Information needs of voters with visual impairment in the electoral and voting process in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The major thrust of this study was to establish the electoral and voting needs of voters with visual impairment. The study also intended to determine the extent to which these needs have been met by electoral authorities in Zimbabwe as well as suggesting ways through which the outstanding concerns could be addressed. The study was carried out in five provinces of Zimbabwe (Bulawayo, Masvingo, Mashonaland East, Mashonaland West and Harare). The qualitative research paradigm was applied. The interpretive research design was also used in line with the research philosophy and opportunity sampling was utilised. The study revealed that voters with visual impairment were excluded from the electoral and voting processes due to the use of only ordinary print to present information. Not all voters with visual impairment can access information presented in normal print. Many of them prefer formats such as Braille, computer based software, desktop screens and enlarged print. The study also found out that election authorities were not doing much to improve the format through which information is presented to them. Visually impaired voters indicated that they acquired most of the electoral and voting information through political rallies, radio and to a limited extent, television. The study recommended that presentation of voting information should be extended to other inclusive formats such as Braille, enlarged print, audio and information technology (for example computer based software), desktop voting screens and magnifying sheets. Political parties and electoral authorities should explore and diversify the ways through which information is presented to voters with visual impairment if effective inclusion of these voters is to be realised.

Key words: visual impairment, enlarged print, Braille, magnifying sheets, voting format, access

Introduction

Provision and availability of information on the electoral process to voters with visual impairment is a critical element for political development in any society. Electoral authorities provide information on electoral and voting matters in ordinary or normal print, yet people with visual impairment cannot access that information unless it is provided in formats that are user-friendly. When electoral authorities plan for elections they do not prioritise reaching people with visual impairment. This is evidenced by the limited or non availability of electoral or voting information that accommodates the information needs of voters with visual impairment regardless of the fact that these voters play an equally critical role in determining the political situation of any country. This study, therefore, put into perspective, the information needs of the constituency of people with visual impairment as well as suggesting what could be done to address the outstanding concerns.
Background to the Problem

In Zimbabwe, national elections are held after every five years. Local authority elections are also held from time to time. The period before and during elections is normally characterised by educating the electorate about their rights in the electoral process as well as what they are expected to do during the actual voting process. During this time, information is relayed to voters through the print and electronic media as well as public meetings and gatherings. Rarely does one see this information also being provided to voters with visual impairment in the formats they can access easily and understand. These formats include among others Braille, enlarged print or audio files, magnification sheets, computer based software and others. This anomaly influenced the researcher to find out more about the situation on the ground. This study was prompted by the fact that the researcher took part in a number of elections in the country where he was an electoral or polling officer in different capacities and noticed the gaps which this study hopes to fill.

The provision of information on the electoral process is a critical element to unpack reviews and voices of people with visual impairment so as to facilitate access and inclusion of people with visual impairment in mainstream governance activities. Many people with visual impairment encounter technical difficulties in scanning various government websites and other websites because the design and programming was not sensitive to their needs, hence their continued exclusion from the electoral playing field (National Association of Societies for the Care of the Handicapped, NASCOH, 2010).

It is vital to sensitise politicians, governments, non–governmental organisations and other critical stakeholders to put in place intervention strategies that facilitate and promote the involvement of people with visual impairment in the electoral systems and processes. This approach will go a long way in dealing with exclusionary practices. NASCOH (2010) argues that one of the possible ways to achieve the involvement of people with visual impairment in the electoral systems and processes is by availing information in the appropriate format, requisite resources and support for those with visual impairment to exercise their right to vote.

In order to ensure effective inclusion of people with visual impairment in the electoral and voting process, all the relevant information should be disseminated through various media. These could include community gatherings, letters, books, print and electronic media, pamphlets, news releases and advertising messages. Some sections of the disability community strongly advocated for the quota system in all the key sections of governance such as in parliament, local authority councillors, in senate and other decision making organs of both the state and private institutions. The implication of the quota system is that it enables the free flow of information to all stakeholders.

