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## ECOWAS at 50: The principles and practice of disabled-inclusion in governance in West Africa

Uriji Oshen Morphy <sup>1,\*</sup> and Osasenaga Igbini <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The Heller School of Social Policy and Management, Brandeis University Waltham, USA.*

<sup>2</sup> *School of Management, Cambridge College Massachusetts, USA.*

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### Abstract

ECOWAS celebrates her 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2025 in regional peace building, security, and governance efforts among others. Within this period, however, the principles and practices of the Commission on various subjects have been critically evaluated by observers, scholars and experts with mixed results. In relation to inclusive governance, the focus on evaluation has been excessively focused on women and youths while summarily neglecting PwDs. Men, women, youths and children under the category of PwDs are hardly targeted for such interventions and social empowerment. The simple evidence of this neglect is the lack of social and public infrastructures in schools, hospitals, religious worship centres, roads, public transport and road networks across the continent that do not factor in the plight of PwDs. The study thus explores the existing principles and practice of inclusive governance as it concerns PwDs in the ECOWAS region and also examines the same principles and practice among member states. Findings showed that whereas ECOWAS member states like Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone and Senegal have national policies driving inclusive governance for disabled persons, there has been no explicit policy by the ECOWAS community. The community adopted the Regional Action Plan on Disability in West Africa 2022-2030 to ensure a more comprehensive and institutional approach to inclusive governance for disabled people in 2024 but remains to be seen what will be made of it. The study recommends that the Community establishes a department to implement the various policies that have been initiated to help the inclusion of disabled persons in governance in west Africa.

**Keywords:** Disabled; Inclusive governance; West Africa; ECOWAS; Good governance

### 1. Introduction

Inclusive governance has been the political mantra and aspiration of governments and members of the ECOWAS in the last 50 years (Ronceray et al, 2023; Bossuyt, 2021). This has been exemplified in the discouragement of military putsch and armed invasion of governments in the last three decades of the century by Heads of Government and States in the region (Omilusi, 2024; Schultes, 2022; Bossuyt, 2021). According to ECOWAS protocol on democracy and good governance, the main objective of the Commission and her member states is the actualisation of good democratic governance ensured by popular and violence free elections, massive participation of citizens as well as the seamless movement of persons, goods, and services within the sub-region (Ronceray et al, 2023; Bisong, 2019). These aims have been pursued actively through the protocols on the free movement of persons and migration over the years (Byiers & Dieye, 2022; Bisong, 2019). However, the inclusion clause of the ECOWAS commission seems to be faulted by the neglect of a vital people-group in the sub-region - the disabled (ECOWAS, 2021). Global data on persons with disabilities reveal some startling reports. The World Health Organisation reports that approximately 16% of the world's population (1.3 billion people) live with some form of disability with more increases recorded with time (WHO, 2023). Further reports indicate that there is an estimated 150 million children living with one form of disability or the other and in

\* Corresponding author: Uriji Oshen Morphy

developing countries, this was discovered to be a major factor reducing school attendance in children (Sight Savers, 2021).

West Africa accounts for a significant number of persons living with various forms of disabilities that make free movement within social infrastructures difficult (Tuakli-Wosornu & Haig, 2014; Piatta & Guy, n.d.). Nigeria alone accounts for over 29million persons living with disabilities, the highest statistics in the whole of Africa (Eme-Uche & Eme, 2023), yet reports from various institutions and experts indicate that these are the mostly neglected group in social considerations and constructions (Akwetey & Mutangi, 2022). Furthermore, the research on inclusive political participation by Akwetey and Mutangi (2022) shows that despite the existence of several national policies and legislations providing special concessions and considerations to persons with disabilities in the construction of public buildings, governance and leadership, this remains a largely neglected issue in the West African sub-region generally. Disability in any form according to empirical findings carries with it social, economic, physical and psychological implications capable of reducing healthy participation and lifespan especially if neglected (Aremu, 2023; Ocran, 2023; Sight Savers, 2017). Socially, it limits the options of PwDs from engaging in social groups and socioeconomic activities and interactions due to stigmas and stereotypes associated with disabilities especially in Africa (Sight Savers, 2024; Mbayo, 2019). Physically, it restricts movements and mobility such that these persons are compelled to depend on others for movements (Barbelet, Njeri & Onubedo, 2021). Psychologically, it affects the confidence and self-worth especially when one is perceived as a burden or have to depend on others for basic necessities (ECOWAS Commission, 2020).

All of these informs the global and regional efforts towards recognising and providing special considerations to these people groups in governance, social institutions and infrastructures. However, the participation and practical implementation of policies like the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Resolution 61/106 (United Nations, 2007) by signatories to the UN remains an issue of debate. According to a study by Sarwar et al (2022) in Ghana, it was discovered that majority of the efforts geared towards the recognition and consideration of disabled persons were generally engaged by social groups and non-governmental organisations. Similar findings from studies indicate that due to the general social and legislative barriers against PwDs, their participation in national politics is generally low (Ocran, 2023). This informs the questioning of the total impact of the inclusive governance mantra of the ECOWAS commission.

