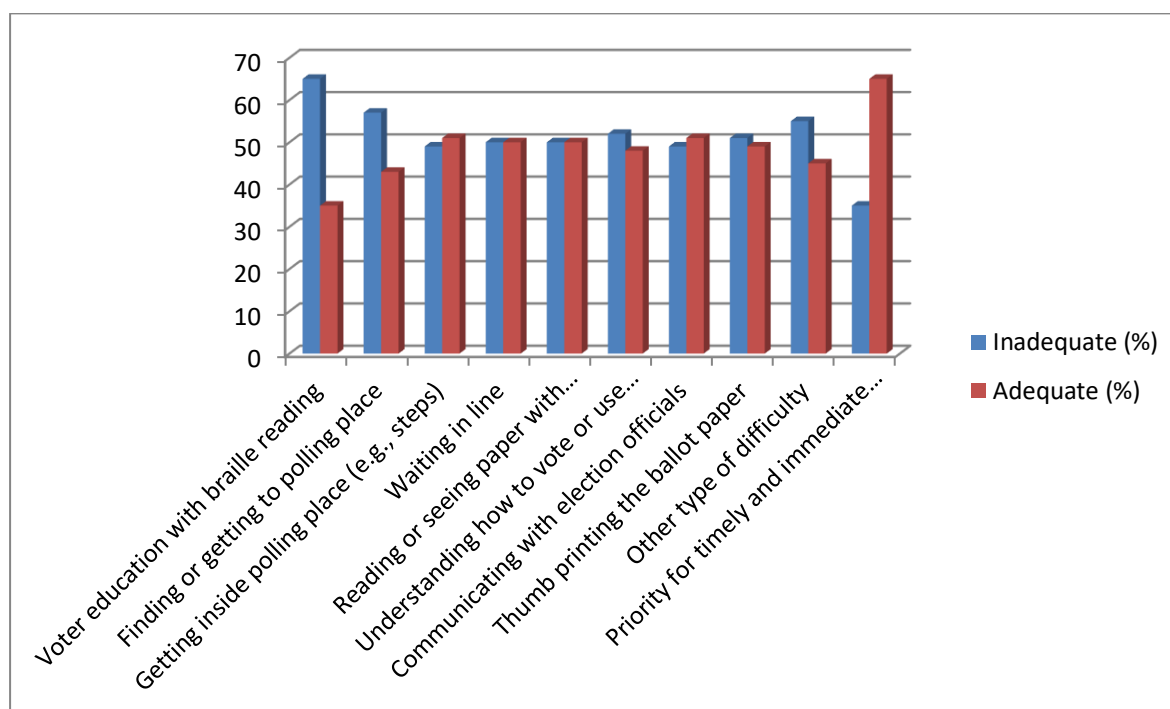


Figure 3: Responses on Election Training towards Visually Impaired

Observation from Figure 3 shows that 51% of the electoral officers perceived the training with respect to the visually impaired as inadequate. However, the remaining 49% perceived it as adequate.

Research Question 4: What are the measures taken to include the albinos in the 2019 electoral process?

Table 4

INEC preparedness towards including the Albino persons in 2019 electoral process

SN	Albino	Inadequate	%	Adequate	%
1	Voter education	364	36	637	64
2	Finding or getting to polling place	378	38	623	62
3	Getting inside polling place (e.g., steps)	378	38	623	62
4	Waiting in line	399	40	602	60
5	Reading or seeing paper with magnifying lens	350	35	651	65
6	Understanding how to vote or use voting equipment	378	38	623	62
7	Communicating with election officials	413	41	588	59
8	Thumb printing the ballot paper	329	33	672	67
9	Other type of difficulty	539	54	462	46
10	Priority for timely and immediate voting on arrival at the polling unit.	308	31	693	69
Average		384	38	617	62