The availing of information in the relevant format that can be accessed by voters with visual impairment is a requirement that no electoral authority can afford to take for granted. It is one of the single aspects that negatively contribute to the discrimination of people with visual impairment in as far as the electoral process is concerned. Electoral authorities prefer to use the one size fits all approach where voter information is provided only in ordinary print to all the citizens including those who might not benefit from this information. This is pursued at the expense of visually impaired voters who are unable to access the voter information in that form because they are blind or have low vision. In Zimbabwe, not even enlarged print has been provided as another viable option.
for those with low vision or residual sight. Enlarged print is generally cheap to produce but provision of this service has remained a pipe dream for voters with visual impairment.

The United Kingdom is probably a shining example in pioneering progressive ideas meant to empower people with visual impairment in their quest to be part and parcel of the global village. The Electoral Commission established a website known as ‘about my vote’. This website contains vital information which could be downloaded in not only large print, but other various language formats as well as audio files (United Kingdom Electoral Commission, 2013). Other alternative websites that provide invaluable information about electoral issues include ‘easy read’ and ‘our vote’. Information can therefore be downloaded or ordered in the form of a digital versatile disc (DVD).

In Northern Ireland, the office of the Chief Electoral officer provides information on details for registering to vote. It also provides information on the various types of elections and guidance for candidates. This information is provided in the form of leaflets, flyers and statistics. The office generally strives to modernise electoral practices including accessible voting for people with visual impairment (United Kingdom Electoral Commission, 2013). The Northern Ireland Chief Electoral Officer has responsibility for administering elections as well as compiling the Register of voters. The office of the Chief Elections officer was independent of government. The staff is not an arm of government and therefore operated autonomously.

The case in Zimbabwe is that the electoral process cannot be regarded as absolutely independent of government because it is funded by government for most, if not all of its activities. The Chief Elections Officer of The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission was initially appointed by government. The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) only took over the running of elections at a later stage. Since ZEC is not a profit making organisation, it is funded by central government for all its programmes, although some of its funding comes from donor institutions. Due to this background, government has so much interest in what goes on at ZEC. To some extent, this compromises the autonomy of the electoral body in Zimbabwe. Hence, decision making could not be totally independent of government influence, by virtue of many of the government officials having a lot of vested interests in the final outcome of the electoral process as a whole.

Statement of the Problem

People with visual impairment are experiencing challenges in accessing vital information on elections and the voting process in Zimbabwe.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

i. What are the electoral and voting experiences of people with visual impairment in the electoral and voting process in Zimbabwe?

ii. To what extent have people with visual impairment been included in the provision of electoral and voting information?

iii. What strategies can be used to address the outstanding issues in the provision and availability of appropriate information for people with visual impairment?
Review of related literature

Conceptual framework

This study was informed and guided by the framework of inclusion. Inclusion is a recent paradigm shift from the exclusionary practices where people with visual impairment were unfairly discriminated against and taken advantage of by the status quo. Inclusion entails that people with disabilities should be regarded as humans and should therefore be part of activities that take place in the societies where they live, without being left out or segregated on the grounds of their disability. People with visual impairment should therefore partake in activities in the community such as education, healthcare system, sports and recreation, information and technology, commerce and industry and others. Inclusion therefore recognises and embraces the need to capacitate people with disabilities with skills to be independent citizens in their own right (ILO, 2001).

Inclusivity in the provision of information forms the basis of this study; hence it was selected as the best theoretical framework for the study. Provision of information in the electoral and voting process is a key issue in the efforts to include people with visual impairment. According to the United Nations (1994), inclusion is concerned with the equalisation of opportunities. In support of this position, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (1997) indicates that inclusion is based on the recognition of capacities and potential of all people if the environment is responsive to their needs.

Accessibility of information

Communication on elections from political parties and candidates needs to target the visually impaired, who by virtue of their lack of sight miss out on standard publicity (Prince, 2014). Voting independently for the visually impaired does not exist in Zimbabwe. This is mainly caused by the fact that the voting forms or ballot paper is available only in print. On the other hand, visually impaired people can access most of their information through enlarged print, Braille, audio tape and diskette. These formats can be produced locally, but somehow, the authorities are not forthcoming in addressing this grey area. For the visually impaired people to make informed decisions, they definitely need and are entitled to the same information that the sighted access. It has been demonstrated that 36% of blind people and 75% of partially sighted people were able to use large print comfortably [United Kingdom Department for International Development (DFID), 2007].