ECOWAS celebrates her 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2025 in regional peace building, security, and governance efforts among others. Within this period however, the principles and practices of the Commission on various subjects have been critically evaluated by observers, scholars and experts with mixed results (Ronceray et al, 2023; Chilakah & Peter, 2022; Bossuyt, 2021; Gyimah-Boadi, 2021). In relation to inclusive governance however, the focus on evaluation have been excessively focused on women and youths while summarily neglecting PwDs (Bakare, 2023). This is evident in the number of youth and women empowerment and inclusion programmes scattered across the West African region targeted at women and youth development especially in rural areas (Barbelet et al, 2021; UNDP, 2021; Bisong, 2019). In contrast however, men, women, youths and children under the category of PwDs are hardly targeted for such interventions and social empowerment. The simple evidence of this neglect is the lack of social and public infrastructures in schools, hospitals, religious worship centres, roads, public transport and road networks across the continent that do not factor in the plight of PwDs (Akwetey & Mutangi, 2022). In many African urban cities and public centres (such as markets and parks), PwDs are a common sight being led by a dependent either asking alms or sitting by the road side seeking charity stipends for survival (Aremu, 2023). All of these while governments at all levels continues to promise inclusive governance. This study is an attempt to examine the principles and practice of inclusive governance to disabled persons in West Africa using the ECOWAS commission as case study. The study explores the existing principles and practice of inclusive governance as it concerns PwDs in the ECOWAS region and also examines the same principles and practice among member states.

- The overall research question for this study is thus; What are the principles and practices of inclusive governance for disabled persons in the ECOWAS region?
- Specifically, the study questions to be answered by the research are:
- What ECOWAS policies and principles exist to ensure disabled-inclusion in the ECOWAS?
- What are the various practices to indicate ECOWAS commitment to disabled-inclusive governance?
- What are the challenges to ECOWAS implementation of disabled-inclusive governance in the sub-region in the last 50years?

The aim is to discover the efforts of the commission and her member states towards including PwDs in governance in realisation of political aims of the commission and also to outline possible challenges and factors mitigating these aims for practical policy recommendations.

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## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Inclusive Governance

The concept of inclusive governance generally connotes the idea of total or involved leadership (OECD, 2024; Sanchez-Soriano et al, 2024). In other words, the leadership or governance system where everyone irrespective of differences are included in governance process and decision-making (Yates et al, 2024). More technically, inclusive governance refers to the process of ensuring full participation of every member of society in the social development processes regardless of their differences, peculiar challenges, and characteristics (UNESCO, 2016). This presupposes the essence of government as envisaged by the social contract theorists where government is essentially established to protect and guide the rights and liberties of all members of the social unit (OECD, 2020). In the conceptualisation of Bossuyt (2021) inclusive governance builds on existing concepts of governance such as 'good governance', 'democratic governance' to mean inclusion in decision-making processes and development programs. This inclusion summarily means the participation of vulnerable and otherwise excluded groups in governance processes thus making their voices heard (Bossuyt, 2021). According to the OECD (2020), inclusive governance is enabling people to exercise their voices and influences in the social processes that concern them. This is further expatiated by Hickey et al (2015) as the "normative sensibility that stands in favour of inclusion as the benchmark against which institutions can be judged and also promoted". More specifically, it refers to how decisions are made, who are involved in the decision-making process, whose voices count in the decision making processes and how/why they count, as well as how decisions are taken and implemented in society (Bossuyt, 2021). In other words, it does not just end in recognising the various groups and individuals that make up a polity, it goes further to entail how decisions are made among this diverse groups and implemented (Werner, 2019).

The debate surrounding inclusive governance has been in the international scene for decades with various racial, religious, ethnic and identity based groups demanding special recognition and inclusion status as other constituent social groups (WANEP, 2021; Reinders et al, 2019; Alvaredo et al, 2018). This is reflected in the push for political participation, economic empowerment and representative governance by groups perceived to be marginalised. The core of inclusive governance reiterates the vital propositions of democratic governance which in the words of the United Nations essentially means 'leaving no one behind' in the issues of governance and development (OECD, 2020). This is however a technical process that involves raising systematic structures that recognises and requires the contributions of all members and groups in society to make relevant policies. Broken down, Ferdman (2017) understands it being the amalgamation of two vital concepts – inclusion and governance. Inclusion he defines as a process in which individuals, groups, organizations and societies approach diversity as a valued resource rather than seek to foster homogeneity (Ferdman, 2017). In other words, rather than attempt to make everyone appear the same, inclusion identifies every member of society as a participant and contributor to the larger groups, thus protecting the identity and uniqueness of every member of the group. Scholars like Lang et al (2017) have however underscored the technicality and difficulty in maintaining an inclusive atmosphere in governance basically because of the negotiated changes occasioned by several unique individuals and groups within a society.

Due to the multifaceted and broad conceptualisation of the concept of inclusive governance, the United Nations and several national governments have embarked upon domesticated operationalisation of the term. For the UN, inclusive governance connotes the recognition and participation of all social groups including prioritising the poorest and most marginalised in development efforts (OECD, 2020; UN, 2015). This is ensured basically through the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 which seeks to promote the participation of all categories and class of society in social governance and decision-making processes essentially focusing on women, youth, poor countries etc. (UNDP, 2021; OECD, 2020). Through the "Inclusive Governance Initiative" the UNDP provides support to countries in the third world to become more efficient and increasingly accountable to their entire populations irrespective of gender and sexual orientations (UNDP, 2021). This is to further strengthen better laws, responsive public sector services and social norms that uphold the rights and recognition of all. By collaborating with governments, parliaments, nongovernmental organisations, civil society organisations and the likes, the UN promotes the recognition of otherwise relegated groups and minority groups in social policies and governance (UNDP, 2021). The idea as rightly recognised by the OECD (2020) is to promote the concept of good and inclusive governance globally and the SDG 16 encapsulates the UN's commitment to achieve an inclusive society void of neglected and relegated persons and groups in governance and development.

