



**COUNT US IN:
FULLY ABLED NATION
MAKING ELECTIONS
MORE INCLUSIVE**



Coalitions for Change is a centerpiece program of the partnership between the Australian Embassy and The Asia Foundation in the Philippines. CfC encourages civil society, private sector, academe, and government to work together and bring about public policies that contribute to improving the lives of Filipinos and promoting their economic well-being.

CfC focuses on development concerns that are consistent with the Philippine government's agenda: promoting economic growth, reducing vulnerabilities, improving education outcomes, and advocating for effective governance.

People with disability face many challenges that make it difficult for them to exercise their right to vote. In the Philippines, public schools that serve as polling places do not usually have the appropriate facilities to accommodate voters with disability. There have been efforts to improve the conditions of polling places to facilitate the participation of people with disability. But, much remains to be done to make Philippine elections fully inclusive.

This story traces the efforts of the Fully Able Nation (FAN), a multi-sectoral coalition of Disabled Peoples' Organizations (DPOs), civil society and government partners, and private sector entities, towards a more disability-inclusive 2016 national election.

THE DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGE

The Philippine Constitution guarantees the right of people with disability to take part in the democratic and electoral processes. Various enabling laws, such as the Magna Carta for People with Disabilities (Republic Act No. 7277) and *Batas Pambansa Bilang 344* (Accessibility Law), support this constitutional provision. The Philippines is also a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability.

In June 2011, the Australian Agency for International Development (later integrated into the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade [DFAT]) supported the program "Increasing the Participation of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) in the 2013 Philippine Midterm Elections" with The Asia Foundation (TAF). The initiative provided a better understanding of the issues that limit the sector's participation. It also brought together and made disability organizations and networks, including the media, passionate about making elections inclusive. FAN, the coalition, was born.

Operating within the aforementioned favourable policy environment, FAN worked with the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) to formulate Resolution No. 9485¹, laying out the process for voters with disability. The 2012 policy mandated the creation of Accessible Polling Places (APPs). These are "barrier-free" places for people with disability and senior citizens to cast their votes.

The policy also mandates Special Board of Election Inspectors (SBEIs) to assist such voters.

The passage of Resolution 9485 was an early success. However, on May 13, 2013, election day, it was clear that more preparation was needed to achieve the sector's desired results. Despite the legal mandate, only two pilot APPs out of some 36,000 voting precincts nationwide were established. Moreover, out of 360,000 registered voters with disability, only 82,000 came out to vote. The participation of voters with disability was still hindered.

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These impediments motivated FAN to refocus and make more strategic interventions. The benefits of the policy for voters with disability must be fully realized.

¹On June 29, 2012, the COMELEC issued Resolution No. 9485 or the "Rules and Regulations for Voting of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) and for the Establishment of Accessible Polling Places in Connection with the May 13, 2013 National and Local Elections".

FOCUSED INTERVENTIONS

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FAN worked within the disability sector to improve awareness of their right to vote and looked at the processes and structures that will facilitate their participation. With DPOs and the COMELEC, FAN sought to improve policy implementation. FAN also harnessed the capabilities of local governments, the media, the private sector, and civil society to improve the inclusiveness of elections.

With physical access as the main issue to the participation of people with disability, it was clear that physical infrastructure at the voting place was a contributing factor. Aside from this, not all people with disability are registered as voters. Hence, FAN’s intervention for the 2016 elections was two-fold: registration for voters with disabilities and improving the APPs.

DATA AND REGISTRATION

FAN worked closely with the COMELEC to improve the voter registration process. The work started in eight areas across the country² to fill the data gap on voters with disability.

Because the regular administration of elections is not as effective in reaching out to the marginalized, FAN assisted COMELEC in establishing satellite registration sites. Partnering with ABS-CBN, a major television network, and Alyansa ng may Kapansanang Pinoy (AKAP-Pinoy), an umbrella network of DPOs, special registrations were

held in areas that are accessible. Sign language interpreters were also deployed to assist members of the Deaf community better.

