

2021.04.28

Election Commissioner General,
Election Commission,
Sarana Road, Rajagiriya.

Dear Commissioner General,

Formulation of the strategic plan 2022-2025 of the Election Commission

The proposals and suggestions of the Disability Organizations Joint Front, as per the letter forwarded to us by the Elections Commission on the formulation of the strategic plan 2022-2025 dated 1st April 2021, are as follows,

4. Division of Youth /Females/ Disability groups/ Atheist communities

4.1 What are your ideas/ submissions on the formulation of the strategic plan for the Election Commission?

- To pay more attention towards the activities which could not be achieved within the plan 2017-2020, and also to take alternative measures and adopt new technical methodologies required for that.
- To make use of the lessons learnt during the period 2017-2020 for the new plan
- To add new practical solutions for the major concerns that had a direct impact on the voting rights of the persons with disabilities directly
- Integrating the disabled persons organizations and special committees for the process of formulating the strategic plan 2022-2025
- Previous strategic plan did not include the adjustments needed regarding the accessibility facilities to be established in the polling stations however the accessibility facilities should be made available in all the polling stations
- To expand the programs on raising the awareness on voting rights and there, the methods which can be easily understood by all categories of people should be utilized.
- The activities which are focused on ensuring the voting rights of the persons with intellectual disabilities have not been integrated
- The persons with disabilities who are homebound and the persons with disabilities who undergo long- term residential treatment in hospitals should be registered as voters and awareness raising should be done with a focus on them.
- Activities have been included with pertinence to the voting rights of the prison inmates, however special attention should also be paid towards the voting rights of persons with disabilities retained in the prisons
- To promote an all-inclusive election whenever possible

4.2 Have the activities indicated with relevance to the category that you represent in the plan 2017-2020 been accomplished?

We can't be satisfied about the accomplishment of the activities in the said plan and the following reasons can be given in this regard.

- The accurate information and data related to the voting rights of the eligible voters in the disabled community have not been maintained properly there is a lack of proper information on the number of persons who are eligible for voting rights among the disabled community at divisional and electorate level and as a result of this situation they face various inconveniences related to the voting process and further their voting rights get violated, similarly the required facilitation is not available in the polling stations
- According to the objective 5 of the participatory strategic plan 2017-2020 of the Election Commission it has been mentioned that “ All the citizens living under marginalized conditions participate in election process to a satisfactory level”
- We are happy about the effective steps taken by the Election Commission to ensure effective participation of persons with disabilities in the election process during the past few years.
- Relevant programs were implemented parallel to the elections to raise the awareness on the election related rights but however these programs have been insufficient as per their requirement, specially the facilitation made available to suit the different disability categories cannot be considered satisfactory.(example -sign language interpretation, braille technology)
- During the election process and during the release of final results, the attention paid by the election commission to ensure the access of the persons with disabilities has been minimal.
- 1.2 Financial allocations had not been made in an adequate manner for raising the awareness of the persons with disabilities and we are not aware of any one day programs conducted in each electorate focusing on the leaders and trainers of civil society organizations and community based organizations.
- 1.3 The disabled community, civil society organizations and community-based organizations have not been represented in the consultation programs on the voting rights.
- 1.4 One major activity has been mentioned as the requirement for the election commission to engage with the relevant parties in order to conduct trustworthy elections, however we can't be satisfied about the steps that have been taken in relation to the facilitation needed to enable the persons with visual disabilities to mark their vote alone.
- 2.1 No effective change in relation to the persons with disabilities is evident with regard to the International Day celebration
- 5.1 Arrangements have been made to prepare the database on the number of persons with disabilities who face difficulties with regard to exercising their vote and this can be pointed out as a progressive step.

4.3 What are your views on the factors included in 4.2 above?

- Attention should be paid to maintain accurate information and data about the persons eligible for voting among the disabled community ,to focus attention on permanently maintaining the facilities related to the voting, to follow alternative methodologies instead of asking for medical reports to confirm the disability of the person in all instances related to exercising the vote- for example -to make arrangements to provide a suitable identity card or to enable the postal vote for the persons with permanent disabilities including the persons with visual disabilities wheelchair users.
- It is expected that the Civil Society organizations and the community based organizations actively intervene towards conveying the message on the rights of the voters to the citizens, as the special objective 1. Certain awareness raising measures are taken by the Election commission in this regard during the election period. All these interventions are not adequate. Programmes should be further implemented to raise the awareness of more than 1200 000e voters using different methodologies and to further implement programs to match with the disability conditions of the people.
- The formulation of pre-assessments and the procurement of funds and material for training programs are not satisfactory.
- There is no evidence about the implementation of the one day programs in each electorate focused on the trainers and leaders of disability persons civil organizations and community-based organizations in relation to the awareness raising measures
- There is no proper understanding about the level to which assistance has been given to Civil Society organizations and community based organizations for the implementation of advisory programs on voting rights, however establishing the technical team focused on an election process which includes persons with disabilities can be pointed out as an effective measure.
- According to the strategic plan, one main activity in order to conduct a confident election process is to work with election related partners in brotherhood. we believe that no effective measure has been taken during the past four years with regard to this matter, although it had been included as one major activity in the strategic plan.
- Under the second special objective, it had been planned by the election commission to conduct publicity campaigns to raise the awareness of people on the rights of voters on the dates declared locally and internationally each year. The International Day of Persons with disabilities too has been included among the special days relevant to the international days, however we are of the idea that proper attention was not focused to commemorate this day in comparison with the importance given to the other celebrations.
- The third special objective has been to ensure the adequate participation of females in the election process in order to have a balanced gender participation. Therefore, it is important to pay special attention towards females with disabilities. This was made possible by giving an opportunity for females to voice their concerns within the process of policy formulation. However, we were not aware of any opportunity which was given to females with disabilities or of any other program which has been planned and implemented on behalf of them.