Basically, the concept of inclusive governance, borne from the desire to promote comprehensive growth and development in society as related by scholars, captures all social categories and groups with legitimate rights and privileges to participate in governance and development process (Annahar et al, 2023; Rustomjee, 2019). The UN through collaborations with countries and governments in various regions has established several programmes and initiatives to promote this initiative with varying levels of success (UNDP, 2021; UNDP, 2007). For instance, inclusive governance projects and programmes have been initiated in Asia, Africa and Latin America to promote the participation of women, youths, poor and rural populations in elections and governance processes (GIZ, 2019; Lang et al, 2017). In Asia, the participation of women in electoral processes have helped to increase rural and urban women involvement in political processes (Yamin, n.d). Similarly, African governments under the auspices of the African Union have initiated the Agenda 2063 to curb social exclusion and achieve inclusive governance in the continent (Lang et al, 2017; African Union, 2015). The Agenda 2063 involves the active recognition and participation of minority groups and populations in issues of governance. More specifically, the goal of the agenda is the prioritisation of the inclusion of the poorest and most marginalised groups in governance processes (African Union, 2015). This is important for Africa's development because of the vast array of persons and groups that are actively excluded from government processes in the continent and which Lang et al (2017) observes constitute a major economic force for the continent. Through this initiative, the several regional economic communities (RECs) in the continent have the duty of domesticating the Agenda 2063 through practical policies and implementation strategies to achieve a truly inclusive continent in terms of social structures and political representation.

## 2.2. Inclusive Governance in West Africa

The West African sub-region presents a unique example for the consideration of inclusive governance because this region has experienced and continues to experience several political conditions that threaten the very idea of inclusion in governance. Basically, Odubajo and Ishola (2024) recognises that the ambitious political bids of presidents and heads of government to pursue unconstitutional terms and extend governance tenure unconstitutionally are classic cases of political exclusion that the SDGs and the Agenda 2063 seeks to address. These tendencies more than ever, threatens the commitment of the sub-region under her rec, ECOWAS, to political inclusion (Byiers & Ronceray, 2019). While several protocols and policies exist in different nations to promote inclusive governance, findings from different authors and report indicate a systemic neglect of a vast majority of important stakeholders in political and governance process (Ronceray et al, 2023; Bossuyt, 2021). Beginning with the overwhelming youth demography, reports such as Sight Savers (2024) indicates that West African countries continue to relegate and undermine the role of women and youths in political processes both as elections. In Nigeria for instance, the largest country in the sub-region and largest Black nation in the world, representation of women and youths in public governance is still very much at the minimal whereas the majority of the country's estimated 220million population is aged 15-29years according to the (Eme-Uche & Eme, 2023). According to a study by William and Flora Hewlett Foundation (2022), the average age of political representatives in sub-Saharan Africa is 65years which is a huge gap between the citizens and leadership. Furthermore, the current 11<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the Nigeria's Upper Chambers, the Senate comprises only four women in the midst of 100 legislators. All of these point to the systemic exclusion of women and youths from governance.

In politically hot regions like Mali, Niger, and unstable polities like Gambia, Senegal etc. the plight of women and youths are not different (Bakare, 2023; Mbayo, 2018). The consideration in many of these countries do not sufficiently address women, youths and vulnerable or minority ethnoreligious groups in the issue of governance (M'cleod & Ganson, 2018) hence lesser attention is paid to persons with disabilities. In fact, in the findings of Akwetey and Mutangi (2022) on inclusive governance in west Africa, it was discovered that for the average youth to get an elected position in governance, they must have waited or been patient for at least 10years within which time they would have gathered the prerequisites to embrace a political career. For disabled persons however, these chances are totally non-existent providing a huge and significant gap for the sub-region. The exclusion of vital people groups in politics and governance in the continent has been partly held responsible for the increasing irregular cross-border migrations and informal trades embarked upon by thousands of women and youths in the sub-region (Bisong, 2019). In seeking to carve a niche and means of survival, youths and women whose concerns and experiences are not aptly captured in governance and policies are compelled to seek refuge beyond their national borders (Bisong, 2019; Awubimla, 2017). However, the dangers of such dangerous course of actions is evident in the massive loss of lives and potentials in the sub-region.

This position is further tainted by the increasing disregard for national democratic structures in the region by military officers (Klaas, 2019). As Odubajo and Ishola (2024) rightly puts it, inclusive governance in a state of messianic interventions by the military to 'strengthen' democracy as currently experienced in countries in the West Africa region becomes more difficult and untenable especially for minorities and marginalised groups. Systemic political exclusion has also been identified against rural and poor people in the region. This is the case of the Niger Delta in Nigeria which has suffered years of environmental degradation and hazard with no meaningful intervention from the government

even though they contribute significantly to the revenue generation of the country because they are classified as a minority (Odedina, n.d). The classification of religious, ethnic and cultural peoples and groups as minority and majority within the West African region as in others across the continent has been recognised as the basis for different levels and manifestations of exclusion from political processes (Yamin, 2020). For instance, in the Ghanaian society, a report by the Sarwar et al (2022) revealed that the following category of people were excluded from political processes and procedures on the basis of identity and ethnicity – women, pastoralists, external and internal migrants (especially those of Nigerian descent), persons living with disabilities, poor, alcoholics, drug users and orphan children. Whereas the country has several social and political inclusive programmes such as the Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP) and the National Health Scheme (NHS), the report states that several categories of people still lack basic access to political and social participation (Sarwar et al, 2022).