FAN also worked closely with the Cerebral Palsied Association of the Philippines (CPAP), the Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting (PPCRV), and various local governments to encourage their members and constituents with disability to register and vote.

IMPROVING ACCESSIBILITY OF POLLING PLACES

In 2014, supposedly its last year of implementation, FAN partnered with the Upholding Life and Nature (ULAN), an environmental human rights organization to conduct a nationwide audit of the polling places. The audit revealed that most voting centers lack sturdy ramps and railings, ample space (corridors and doorways) for wheelchairs, accessible toilets, and designated parking spaces. Signages to assist voters with disability and their aides were also absent in the previous election.

In 2015, Coalitions for Change (CfC), a program focused on key policy reforms that bring about sustainable and scalable outcomes, saw the potential of FAN’s work on improving accessibility. Under CfC, FAN renewed its efforts to improve the accessibility of the 2016 elections.

Informed by audit findings and the data on registered voters with disability, the COMELEC released Resolution 10108³ to guide and improve the implementation of the APP law. The policy enhanced the 2012 APP policy and additionally provided for the designation of an Emergency APP (EAPP) and corresponding facilities and procedures to improve access of voters.

The EAPPs were made available for people with disability who prefer to vote in the regular voting centers. These also include the elderly, heavily pregnant women, and people with temporary disability. The resolution introduced a modified runner system, where ballots are brought to the voters for filling up, then sealed and delivered within the voting period to the ballot boxes of their respective precincts.

To further encourage people with disabilities to vote, FAN also worked to improve access to information in the lead-up to the 2016 elections, particularly the Deaf. In collaboration with the Philippine National Association of Sign Language Interpreters (PNASLI) and media partners, the nationwide telecast of presidential and vice-presidential debates included sign language interpretation. This helped members of the Deaf community make informed decisions on election day.

² Albay, Laoag City (Ilocos Norte); Puerto Princesa City (Palawan), Cebu City, Cagayan de Oro City, Davao City, and select areas in Region VI (Western Visayas), and the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM)

³ COMELEC Resolution No. 10108 or the “General Instructions on Voting by Persons with Disability and Senior Citizens including Heavily Pregnant Voters”. April 29, 2016.

ACCESS THROUGH THE MEDIA

In the lead-up to the 2016 elections, the telecast of the presidential and vice-presidential debates featured sign language interpreters.

Found at the bottom corner of the television screen, the inset was a significant milestone in Philippine broadcasting. The simple but important adjustment was positively received by the Deaf community as it “enabled the deaf to glean information about candidates and their platforms that otherwise wouldn’t have been made known to them in a direct manner”. The interpretation also “fostered intelligent conversations... and empowered them to make informed decisions come election day.”

The sign language interpretation was made possible in partnership with CNN Philippines and ABS-CBN.

Source: Calimlim, Aldrin. How sign language was crucial to this year’s election. May 12, 2016. CNN Philippines Life. Retrieved from: <http://cnnphilippines.com/life/culture/politics/2016/05/11/sign-language-election.html>





RESULTS AND FURTHER CHALLENGES

FAN's initiatives resulted in significant improvements over the 2013 elections. With concerted efforts from partners and the COMELEC, at least 189 EAPPs were established nationwide for the May 2016 national elections. There was also a notable increase in the participation of voters with disabilities: from 82,000 in 2013, COMELEC records⁴ show a total of 318,014 voters with disabilities in 2016 – a remarkable 288 percent increase.

In the recent *Barangay* (village) and *Sangguniang Kabataan* (SK) elections held on May 14, 2018, the List of Voters posted on voting precincts clearly indicated if one had disability, is a senior citizen, or both. This helped the COMELEC Board of Election Inspectors (BEI) provide proper assistance so people with disability and senior citizens can cast their votes conveniently and with dignity on election day.

