

## Ghana Elections

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The 7<sup>th</sup> December 2004 was election day in Ghana, as voters went to the polls to elect parliamentary representatives and a new president. Tension was high, as this would be only the second time since independence that there had been a peaceful and democratic transfer of power in Ghana. Delegations from several other African countries were present, hoping to witness elections which would serve as a model of democracy for other countries.

In these circumstances, the role of election monitors was extremely important to ensure that elections were free and fair. 117 disabled people, all members of the disability movement, had been trained and accredited as election observers alongside non-disabled observers – this was as a result of several years of lobbying by the GFD (Ghana Federation of Disabled), and based on the success of a pilot project during the 2002 local elections. For the first time, there would now be a disabled election observer in every single district in the country.

Before the elections, the GFD had worked with the electoral commission to raise awareness of the right of disabled people to vote, for example by including Sign Language interpretation on voter education TV broadcasts, by raising awareness of electoral rights among the members of the disability movement throughout the country, and by training members of the Ghana Association of the Blind in how to use the tactile ballot.



▲ *Nicholas Halm and Agnes Tetteh, members of Ghana Association of the Blind, in action as election observers*



◀ *Nicholas Halm (GAB) and Agnes Effiaog (Liberian Delegation), election observers, question the presiding officer as a woman casts her vote*



We spent the day with roving election observers Nicholas Halm, Secretary General of the Ghana Association of the Blind, and Agnes Effiaog of the Liberia Union of the Physically Disabled. Agnes was part of a delegation from Liberia including members of the disability movement there and representatives of the Liberia Electoral Commission. They were interested to learn from the Ghana experience and to find out how disabled people could be actively involved in making elections more accessible to disabled people through election monitoring and the tactile ballot.

◀ *The delegation from Liberia, members of the disability movement there, learn about the tactile ballot in the Ghana elections*

As we visited polling stations in the various districts of Accra, voters waiting in line reacted with curiosity and interest as 2 disabled people with the official T-shirt and bag of the election monitors went straight to the presiding officer and began to ask questions. The surprise on many faces reflected how assumptions about the role of disabled people were being challenged.

*Agnes Effiaog (left) of the Liberia Union of the Physically Disabled, questioning a presiding officer during the election monitoring ▶*



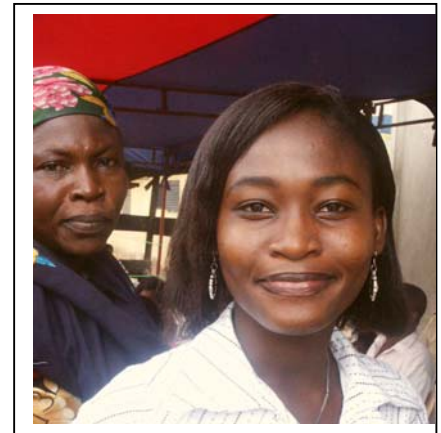
The introduction of a tactile ballot folder in every polling station in the country was a groundbreaking initiative – in the 2002 local elections the tactile ballot folder had been piloted in one small area. There were many gaps and challenges: not all of the presiding officers had received training in how to use the tactile ballot, and even those who had were often unsure how to use it. At one polling station we witnessed Nana Anima Akuamoah casting his vote. The presiding officer showed him how to use the tactile ballot, but was unsure how to place the ballot paper correctly in the folder – in the end, Nana Anima Akuamoah asked his son to help him cast his ballot. He regretted that people had not yet had time to understand this new approach: ‘ We have to go and teach the people because it is a new thing’.



◀ *Nicholas Halm (left) discussing the tactile ballot with blind voter Nana Anima Akuamoah (right)*

In another polling station, when Nicholas and Agnes asked the presiding officer to demonstrate to them how he would use the tactile ballot folder, Rita Owusumensah, a non-disabled woman waiting in line chipped in, giving him instructions. She said she had found out about it through television broadcasts: ‘everyone has seen them!’. She felt that ‘it is good to help the blind person vote honestly - that they are not left out.’

*Rita Owusumensah, a non-disabled voter, supporting the right of blind people to vote independently and in secret. ▶*



◀ *Agnes Tetteh, waiting at her polling station for a tactile ballot folder to arrive so that she can vote independently and in secret*

Not all the polling stations that we visited had received their tactile ballot folder, and as it was not included on the list of essential items, many presiding officers had not gone out of their way to ensure that they got hold of one. Stationed as an observer in the La Nativity Presbyterian School polling station, Agnes Tetteh was particularly disappointed that there was no tactile ballot folder there.

As a member of the Ghana Association of the Blind, Agnes had spent the past few weeks training her members in how to use the tactile ballot folder, but at 3.30 on the afternoon of election day, she herself had not yet been able to cast her vote independently. The idea of independent and secret voting for blind people is very new and its importance is still underestimated by many non-disabled people - the presiding officer at this polling station was puzzled by Agnes' flat refusal to be helped to vote. Agnes preferred instead to wait for many hours until a ballot folder could be brought to the station.

Elsewhere, the presence of disabled election observers helped to highlight access issues. In some cases registration tables had been placed high up on platforms, or behind drainage ditches, and were impossible to reach for a wheelchair user. When Nicholas and Agnes raised



these concerns, the election workers seemed surprised – these were issues which they had simply never considered, and they discussed with Nicholas and Agnes some simple measures they could take to make the voting process more accessible for physically disabled people, such as placing ballot booths in more accessible areas.

▲ *Agnes Effiaog highlights the inaccessibility of the registration table in 2 different polling stations!* ►

Despite these shortcomings, the inclusion of disabled people as election observers in all districts of the country, and the introduction of a tactile ballot folder nationwide have both gone a long way in raising awareness, among election officials and the general public, of disabled people's equal right to an accessible, fair and secret ballot. There is a long way still to go, and in January 2005 the GFD organised a review workshop with stakeholders from the disability movement, the Electoral Commission and supporting organisations such as DFID, UNDP and USAID. Recommendations from this workshop will be built in to the planning process to improve access in future elections - disability issues are now firmly on the Electoral Commission's agenda.