Another report of empirical studies in Senegal, Sierra Leone and Cameroon identified similar findings that although several legislations exist that recognise the participation and inclusion of youths and young persons in governance and political processes, there is still a significant discrimination against youths and women based on negative stereotypes and misperceptions (Iris Group, 2021; Mbayo, 2018; M'cleod & Ganson, 2018). In Sierra Leone, report by Sight Savers (2024) identifies that vulnerable groups such as PwDs are only included by manipulation in political processes to garner electoral advantage and not necessarily to cater for their concerns. Similar cases abound in other West African countries where vulnerable groups and minorities are only included in political processes and not governance for optics (Ocran, 2023; Aremu, 2023; Lang et al, 2017).

The survey above indicates various forms of political exclusivity among west African countries. The plight of women and youths in these countries continue to defy the anticipated equality and equity objectives of the United Nations' SDGs, the African Union's Agenda 2063 and the sub-region's economic integration and inclusive development (UNDP, 2021). The agitations of various cultural, ethnic, social, religious and political groups for adequate recognition and involvement in governance processes indicates the sad reality of continual neglect (Odedina, n.d). With many West African nations still grappling with various forms of political exclusion of the several constituent ethnic and cultural groups, the plight and conditions of PwDs remains largely obscure (Sight Savers, 2024; Sight Savers, 2017; Tuakli-Wosornu & Haig, 2014). The various reports from some countries indicate that while there are policies to include the physically disabled in governance processes, the physical reality indicate a total neglect of this vulnerable group (Sight Savers, 2024; William & Flora Hewlett Foundation, 2022; Mbanjo, 2018). More so, the activities of governments in the West African region have not reflected a dedicated commitment to the vast number of disabled children and young persons domiciled in the region who depend on stipends for daily survival (Barbelet et al, 2021; Piatta & Guy, n.d). The implications of this for the ECOWAS region is the concern of this study. At the individual national level, reports indicate systemic lag in policies, infrastructures and process of governance but at the sub-regional level, the efforts of the ECOWAS commission in driving inclusive governance remains obscure.

### **2.3. Dimensions and Burdens of Disability**

The concept of disability has overtime assumed a political connotation away from its basic biological and physiological meaning (OECD, 2024). Basically, it refers to the physical or mental impairment of the human body such that an individual is not able to perform the basic physical movements envisaged (Lang et al, 2017). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) observes that from this basic definition, the understanding of disability is continually evolving so that it does not just connote medial impairment but also now includes a social dimension that highlights contextual factor (United Nations, 2006). According to Lang et al (2017), disability is best understood as the dynamic interaction between health conditions and external environments. In other words, the physical and medical disability of an individual is best captured in the social limitations facing the individual in a social context. An exploration of literature show that this latter conceptualisation reflects the majority of contemporary conceptualisation. As such, the concept of disability is best captured in its relative limitations in a social context and how much obstacles and disadvantages PwDs encounters in the process of navigating their daily experiences (Trani et al, 2015; Leonard Cheshire Research Centre, n.d; Mitra et al, 2013). The burden of disabilities is reflected in the various forms of societal exclusion they experience. According to Ocran (2022), PwDs represent the last and vital group of excluded persons from social, economic, and political processes globally on account of their perceived inability to physically participate as others. This burden weighs significantly on the self-esteem and psychological health of disabled persons especially those from man-made causes such as accidents and medical processes (Piatta & Guy, n.d.; Schur et al, 2005). According to statistical report from Ghana, 38% of working-aged Ghanaians with disabilities are between the ages of 46 and 65years which increases the prospects of dependency and reliance on others for mobility (Tuakli-Wosornu & Haig, 2014). Furthermore, the majority of PwDs in this country without job is much more than the percentage of those with job. The implication therefore is that a significant population of Ghanaian PwDs are unable to

perform daily tasks and also fend for themselves due to physical, social and environmental limitations (Ocran, 2023; Ocran, 2022; Sarwar et al, 2022).

Another significant burden of disability is the inability to successful access socio-political structures for development (Sight Savers, 2021). This, more than the physical impairment affects the mental articulation and self-assertion of physically disabled (Ocran, 2022). Given that PwDs in developed contexts and regions have relatively popular social recognitions and provisions as reflected in the German GIZ (2019) study, the neglect of disabled persons in developing and underdeveloped climes presents a huge burden to PwDs (Tuakli-Wosornu, & Haig, 2014). This is because compared to other minority and marginalised groups, persons with disabilities are incapable of making use of existing social public infrastructures (Piatta & Guy, n.d). This necessitate the call for special recognition status. For instance, in Nigeria's northeast where some 13million children are reportedly unable to attend school because of various forms of disabilities, their counterparts in more developed climes have little or no limitations to acquiring basic education (Barbelet et al, 2021). As Lang et al (2017) puts it, disability basically limits the options and essence of its victims especially in climes where special needs are not taken into consideration. In Sierra Leone, Mbayo (2018) discovered that when PwDs attempted to participate in the 2018 General elections, they were not provided with the necessary supports needed for mobility and expression of political freedom. In some cases, they were booed and disrespected by electoral officials (Mbayo, 2018).