However, further improvements are still needed. Social media posts from some leaders in the disability sector show disappointment with the uneven implementation of the APPs and EAPPs. The Legal Network for Truthful Elections (LENTE), a network of election monitors in the Philippines, for instance, described the 2018 *barangay* polls as with “limited accessibility of polling places, resulting in difficulty in voting for persons with disabilities, senior citizens, and heavily pregnant women, were prevalent in various areas in the country.”⁵

Then there is also the current lack of consensus on how the sector itself defines “accessibility”. Some feel that for elections to be fully inclusive, voters with disability should be accommodated even within the regular polling places, removing the need for APPs. While this is ideal, the huge infrastructure resource needed to improve the public schools doubling as voting precincts in time for the elections is unlikely. The establishment of APP, in the interim, offers a practical option for voters with disability.

RECOGNITION OF INCLUSIVENESS

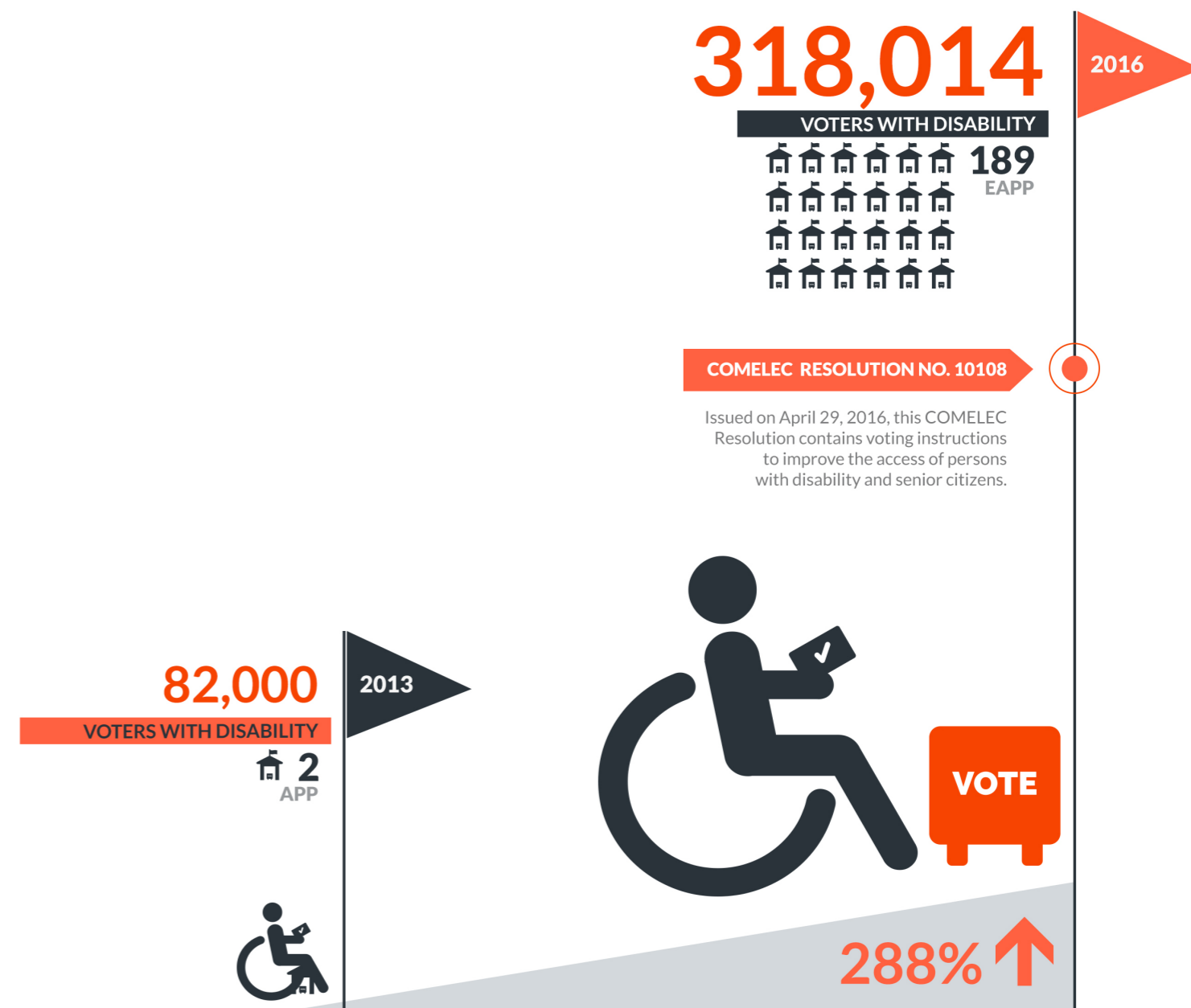
The International Electoral Awards of the International Centre for Parliamentary Studies Ltd. based in London, United Kingdom, conferred the *Recognition for Outstanding Achievement on Accessibility and Minority Participation* to the COMELEC in 2016.