Absence of clear print guidelines is impacting negatively on the information needs of people with visual impairment. The following principles have been missing in the existing electoral process:

- Good and appropriate colour contrast between text and background;
- Reasonable print size (12 point minimum) and boldness of print;
- Appropriate and relevant material;
- Use of paper that is non-glossy and does not show through print on the reverse side;
- Good printing;
- Generous spacing and a clear contents list to help with orientation; and
- Well constructed text that uses correct terminology.

Absence of such provisions in the Zimbabwe electoral system is a cause for concern impacting negatively on people with visual impairment.

The role of information

Information is essential to allowing voters to make informed choices (Leclerc, 2012). Thus,
targeted information for the visually impaired is critical. This information has to be adapted to meet the needs of people with visual impairment. In accordance with the information needs of people with disabilities, in 1990, new ways to facilitate voting by people with disabilities were put in place in Quebec. In Quebec, these provisions were put to test in the 1992 referendum and had to be improved in subsequent elections. The essence of these measures was to give people with visual impairment and indeed other disabilities as much information as possible on the details of legislation on electoral issues as well as the methods that were availed to create room for easier access to voting (Quebec Referendum Report, 1992).

In Quebec, more than twenty different information tools were adapted to cater for the needs of people with disabilities. These included pamphlets, posters, letters, news releases and advertising messages (Leclerc, 2012). Of special note was the fact that the manual for voters was adapted to alternative media such as Braille, audio-cassette as well as enlarged print and video cassettes. In addition, all televised messages had to be subtitled for people with visual impairment and hearing impairment. Throughout the election period, vital information on special measures for those groups was sent to all media in Quebec including twenty specialised media and to some 1,500 affected institutions and organisations (Leclerc, 2012).

In the 2003 general election held in Quebec, a pamphlet showing the various stages of the election period was produced. The last part of the pamphlet, which was the election day, was turned into a poster to be put at all polling stations. Attention was given to the visual content of messages to ensure they depicted respect for people with disabilities. Messages had to meet the needs of the client. Language used was also adjusted to meet individual needs. Any message had to be made depending on whether it was meant for those with visual impairment or those with limited mobility.

The Director General of elections in Quebec recommended the promotion of the broadest possible exercise of the right to vote, within the framework of the existing legislation or recommending and supporting legislative amendments adapted to the needs of electors (Leclerc, 2012) as the best way to ensure that various groups of people with disabilities were accommodated in the electoral process. It had been realised that this initiative was going to go a long way in addressing a number of the concerns that negatively contributed to the exclusion of people with visual impairment in the electoral process. Zimbabwe has a lot to learn from the example of Quebec. In particular, it could adopt the use of alternative information media such as audio cassettes, enlarged print and Braille. Information could also be availed through television messages. Supportive legislative provisions could also be used. The use of different information tools such as pamphlets, posters letters and news releases cannot be overemphasised. Above all, information needed to be tailor-made to suit people with visual impairments’ various needs.

**Provision of information to people with visual impairment**

The provision of information on the electoral process is a critical element in efforts to facilitate access and inclusion of people with visual impairment in mainstream governance activities. Many people with visual impairment encounter technical difficulties in scanning various government and other websites because the design and programming was not sensitive to their needs, hence, their continued exclusion from the electoral playing field (NASCOH, 2010). It is vital to sensitise politicians, governments, non-governmental organisations and other critical stakeholders to put in place intervention...
strategies that aimed at facilitating and promoting the involvement of people with visual impairment in the electoral systems and processes. This approach will go a long way in dealing with exclusionary practices. One of the possible ways to achieve inclusion is to avail the requisite resources and support for those with visual impairment to exercise their right to vote (NASCOH, 2010).