In different African society where disability is erroneously perceived as signs of witchcraft, bad omen and evil, social exclusion and discrimination adds to the physical and psychological burdens of PwDs (Tuakli-Wosornu & Haig, 2014). This is compounded by governments with no specific and tangible policy to drive the implementation of special recognition to PwDs across the continent. Dealing with various forms of social exclusion in the form of cultural discrimination, stigmatisation, misrepresentation and misperception are burdens variously associated with disabilities in the African continent (Aremu, 2023; Tuakli-Wosornu & Haig, 2014). Reports from studies in Sierra Leone and Senegal show that young persons with disabilities continue to lack basic access to education, social welfare, training programmes, special empowerment programmes and political processes to relate their concerns (Akwetey & Mutangi, 2022; Piatta & Guy, n.d). The report further outlines that these limitations occur even though these young persons are not mentally impaired and can live qualitative lives if provided with the right tools (Akwetey & Mutangi, 2022). The basic needs for persons with disabilities according to the study of Sight Savers (2024) across African countries is the absence of social public infrastructures to enable them make use of social services with relative ease. Accessing public institutions such as banks, schools, hospitals, churches, government offices and even market places for many persons with disabilities is difficult and impossible due to the lack of special routes and roads for such movements (Ocran, 2023). In other cases, they exist in very few public areas but not in the vast majority, thus compelling the reliance of PwDs on third parties.

Living with any form of physical or mental disability globally is a really challenging experience not so much due to the impairment of the limbs or mind but really due to the social challenges that come with such experience (OECD, 2024; GIZ, 2019). This burden is compounded in developing regions where social programmes for assisting the physical and qualitative well-being of disabled persons are absent (Ocran, 2023; Aremu, 2023; Ocran, 2022). Furthermore, in contexts like Africa where sociocultural sentiments enhance the stigmatisation, resentment and neglect of disabilities, the burden of living with disability amidst social, economic and political exclusion goes beyond physical restriction (Sight Savers, 2024; Piatta & Guy, n.d). As a socio-political group therefore, persons with disabilities are compelled to seek social redemption through partnerships with international and domestic nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), civil societies and any willing partners ready to promote their overall inclusion in otherwise neglected circles. These partnerships are mostly reflected in the calls for recognition, political participation and representation in all spheres of governance for easy navigation and inclusion in socio-political processes.

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### 3. Methodology

The study engages a qualitative analysis of primary and secondary sources to critically evaluate the principles and practice of disabled-inclusion in governance in the ECOWAS. Primarily, the research reviews relevant ECOWAS policies and articles on political inclusion to examine the provisions for disabled in the political processes of the sub-continent. Secondly, extant research from countries and states within the region are engaged to provide data for analysis and evaluation. The study engages the desk review approach to analyse the findings of the study using thematic analysis.

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### 4. Results and Discussions

The findings in this section are thematically discussed according to the research question as presented below.

#### 4.1. RQ1 – ECOWAS Policies and Principles of Disabled-Inclusion in Governance

In fifty years, the plight of disabled persons in the ECOWAS commission has been otherwise silent as evident in the non-availability of a policy on the inclusion of PwDs in electoral processes (ECOWAS, 2021). It was not until 2050 ECOWAS Vision to move the sub-region from an “ECOWAS of States to an Economic Community of People” that the attention was provided for disabled persons (ECOWAS, 2021:11). A critical look at the ECOWAS Vision 2050 document however reveals a glaring relegation of PwDs in the sub-continent’s vision for her member states (ECOWAS, 2021:42). Since her inception in 1975 where political participation and good governance have been at the fore of her socio-political dealings, the attention of the Commission and her member states have been rather untenable in relation to promotion and protection of citizens’ rights and privileges (Bakare, 2023; Hartman, 2013; Bolaji, 2010). For instance, although the Commission lacks basic legislations for the involvement of the disabled in the governance processes of the sub-region, her commitment to ensuring a comprehensive actualisation of good and inclusive governance have been called to question (Bakare, 2023; Mills, 2022). According to Ronceray et al (2023), the good governance principle of the ECOWAS has been challenged by her recognition of heads of governments and states who gained political power by suppressing the will of the people and also undermining the popular will. Therefore, while the commission tries to promote good governance on one hand, it does not ensure the relegation and punishment of democracies that act against the will of the people (Pita, 2023; Chin & Kirkpatrick, 2023). However, in relation to persons living with disabilities, the ECOWAS surprisingly has no tenable policy. Instead, it is couched under the social inclusion clause of women and youths as marginalised groups (ECOWAS, 2021). In other words, in the past fifty years, the ECOWAS only just recognised the need to elevate and focus on the plight of person with disabilities. The ECOWAS Action Plan on the Inclusion of People with Disabilities tagged “Regional Action Plan on Disability in West Africa – 2022-2030” was only adopted in 2024. Part of the actions required of this plan is the improvement of the legal and policy environment for the inclusion of persons with disabilities and the strengthening of regional partnerships for increased resource mobilisation towards persons with disabilities (Odeyemi, 2024).