The awards highlighted the Commission's efforts to make the 2016 Philippine national elections more accessible for marginalized groups, including people with disabilities, indigenous peoples, senior citizens, and detainees.

Source: *International Electoral Awards 2016*. <http://awards.electoralnetwork.org/shortlist-2016.php>

⁴ COMELEC General Instructions on PWD/SC Voting (Resolution 10108). May 2016. Retrieved from: <http://www.comelec.gov.ph/php-tpls-attachments/2016NLE/AccessiblePollingPlace/GenInstructionPWDSCVoting.pdf>

⁵ Politics as usual. Editorial. Philippine Daily Inquirer. May 16, 2018. Retrieved from: <http://opinion.inquirer.net/113229/politics-as-usual>





LESSONS LEARNED

Fully Abled Nation's story on promoting the people with disability's rights to suffrage in the past six years brings forth the following lessons:

1. UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

FAN's decision to focus on physical infrastructure and the lack of data on people with disability was a result of their assessment of the pre-existing conditions that prevent voters' access on election day. Informed by this analysis, the coalition's focused, practical interventions, such as the satellite registrations and emergency APPs, helped increase accommodation for voters with disability.

2. CHANGE MINDSETS ABOUT DISABILITY

FAN implemented sensitivity training activities for BEIs in dealing with voters with disability. Together with media partners, FAN also invested in developing information materials and raise awareness of the public on the sector's right to suffrage. Partnering with media groups also provided the means for voters with disability to get to know the national political candidates better.

In the years that FAN has worked on inclusiveness, the need to empower the sector itself is a constant. There are still families who choose to hide family members with disability rather than deal with the inconvenience or perceived stigma associated with it.

3. STRONG PARTNERSHIPS WITH THE MEDIA EXPAND PROGRAM REACH AND AMPLIFY MESSAGES

The media was a valuable partner in increasing the inclusiveness of elections. Aside from the sign language interpretation on television, FAN also partnered with VERA Files, a non-profit media organization, and produced two publications and a microsite, stressing disability-sensitive elections and media reportage.⁶ Coupled with the many voices from people with disability, the media partners' efforts encouraged the COMELEC to perform better than the 2013 elections. Further, with the benefit of real-time media coverage, immediate feedback on APP implementation was available. It put the issue at the forefront and kept the people with disability informed on their right to vote.

While FAN achieved much in the 2016 elections, the advocacy for people with disability is far from over. Efforts to reach out to marginalized sectors and improve their ability to claim their rights should continue.

Fully Abled Nation's experience on inclusive election reform is but a stepping stone into the coalition's enhanced approach to policy-making, towards empowering people with disability and realizing their full potential.

⁶These two VERA Files publications are: *The Right to Vote: Filipinos with Disabilities and the 2013 Elections* edited by Luz Rimban and Yvonne Chua, 2014 and *Getting It Right: Reporting on Disability in the Philippines*, edited by Yvonne Chua, 2015. Available at: <https://asiafoundation.org/tag/coalitions-for-change/>

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