

Meaningful Participation in Assistive Technology (AT) Decision-Making Processes

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Introduction: The Heart of the Matter

- Access to assistive technology (AT) is a fundamental right, essential for the **independence, dignity, and inclusion of persons with disabilities.**
- Despite global efforts, a critical gap remains: the exclusion of the very people AT is meant to serve from decision-making processes.
- The core principle of the disability rights movement must be our guide: **“Nothing About Us, Without Us.”**
- **The Decision-Making Process** is a step by step approach used to identify a problem, evaluate options, and select the best course of action.
- This presentation will highlight *why* meaningful participation is non-negotiable and *how* we can achieve it together

Defining "Meaningful Participation"

- **It is NOT Tokenism:** It goes far beyond a simple survey or a one-off focus group.
- **It is Comprehensive:** Involvement at *all* stages: from initial design and policy formulation to procurement, implementation, and evaluation.
- **It is Inclusive:** Ensuring diverse voices from all disability groups are at the table, including women, youth, and those in rural areas.
- **It is Empowering:** Shifting power by recognizing lived experience as expertise and providing the information, resources, and capacity building for persons with disabilities to engage as equal partners.

Why Participation Matters: The Case for Inclusion

- **Leads to Better Solutions:** Results in AT that is relevant, acceptable, and sustainable because it meets real-world needs.
- **Improves Efficiency of Investment:** Prevents wasted resources on technology that is impractical or gets abandoned by users.
- **Enhances Ownership & Accountability:** When users are involved, they become champions of the solutions, and decision-makers are held accountable for the outcomes.
- **Fulfills Human Rights:** Directly aligns with our obligations under the UNCRPD, particularly Articles 4.3 (Consultation) and 9 (Accessibility).
- **Prevents Exclusion:** Ensures that the needs of the most marginalized groups within the disability community are not overlooked.

The Reality: Current Gaps in Participation

- **Top-Down Decisions:** AT choices are often driven by donors, governments, or the private sector without adequate, early-stage user input.
- **Limited Influence:** Persons with disabilities have few formal opportunities to influence procurement policies, technical standards, or funding priorities.
- **Accessibility Barriers:** Engagement platforms, both physical and digital are often inaccessible, preventing participation.
- **Inadequate Representation:** A persistent failure to include a diversity of voices, particularly those of women, youth, and individuals from rural and marginalized disability groups.

Practical Strategies for All Stakeholders

1. Strengthen Policy & Legal Frameworks:

- * Mandate inclusive decision-making bodies for all AT-related policy.
- * Enforce UNCRPD principles in national legislation and public procurement.

2. Build Capacity (For DPOs and PWDs):

- * Train DPOs and persons with disabilities on AT policy, technology literacy, and advocacy.
- * Ensure all information is provided in accessible formats.

3. Institutionalize Multi-Stakeholder Platforms:

- * Create and fund permanent, user-led forums for ongoing dialogue between users, government, and industry.
- * Ensure these platforms have diverse and equitable representation.

4. Drive Monitoring & Accountability:

- * Develop and track clear indicators for participation.
- * Establish mechanisms to hold decision-makers accountable for inclusion.

LNFOOD's Role & Experiences in Lesotho

- **Advocacy:** Leading the charge for inclusive AT policies in Lesotho, engaging directly with government ministries.
- **Capacity Building:** Training our member DPOs on technology literacy and how to effectively engage in policy discussions.
- **Partnerships:** Forging collaborations with government and the private sector to promote and pilot user-centered approaches.
- **Lessons Learned:** We've faced challenges with funding and institutional buy-in, but we've learned that persistence, partnership, and presenting a unified voice are key to making progress.

The Future is Now: Using AI to Amplify Our Voices

How DPOs can leverage Artificial Intelligence (AI):

- **Evidence-Based Advocacy:** Use AI to analyze large datasets (e.g., national surveys, social media) to identify gaps in AT access and present data-driven arguments to policymakers.
- **Breaking Down Barriers:** Employ AI-powered tools for real-time translation and captioning during meetings, and to generate accessible formats (like summaries or Easy Read versions) of complex documents.
- **Efficient Operations:** Use AI assistants to help draft grant proposals, reports, and social media campaigns, allowing DPOs to focus more resources on direct advocacy and member support.
- **Personalized Information:** Develop AI-powered chatbots on our websites to provide 24/7, accessible information on AT options and rights to our members.

Caveats & Ethical Considerations:

- AI is a tool, not a replacement for human experience.
- We must address the digital divide and ensure AI tools are accessible.

Call to Action: Commit to Participation

- **For Governments:** Create and mandate formal spaces for our participation. Move from listening to us, to legislating with us.
- **For Donors & Investors:** Fund the *process*, not just the product. Make meaningful participation a non-negotiable requirement for funding. Invest in DPOs as your expert partners.
- **For the Private Sector & Innovators: Co-design with users from day one.** Your best ideas will come from genuine partnership with the people who will use your technology.
- **For DPOs & Persons with Disabilities:** Let's continue to engage actively, build our capacity, and hold our partners accountable.
- **For All of Us:** Let's commit today to making “**Nothing About Us, Without Us**” the standard practice in all things related to Assistive Technology.

Conclusion

- Access to AT is a human rights issue.
- Meaningful participation is not optional—it is essential for creating AT that truly works.
- By working together, with persons with disabilities at the center of every decision, we can bridge the gaps and build a world where technology empowers everyone.

Thank you - Kea Leboha!!

Together, We Can UnLock TheEveryday