The Article 9 of the United Nations Convention on Rights of the Child and Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the UN SDGs are basically the tools recognised by the Commission to address disability in the sub-continent (ECOWAS, 2021; Tuakli-Wosornu & Haig, 2014). However, as noted by Ocran (2023), the implementation of these policies and conventions still remain largely ineffective evident in the institutional and structural lack of provision for PwDs. In 2024, Nigeria recommended the establishment of an ECOWAS Agency for Disability Affairs (EADA) to integrate regional efforts for promoting, supporting and protecting actions and mechanisms for persons with disabilities but this is yet to be adopted by the commission (Odeyemi, 2024). With the ECOWAS Vision 2050 slightly mentioning the plight of disabled persons in the western sub-region, it remains to be seen the aggressive framework to be adopted by the body in enhancing political participation and governance inclusivity for disabled people. Furthermore, while deliberations for PwDs are ongoing in the commission, there is as yet to tangible commitment to the inclusion of persons with disabilities in governance process. The fifth pillar of the ECOWAS 2050 Vision which deals with social inclusion of vulnerable groups in the sub-region is yet to be translated into an actionable plan for member countries to implement. Therefore, in relation to policies and principles of disabled-inclusion in governance in the West Africa sub-region, the ECOWAS still relies significantly on the UN’s Conventions, SDGs and the African Union Agenda 2063. The recent Vision 2050 for ECOWAS member states is the only document related to guide the implementation of the political inclusion for PwDs but this document is lacking in details and guidelines to enhance adoption among member states.

#### 4.2. RQ 2 – Practices & Commitment of ECOWAS to Disabled-Inclusive Governance

There is a dearth of data and reports on the commitment of the ECOWAS to the inclusion of disabled people in governance. Few of the reports however underscore the contributions of various national government agencies and department to inclusive governance for disabled people (Akwetey & Mutangi, 2022; Mbayo, 2018). Basically, following from the ECOWAS recognition and adoption of the UN’s Conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the commission’s commitment to disabled-inclusive governance is hardly felt among member states (Aremu, 2023; Ocran, 2023; Ocran, 2022). The point of evaluation of the REC’s commitment can however begin from the deployment of policy and legislations promoting disabled peoples’ participation in governance. Currently however, the evidence from various member countries does not include a regional commitment to eradicating political exclusion among PwDs (Sight Savers, 2024; Piatta & Guy, n.d; Akwetey & Mutangi, 2022). Evidences indicate that selected members such as Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Senegal among others are engaging national policies to address disabled peoples’ exclusion from governance (Sight Savers, 2024; Aremu, 2023; Sarwar et al, 2022; M’cleod & Ganson, 2018). In fact, following the adoption of the Action Plan by the ECOWAS in 2024, the Nigerian government gave the recommendation for the establishment of a regional agency to promote coordinate regional efforts (Odeyemi, 2024). Currently however, an assessment of existing reports from various West African countries indicate a disconnect in the policy frameworks and the practical realities (Sight Savers, 2024). Aremu (2023) reports that Nigeria continues to have a significant number of

disabled persons socially disconnected from the governance process while in Sierra Leone, there are reports of electoral procedures discouraging the participation of PwDs (Sight Savers, 2024). An interesting fact however is that while the ECOWAS seeks to promote good governance among her member states, there have been no decisive action in relation to recognising the political rights of PwDs until 2024 when the adoption of the Action Plan was initiated in Abuja (Odeyemi, 2024).

Furthermore, the ECOWAS lacks comprehensive database to identify and monitor the participation of disabled persons in governance processes since her adoption of the UN's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Odeyemi, 2024). Also, while the commission has undertaken several advocacy and policy steps to enhance equality and equitable participation of women and youths in governance processes across member-states, similar initiatives are relatively lacking among disabled people (Sight Savers, 2024; Bakare, 2023; Bisong, 2019). According to findings from an empirical study, it was discovered that the lack of significant commitment of the ECOWAS and her member states to the actualisation of disabled-inclusive governance was due to the inefficiency of the commission to undertake such step (Klaas, 2019). Essentially this would require the commission to strengthen the national capacities of her member states to implement and regulate her political processes (Klaas, 2019). This is however a difficulty for the ECOWAS because of the inability of the lack of institutional framework to drive such implementation. There is also the question of political will of the commission's leadership to see to the participation of disabled persons in governance processes. As Mbayo (2018) rightly notes, the existing legislations notwithstanding, there is a general lack of structure and infrastructure to allow for the smooth participation of the disabled in governance process. A show of commitment in the last 50years of the ECOWAS reign would have summarily resulted in massive awareness campaigns and establishment of necessary data to monitor the state of inclusion among disabled persons.