In order to ensure effective implementation of this provision, all the relevant information should be disseminated to people with disabilities through various media. These could include through community gatherings, letters, books, print and electronic media, pamphlets, news releases and advertising messages. Some sections of the disability community strongly advocated for the quota system in all the key sections of governance such as in parliament, local authority councillors, in senate and other decision making organs of both the state and private institutions. The implication of the quota system is that it enables the free flow of information.

In Uganda, section 37 of the parliamentary selections statute of 1996, provides for five seats in parliament for representatives of people with disabilities. Uganda uses the Movement Act of 1998, which provides for councillors with disabilities [International Labour Organisation (ILO), 2001]. Thus, in Uganda, the position is that at national level, there are five Members of Parliament who fall under special interest groups. In its 2002 elections, Uganda had more than two hundred (200) people with disabilities among the electoral officials (ILO, 2001). The idea was that these provisions would go a long way in facilitating the provision and spreading of information on voting issues in the various areas where people with visual impairment lived. Zimbabwe has not yet got to a stage where such a number of people with disabilities actively participated in governance and electoral issues of their communities. Negative attitudes could be a strong factor in contributing to this sad state of affairs. Unless positive steps to address the state of the electoral process and legislative provisions are taken, individuals with visual impairment risk the ire of continued discrimination in the electoral process. People with visual impairment still remain the least likely to be served adequately in spite of the rhetoric and promises of successive governments (The Disability World, 2012).

Methodology

The Advocacy and Participatory worldview research philosophy

The Advocacy and Participatory worldview research philosophy was used for purposes of carrying out this study. It is essentially a belief about the way in which data should be gathered, analysed and used (Creswell, 2006). This research philosophy advocates for research inquiry that has a strong bearing on politics and a political agenda. This research contained an action agenda for reform that was targeted at changing the lives of the voters with visual impairment, the institutions in which individuals work or live and the researcher’s life (Creswell, 2009).

This research is about the information needs of a marginalised group of people, namely, voters with visual impairment. As such, the role of information in the lives of voters with visual impairment cannot be separated from politics and a political agenda. People with visual impairment have a history of marginalisation for a long time mainly because those in authority believe that it is unnecessary to waste resources on a minority (Chakuchichi and Kaputa, 2002).
The qualitative research approach

This study was premised on the qualitative approach because of the nature of the inquiry which was premised on finding out the information needs of people with visual impairment. Merriam (1998) defines qualitative research as an approach to research which recognised that meaning emerges through interaction and is not standardised from person to person as in quantitative research. Understanding information needs can best be understood through reporting views of informants and participants as they see them.

Tichapondwa (2013) summarised some of the strengths of qualitative research that the researcher tapped on. By applying qualitative research, the researcher conducted natural inquiry though utilisation of non-interfering data generation strategies to unveil the natural flow of events. The qualitative data collection methods were adapted to suit a wide range of subjects such as visual representation for those with low literacy. The study was flexible in that the researcher could adjust the research framework and direction in the event of new information emerging. Data generation in particular was more relaxed and informal. This motivated participants to participate in the research.

Various social issues pertaining to disability and electoral processes could be studied in detail and with the depth and thrust that the researcher needed. Most important, the research was not limited to a pre-determined set of questions. In the case of interviews, for example, some questions had a response that requires a follow-up question or clarification. Large volumes of data had to be collected. This made data interpretation and analysis time consuming (Creswell, 2009).

The interpretive research design

A design is a systematic subjective approach used to describe life experiences with the intention of giving them meaning (Best and Khan, 1993). The interpretive research design was applied. The major characteristics of this design include: it is the basic element of analysis is words; holistic; believes in open communication; complex and broad; subjective; the basis of knowing meaning and discovery; has shared interpretation; focuses on individual interpretation; and is unique (Tichapondwa, 2013).

This design was the most appropriate for studying electoral information needs of people with visual impairments disabilities the type of research for a number of reasons. The major goal was to gain insight, expose the depth, richness and complexity inherent in the phenomenon. The interpretive design focuses on these by analytically disclosing those ‘meaning making practices’ while showing how those practices configured to generate observable outcomes. The interpretive research design seeks to allow experiences to emerge from encounters in the field. Interpretive research is distinctive in its approach to research design, concept formation, data analysis and standards of assessment (Flick, 2007).

