

LETTER OF THE DAY

PWDs in Uganda: Represented on paper, excluded in practice

Uganda prides itself on being a continental leader in inclusion. Our Parliament is often celebrated as a mosaic of "Special Interest Groups," with designated seats for the youth, the elderly, workers, and Persons with Disabilities (PWDs). We cite affirmative action and speak the language of inclusion fluently.

Yet for 5.5 million Ugandans living with disabilities (13.2 percent of the population, according to the 2024 census), inclusion often exists more in ceremonial speeches than in reality.

Representation is not the same as participation. And good intentions are not the same as outcomes.

Article 21 of the Constitution guarantees equality before the law. But equality on paper is meaningless if it does not translate into everyday life.

The recent electoral cycle laid bare this contradiction. Political parties campaigned vigorously, yet many candidates failed to present manifestos in accessible formats such as braille, sign language interpretation, or simplified audio versions. A friend with a hearing impairment told me after one rally: "They are asking for my vote, but they never once spoke to me."

Polling day was no better. Officials lacked training or materials to assist voters with disabilities. Many were forced to choose between exercising their constitutional right and preserving dignity. We have built a political theatre where PWDs are invited to the stage, but the stairs to the podium do not exist.

The same pattern is visible in our infrastructure. Despite the Building Control (Accessibility Standards For Persons With Dis-



abilities) Code 2019, Kampala's construction boom largely ignores universal design. Ramps are missing. Elevators are too narrow. Entrances are hostile. Even most government buildings remain unreachable. Some PWDs must be hoisted like cargo just to enter a ministry office. This is not lack of funds. It is enforcement failure.

Roads, too, are built for an imagined "standard" citizen. No tactile pavements, no safe crossings, no functional walkways. For many, Uganda's infrastructure says plainly: you were not considered.

Education reveals perhaps the starkest failure. Uganda has just 24 primary and secondary special schools nationwide. Half the population is under 18, yet

mainstream schools remain ill-equipped for diverse learners. The shortage of trained special education teachers compounds the crisis. Families are forced to make impossible choices: distance, cost, or no education at all. Without access to inclusive, quality education, millions are condemned to poverty and invisibility — not by circumstance, but by systemic neglect.

Access to information is equally restricted. On major TV stations, sign language interpretation is largely confined to prime-time news. Beyond that, screens fall silent. Information is power. Whoever we deny it, we are denying them citizenship.

The solutions won't come from Mars. Buildings that fail

accessibility standards should be denied occupancy permits. Schools must accommodate diverse learners. Special education teacher training must be prioritised. Public-interest broadcasting should include sign language interpretation as standard practice, not a courtesy.

Uganda cannot claim to be modernising while 5.5 million citizens remain sidelined. Inclusion is not charity. It is a constitutional and moral obligation.

Representation must move from paper to every pavement. Anything less is not leadership. It is neglect.

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