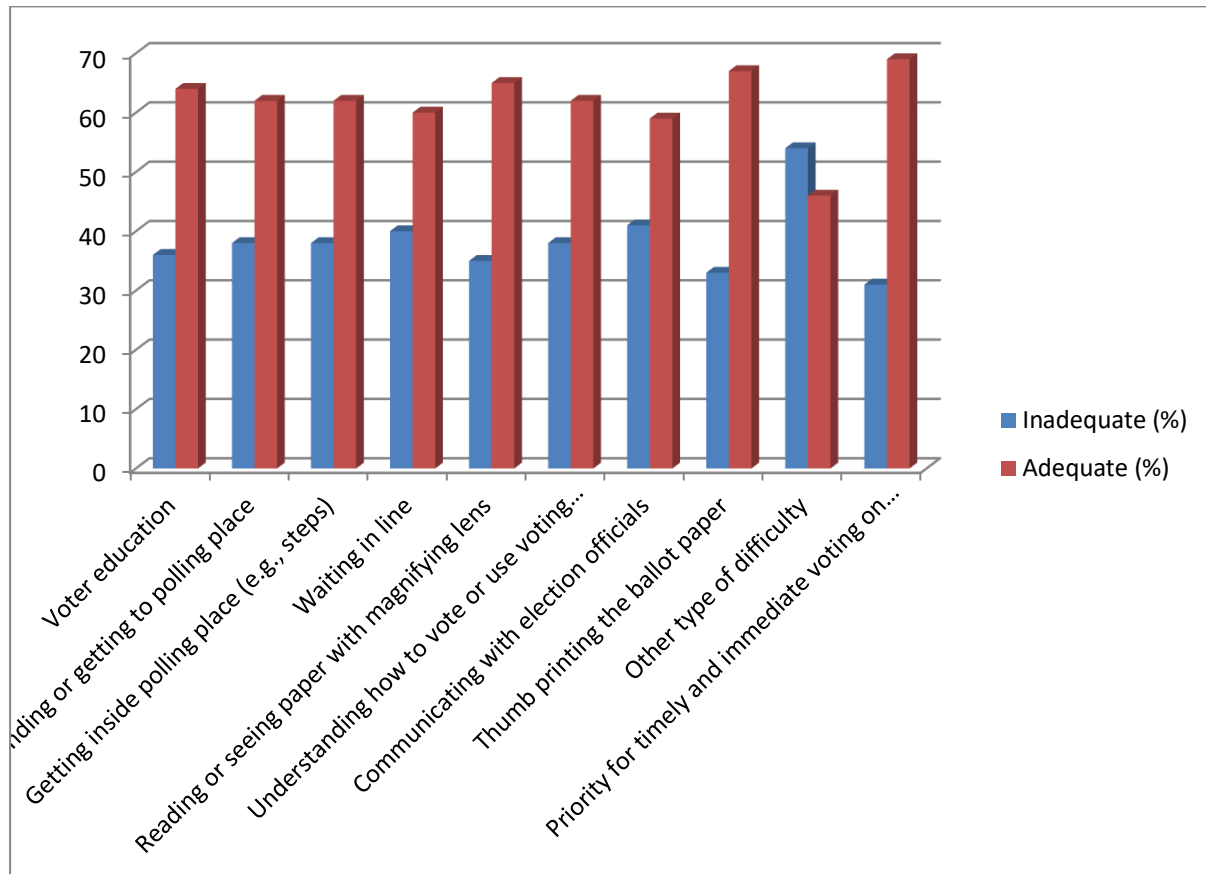


Figure 4: Responses on Election Training towards Albinos

Figure 4 provides the evidence of training provided to the electoral officers in the 2019 general election as it relates to Albinos. It shows that 31% of the electoral officers perceived the training as inadequate, while 69% perceived it as adequate.

Discussion

The findings from data analysed revealed different levels of INEC responses to different categories of people with disabilities during 2019 general election. Result from Table 1 showed that there is average level of inclusion of the people that are physically challenged in the electioneering process. The reason for this might be adduced to the fact that this group might not need any serious technical assistance compare with disabilities like hearing impairment. However, the result demonstrated a level of compliance to United Nation Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) article 29 that focus on ensuring that persons with disabilities effectively and fully participate in political and public life on an equal basis with their non-disabled counterparts directly or through freely chosen representatives, including the right and opportunity for persons with disabilities to vote and be elected (United Nations 2007). With this result, Nigeria is rightly complying with global standard on rule of equality on the part of people that are physically challenged.

The finding on the provisions and inclusion of persons with hearing impairment in election in 2019 revealed that this group were not adequately provided for in the 2019 general election. For instance, there was no provision for sign language interpreter; communication with polling official was perceived to be difficult because

most INEC officials did have knowledge sign language and voter education as regards people with hearing impairment was perceived to be low. This result run contrary to the position advocated for by (United Nations, 2011) that political participation is a fundamental aspect of democratic governance, the rule of law, social inclusion and human rights approaches aimed at eliminating marginalisation and discrimination. If fundamental assistance is not provided for people with hearing impaired, it means that the government of Nigeria especially the electoral body has failed to be guided by the Framework on access and participation of persons with disabilities in election process which ensure that disability issues are mainstreamed into electoral matters throughout the electoral phase, in line with the conduct of free, fair and credible elections towards strengthening and deepening of democracy in Nigeria; and support PWDs throughout the electoral cycle (Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room, 2019).

In the same vein, the finding of from data gathered on inclusion of persons with visual disabilities demonstrated level of inadequacy. For instance, voter education through the use of braille, getting to polling place and the use of equipment that will aid smooth voting (magnifying glasses) were not adequate. These create some level of constraints to people with visual impairment. This result is contrary to the expectation of (United Nation, 2011) that advocate for total rule of law, social inclusion and human right for all citizens.

However, the result on inclusion of albino in 2019 election fairly depicts a level of political inclusion. The revelation might be influenced by the level of advocacy carried out by albino group. Their group has always been active on the course of people with disabilities. This finding is in line with the United Nation Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) Article 29 that focused on ensuring that persons with disabilities effectively and fully participate in political and public life on an equal basis with their non-disabled counterparts directly or through freely chosen representatives, including the right and opportunity for persons with disabilities to vote and be elected (United Nations 2007). The latest development in the electioneering process can be seeing as a new development towards achieving total inclusion of people with disabilities into the society.

Conclusion

People with special needs have been severally isolated from vital decision making in Nigeria most importantly in the area of politics. Nevertheless, their contributions cannot be trivialised. People with special needs have demonstrated their worth significantly in the areas of sports and education. It is therefore imperative for Nigeria to allow for inclusiveness in the area of politics and leadership through periodic election. The findings revealed some levels of inclusion of voters with physical disabilities and albino but exclusion of voters with hearing impairment and visual impairment going by United Nations stated guidelines on the right of people with disabilities in area of political participation (United Nations, 2007).

Recommendations

Electoral body in Nigeria is henceforth encouraged not to partly implement global standard for political participation of people with Special needs as this will amount to political alienation of this group in the era of total inclusion. Nigeria electoral body should employ the service of experts in the area of special needs while preparing for

election so as to know what to be included that will make interests and needs of individuals with special needs to be all inclusive

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