The implications of these on the West African region however is the continual neglect and dehumanisation of people living with various forms of disability which negatively affects the economic and political development of the region. Part of the various national initiatives to enhancing the socio-political participation of persons with disabilities is the compulsory reservation of 5% job opening for PwDs in Nigeria (Aremu, 2023). However, within Nigeria, as in other countries, there are no statistical indicators to reveal the participation of disabled people in governance process (National Commission for Persons with Disabilities, 2021). In Ghana, amidst the several reports of political neglect of disabled persons in governance processes, there have been no indication of the ECOWAS attempt or commitment to reversing this tide (Ocran, 2023; Ocran, 2022; Sarwar et al, 2022). The majority of data retrieved from the study indicates only national and subnational initiatives to addressing disabled peoples' exclusion in governance and governing processes (Sarwar et al, 2022). The indication from several literature indicate that the majority of responses and interventions for people living with disabilities have come from civil organisations and NGOs seeking to raise awareness on the plight of disabled people (Sight Savers, 2024; Sight Savers, 2021; Piatta & Guy, n.d). Findings from this study indicate that there has been no commensurate commitment of the West African apex political organisation to political inclusion of disabled persons in the region. At best, what is obtainable is the deployment of national policies which are not broadly reflected in the social infrastructures of nations within the sub-region.

Summarily, given that the ECOWAS has only just adopted an action plan to engage the inclusion of disabled people in political governance, an evaluation of the commitment of the community to ensuring inclusive governance for disabled people may be too early. However, in the last 50years of the community's existence, there have been no active adoption and commitment to encouraging the participation of disabled people in governance process.

#### **4.3. RQ 3 – Challenges of ECOWAS Implementation of Disabled-Inclusion in Governance**

An evaluation of the study findings indicates several institution and structural challenges working against the non-implementation of disabled-inclusion in governance processes in the western sub-region. The challenges are identified in levels. At the sub-regional level, lack of political will, lack of policy document and legislation specifically promoting disabled-inclusive governance, and lack of institutional framework for implementing the rights and privileges of disabled persons, are some factors. Structurally, there is the general lack of public infrastructures, lack of recognition and acceptance of the rights of disabled persons, prevalence of misperceptions and resentments against disabled persons, lack of human development opportunities for disabled persons and lack of financial resources to engage structural and infrastructural projects to meet special needs for disabled people. These limitations are obtainable in different African countries across the sub-region.

Firstly, the lack of political will is paramount. Among the several factors, findings indicate that there still exists a general lack of will to recognise and provide social, economic and political opportunities for disabled persons in the sub-continent (Aremu, 2023; Ocran, 2023; Bakare, 2023). This lack of will is reflected in the inability to initiate a policy driving disabled-inclusive governance in the region. The attention of the community has been rather directed towards

the actualisation of women and youth empowerment as well as inclusion in political processes (Akwetey & Mutangi, 2022; Bisong, 2019). However, as noted by Salzinger et al (2022), although sufficient advocacy of the ECOWAS community towards the actualisation of gender equity and equitable representation and participation of all groups in governance process has been made some progress, it is still far from actualising its intended goal. In 50years, ECOWAS have only been able to produce one female president and various forms of women and youth exclusion continues unabated in the sub-region. All of these indicates the lack of political will of the community to ensure inclusive governance. The several criticisms against the political leadership and handling of political and security issues in the sub-region by accommodating corrupt and unpopular leaders through fraudulent processes are reflections of the lack of political will to drive necessary policy actions (Chin & Kirkpatrick, 2023; Pita, 2023).

Secondly, although ECOWAS adopted the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of People with Disabilities and the African Union's Agenda 2063, there were no decisive sub-regional policies and framework to guide member states to implement disabled-inclusive governance (ECOWAS, 2021). Although some nations like Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Senegal etc. engaged national policies to integrate and recognise the political rights of persons with disabilities, there was no sub-regional protocol or effort to ensure the full participation by member states (Aremu, 2023; Akwetey & Mutangi, 2022; Ocran, 2022). The implication of this was the inefficient and poorly implemented policies on disabled persons in the sub-region due to several structural, political and financial factors.

Thirdly, along with the lack of policy framework is the lack of institutional agency to ensure the compliance of member states to the adopted Conventions. The suggestion of Nigeria for the creation of an agency to monitor and regulate the implementation of the adopted action plan by the ECOWAS is an indication of the lack of existing framework to address this vital issue (Odeyemi, 2024). This presents a challenge as well as reflects the poor commitment of the ECOWAS to the political and human development of disabled people with the community.

Fourthly, there are no public infrastructures catering to disabled people across the sub-continent. Reports from member states broadly show how physically disabled persons are unable to engage physical mobility as a result of no special walk ways, entrance and exits, elevators and specially designated routes for physically impaired people (Ocran, 2023; Piatta & Guy, n.d; Tuakli-Wosornu & Haig, 2014). With such infrastructural lags, disabled people can hardly move around and engage in social, economic and political activities because social infrastructures are not constructed to serve them (Sight Savers, 2024; Mbayo, 2018). This is a challenge for disabled persons across the community that have not been decisively dealt with by the community. The problem with this is factor is that although some urban public institutions across the sub-region may scantily possess some of these infrastructures, the majority do not. The implication of this is that disabled persons may not be able to freely move across nations within the sub-region to engage in public political and economic activities because of lacking infrastructures.

Another vital challenge to the inclusion of disabled persons in the governance process of the sub-region is the refusal to recognise and accept the rights of disabled persons across the sub-region. This is prevalent in both public social and private spheres such that requirements for access to educational, employment and political opportunities disregards the qualities and rights of physically disabled persons to participate equally (Mbayo, 2018). This prevents eligible but disabled individuals for actively participating in processes of governance as reflected in the Sierra Leonean 2018 General Elections where electoral officers reportedly refused to provide disabled people with the necessary assistance to exercise their franchise (Ocran, 2023; Ocran, 2022; Mbayo, 2018).