- In addition, there was no proper program to include females with disabilities into the 25% quota given in view improving the female participation in the election process.
- Under the fourth objective, special attention has been paid to ensure adequate and enthusiastic intervention of youth within the election process by the year 2019. However we cannot be satisfied about the attention which was paid towards the youth with disabilities and the above special objective. And there, specially under the theme 'youth and franchise' it had been planned by the end of 2017 to establish pool of 25 trainers after training them on conducting programs under this theme in each electorate. We could not witness proper inclusion of disabled youth into this program and a pool ensuring their inclusion had not been established.
- The special objective number five is to ensure the adequate and obstacle- free participation of persons belonging to the disabled community, marginalized community, the displaced community and such other social groups within the election process.
- There, a survey has been conducted on the information of the number of persons with disabilities who face difficulties at the elections. However the final report has not been issued yet. In 2019 with regard to the review process of the registration of voters, this matter has been presented and it can be appreciated as an effective measure. However the relevant persons with disabilities and the relevant officers have not been enlightened on the application. Therefore, we believe that most of the persons with disabilities have been left out of this survey.
- As mentioned under the special objective 6, the legal background needs to be established enabling the persons with disabilities to use postal votes system based on their request similar to the facility established for persons engaged in essential services under public and private sectors.

4.4 What are the new strategic activities that you think are important to be included in the strategic plan?

- Under the major activity in 5.7, it has been mentioned that legal provisions should be made available enabling the persons with disabilities just like the person engaged in essential services of the public and private sector to vote in a specially recognized location.
- To formulate and implement an Annual Action Plan with regard to the establishment of accessibility facilities in polling stations
- To adjust the election process enabling an all-inclusive election system.
- To plan and implement all the related programs in an inclusive and integrated manner.
- To amend the laws, rules and policies which prevent the voters with disabilities from exercising their vote.
- To establish methodologies enabling the persons with visual disabilities to vote alone with confidence
- Establishing awareness raising programs and implementing them according to the awareness raising methodologies to match with the expectations of the persons with disabilities and making sufficient allocations for that.
- Providing the require instructions to maintain favorable media conditions for persons with disabilities
- An intervention should be made to create a favorable environment for persons with disabilities when the election manifestos are presented by political parties.

- Sign language interpretation should be made available in each media releases and press conferences held by the election commission and with regard to the issuance of election results.
- To establish a unit within the head office to undertake the implementation of all the programs for marginalized communities.
- To take measures to implement the proposals submitted to the election commission by the disabled community and through the disabled people's organizations.
- Creating the background required to enable persons with disabilities to you exercise their vote independently
- Returning officers are not much aware and not very sensitive towards the problems of the persons with disabilities including the accessibility issues faced by them during the election process
- The information related to the number of eligible voters among the persons with disabilities at the regional level and the related information at ground level and electorate level to be possessed by the election commission and the regional officers and the data currently available should be properly updated buy them
- To provide new practical solutions to the issues that are encountered by the persons with disabilities with regard to exercising their vote independently
- To use sign language interpretation in relation to the pre- election media communication related to elections
- Getting the participation of persons with disabilities for election monitoring covering all the districts.
- Establishing an Election Inclusion Central committee- to establish central committee with the participation of persons with disabilities in order to discuss and decide on the manner in which the persons with disabilities should be included into the election process without any discrimination and as to how practical measures should be taken regarding that.(all the officers at the decision-making level of the election commission and the representatives of organizations for persons with disabilities should be appointed to this committee as representatives) This committee should meet every three months to discuss about its progress and to make their future plans as required.

4.5 How can you become a partner of the new plan?

- You can become a partner by directly intervening to provide views and suggestions of the Disability Organizations Joint Front with regard to the formulation of new plans.
- To represent the committees or the sub committees for the formulation of the strategic plan 2022-2025.

Yours faithfully,

Rasanjali Pathirage
President