**IFES submission to UNHCR Thematic Study on Participation of Persons with Disabilities in Political and Public Life**

The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) promotes democratic stability by providing technical assistance and applying field-based research to the electoral cycle in countries around the world to enhance citizen participation and strengthen civil societies, governance and transparency.

IFES views disenfranchisement and exclusion of persons with disabilities as a human rights issue. IFES promotes the electoral and political rights of persons with disabilities and ensures that a disability perspective is incorporated into the design and implementation of all international programs and DC-based organizational practices. IFES has implemented disability programming in more than 30 countries around the world.

IFES has led a series of initiatives to promote the electoral and political enfranchisement of persons with disabilities in several different arenas, including securing full participation of persons with disabilities as voters and candidates. Country-specific projects that are successful are replicated in other regions where IFES works. Even if donors do not explicitly require a disability component, IFES aims to include electoral access elements in each project.

The **ASEAN General Election Network for Disability Access** (AGENDA) project, an IFES-led consortium, is seeking to expand Indonesian disabled people’s organizations’ regional leadership capabilities, develop new tools and partnerships to monitor and raise awareness about disability access issues in elections, and work to ensure that disability rights are squarely on the ASEAN agenda. New and enhanced methodologies for monitoring disability access will include regional indices and reports to regional bodies, and Network findings will be shared with civil society organizations in several ASEAN member states. The AGENDA consortium aims to create a new South-South dialogue for collecting and sharing best practices in disability access. This information is currently only shared by international NGOs working in the field.

In October 2011, election professionals and disabled persons organizations supported by IFES observed local elections in the city of Yogyakarta. AGENDA evaluated the election from the perspective of persons with disabilities in areas such as access to polling stations, availability of accessible voting materials like Braille ballots and clarity of voting procedures. AGENDA also interviewed voters with disabilities and will present findings to local and national election authorities as well as international partners.

For the September 2011 elections in **Guatemala,** IFES provided sign language interpretation of the mayoral debates and live sign language transmission of the election night results. IFES also conducted a voter education campaign via radio targeting voters with disabilities.

Since 2008, IFES has worked with leading **Egyptian** DPOs to support the design and development of their political participation programming which targets multiple governorates in order to address urban, rural, and Bedouin communities. Most recently, IFES has worked with local implementing partners on an action plan to address obstacles faced by persons with disabilities trying to access Egypt’s electoral process.

For the 2010 national elections in the **Philippines**, IFES started a campaign to increase voter registration and turnout among vulnerable populations and those with disabilities by educating election administration officials on a human rights-based approach to elections. As a result, the election commission issued resolutions to facilitate participation of persons with disabilities, elderly, illiterate and detainees. On Election Day, numerous media reports indicated increased turnout of persons with disabilities, whose participation was facilitated by the implementation of express lanes and the provision of poll assistance. Through these efforts, IFES increased voter participation, mobilized voters and increased the capacity of local human rights groups.

From 2006-2008, IFES made recommendations to the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) on how to increase the participation of persons with disabilities in national and local elections in **Kosovo**. IFES’ 2009-2010 project supported the Association of Blind and Partially Sighted People to vote independently and in secret by designing and using Tactile Ballot Guides for mayoral and municipal assembly elections.

In collaboration with local **Guinean** NGOs, IFES worked to build the capacity of organizations focused on enfranchising persons with disabilities through educational programs, training in organizational management, improving media outreach and promoting access to the electoral process. IFES strengthened the ability of DPOs to promote the rights of persons with disabilities by increasing their capacity to educate target communities on civic rights and responsibilities and the rights of persons with disabilities.

IFES engaged in an electoral assistance project with the Supreme Electoral Tribunal of **Honduras** (TSE) for the November 2009 General Elections, which targeted enfranchising persons with disabilities. The TSE acknowledged the need to develop strategies to increase accessibility and the participation of persons with disabilities in the political process, and with IFES’ assistance included a number of activities, such as facilitating the signing of an agreement between the TSE and three DPOS to promote the rights of persons with disabilities in the 2009 elections, training volunteers to assist persons with disabilities and the elderly in polling centers on Election Day and constructing mobile access ramps at polling stations nationwide, to increase access to the electoral process.

In **Armenia**, IFES supported efforts by Lusastgh Charity Union in Vanadzor to monitor the February and May 2003 elections. Election observers with disabilities were trained and deployed in five cities, and public information campaigns on radio and television highlighted their voting rights. In 2007, IFES’ technical assessment provided for an Electoral Access Action Plan to increase accessibility and participation of persons with disabilities. That year, the national parliament of Armenia adopted a law legalizing the use of the Tactile Ballot Guide as an officially-approved ballot, whereupon the Central Election Commission issued regulations for the use of Tactile Ballot Guides and included sign language translations in its advertisements. Through 2008, IFES and a coalition of DPOs continued to raise awareness on disability issues through a national outreach campaign, improving access to polling stations by building ramps and encouraging the use of "Speaking Books", and supporting equal rights legislation that complied with international standards.

Over a decade ago, IFES launched **www.electionaccess.org**, the only global information resource devoted to the political and electoral rights of persons with disabilities. The website includes a country-by-country review of various legal documents and regulations (constitutions, election laws, polling station manuals and local governmental laws) to determine the extent to which they effect the electoral and political participation of persons with disabilities. In addition, the website presents model programs in developing nations, ground-breaking research, articles, links and other resources. The site’s appearance, content and functionality are currently being updated.