The foregoing is closely linked to the wrong perception of disabled persons in the African sociocultural space. Tuakli-Wosornu and Haig (2014) observes that disabled persons are still viewed as fundamentally less than the average human due to impairments which are believed to result from evil occurrences or intentions. In rural parts of Nigeria and Ghana, Sarwar et al (2022) reports indicate that disabled persons are still subjected to social stigmatisation, resentment and exclusion from immediate society because of misperceptions. In such atmosphere believed to be widespread among neighbouring nations, achieving political inclusion is summarily difficult. The lack of regional and national efforts to curb these misperceptions also contribute to this lag.

Lastly, findings indicate that lack of financial resources to drive the implementation of several infrastructural and structural innovations for disabled persons are lacking. For instance, Ofuani (2011) notes that implementing social inclusion processes for disabled persons involves activities such as construction of educational facilities, provision of technological resources for schools with special needs, acquisition of materials and processes to meet the needs of disabled persons during electoral processes, construction and renovation of hospitals and other public buildings to enhance mobility for disabled persons and massive rural-urban awareness campaigns to ensure significant political and social inclusion for disabled persons. Each of these activities however requires considerable financial resources from stakeholders at different levels.

Summarily, the findings on the challenges indicate the need for a comprehensive sub-regional and national collaboration to improve the prospects of disabled persons in governance.

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## 5. Conclusion

This article has revealed the state of disabled-inclusive governance in West Africa under the ECOWAS community in the last 50 years with the available scarce data. Findings have shown that whereas ECOWAS member states like Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone and Senegal have national policies driving inclusive governance for disabled persons, there has been no explicit policy by the ECOWAS community. In 2024 however, the community adopted the Regional Action Plan on Disability in West Africa 2022-2030 to ensure a more comprehensive and institutional approach to inclusive governance for disabled people. These notwithstanding, the findings showed that there have been several institutional and structural challenges to the inclusion of disabled people in governance processes in the west African region. It is the argument of this paper however that these challenges notwithstanding, the major factor responsible for the prevalence of political exclusion of disabled people in the sub-region is the lack of political will of heads of government and the leadership of the ECOWAS. Based on the findings of the study, the initiation of structural and infrastructural approaches to recognising and enhancing the participation of disabled persons in the sub-region rests squarely on the willingness of the constituted leadership to do so. Currently however, the lack of political will not only affects the political inclusion of disabled persons but also limits the knowledge and reports of political exclusion of disabled people in the region due to paucity of data and reports. Furthermore, ECOWAS will only prove to be a lead community agency with a thorough inclusive governance principle,

### 5.1. Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made for the increased political participation and inclusion in governance of the disabled in the western sub-region:

Initiate a protocol recognising the rights of disabled people for implementation among member states. There is need for the ECOWAS to make up for the years of lag concerning the rights and privileges of disabled persons within the sub-region. This should be done by initiating a protocol to guide member states' recognition and implementation to eliminate the social, physical and structural challenges of disabled persons.

Establish a regional agency and department to document, monitor and implement the inclusion of disabled people in governance across the sub-region. The recommendation by Nigeria for the establishment of a regional disability agency to monitor and regulate the commitment of member states to the Action Plan and other sub-regional initiatives is important. This can be done by strengthening the capacity of existing national agencies and duplicating similar offices across the sub-region. These offices should be headed by citizens of other member countries to enhance neutrality and objectivity in implementation.

Collaborate with the African Union, the World Bank and other international donors to drive the construction of special infrastructures – roads, transport, classrooms, hospitals, walkways etc.- for ease of accessibility and utility across ECOWAS member states. Findings have shown that funding social infrastructures for disabled persons are some of the vital challenges facing ECOWAS member states. This can be accounted for by diplomatic collaborations and agreements between nations and regional and international financial institutions to enhance the mobility and accessibility of disabled persons to public spaces. This is also important to extend electoral processes and procedures to include special considerations for persons with disabilities. These special considerations should include logistics such as security, technology and accessible infrastructures. All of these are important to avoid a repetition of the situation in the Sierra Leone 2018 General Elections where disabled persons were discouraged from exercising their political rights as a result of lack of access to polling stations and materials.

Reserve a percentage of political representation at all levels of governance for disabled people in the sub-region. The ECOWAS Action Plan and the constitution of member nations should be amended to reserve specific percentage of representation for disabled persons at the federal, state (regional) and local levels. This will enable them tackle their problems more decisively and rapidly. Currently, the attitude of many governments including the ECOWAS towards the political inclusion of persons with disabilities reflects that of relative disinterest. But with institutional representation in governance, the needs and concerns of these persons can be readily addressed.

Engage aggressive education of special needs children and persons with disabilities to reduce dependability and improve the prospects of inclusion in governance process. The ECOWAS needs to collaborate with big sub-regional economies like Nigeria to provide special needs schools for children with disabilities in the sub-region. This should take

the form of local collaboration whereby each local government in the country and across every country has a special needs educational centre for children with disabilities. Private investors in this regards should also be encouraged.

Initiate legislations and policies to protect persons with disabilities from public stigmatisation, vulnerabilities and abuse across the sub-region. This is important to address the social and verbal abuse of persons with disabilities as reported in the literature in some west African societies. There should be clearly defined punishments for violators as the rights of PwDs are emphasized.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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