The interpretive design assumes that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they survived. These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings into a few categories or ideas (Flick, 2007). This research design fits into this scheme as it sought to explore and expose the experiences of visually impaired people on their information needs concerning the electoral process in Zimbabwe. Participants provided
varied experiences in relation to the electoral and voting process in Zimbabwe. According to Flick (2007), the goal of research is to rely on participants' views of the situation being studied.

**Target population**

The target population of this study comprised of people with visual impairment who qualified to vote in elections in Zimbabwe. These were over the age of eighteen. Also involved were the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission and advocacy groups of and for people with visual impairment.

**Sample and sampling procedure**

For purposes of this study, opportunity sampling was mainly used. This is a type of non-probability sampling where participants were selected based on naturally occurring groups. It uses people who might be easily available and willing to take part based on convenience. Opportunity sampling is normally used to study hard to access groups of people. The visually impaired constituency is not a homogenous group and one may not easily find them concentrated at a particular place, hence the researcher opted for opportunity sampling. This sampling technique facilitated easier choice of participants and therefore a quick way to sample those who were interested. Opportunity cost was also less time consuming, handy and cheaper compared to other sampling methods and procedures. However, opportunity sampling might not provide a representative sample of the target population as chosen participants may have different qualities to the other people in general (McLeod, 2014). However, this could not be avoided in this study given the low number of people with visual impairment.

A sample of 50 adults with visual impairment comprising of 31 males and 19 females was selected and interviewed from five provinces in Zimbabwe. These are Bulawayo (Bulawayo urban); Masvingo (Masvingo rural); Mashonaland East (Seke and Marondera districts); Mashonaland West (Kadoma and Chinhoyi districts) and Harare (Harare urban). Individuals who happened to be available at the time were selected. This is in line with Denzin and Lincoln (2005).

In addition, an official from the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission was interviewed as well as part of the sample. Three officials who were representatives of advocacy groups of and for people with visual impairment were also interviewed and therefore formed part of the sample.

**Data Gathering Methods and Procedures**

**Primary data**

Primary data were gathered primarily using semi-structured interviews.

**Semi-structured interviews**

The researcher applied interviews because the exploratory characteristic of the topic and the enhanced interactive nature of interviews. Interviews have certain several strengths that a researcher can tap on (Creswell, 2007; Borg and Gall, 1996). The researcher was assured that no data is omitted and the semi-structured interviews were flexible, adaptable and provided interaction that enabled the researcher to probe and clarify answers with participants, following up on leads, elaborating on original response and obtaining more information with greater detail and clarity. The researcher easily clarified the data being given in cases suspicion that the participant is giving false information through non-verbal cues for example facial expressions and voice tone.
The interview was successfully used to obtain data from literate and illiterate participants. A conducive environment was created; participants provided useful supplementary information by way of spontaneous reactions, something which could not be done under other conditions. The data generated was of immense use to the researcher. Face to face interaction facilitated verbatim recording of responses, which provides useful feedback that can be further probed and clarified. The researcher also cross-checked the data if it was truly authentic. Moreover, the interviews enabled the use of a recording device (a tape recorder). This helped the interviewer to concentrate on listening carefully and probing the interviewee thereby effectively managing the problems caused by interviewing and writing down responses.

In order to counter the challenge of interviewing and recording manually, negatively affecting the flow of the interactions, the researcher complemented this process by using recorders. Recording helped later in identifying specific areas or details that could have been missed during the interview process. The researcher also kept focus of the essence of the interview to avoid getting carried away unnecessarily. Concerning the challenge posed by the low degree of anonymity emanating from interviews that could have resulted in participants and informants withholding data, the researcher assured the participants and informants that the data generated were only for purposes of the study and that their identities could not be known because pseudonyms were used.

Secondary data and information

Relevant publications and data on disability and electoral processes seasoned academics and reputable organisations such as NASCOH were analysed in relation to the objectives of the study prior and during the analysis of first hand data. Secondary sources of data are already existing therefore are easier and cheaper to access. However, the likely problem is that secondary data may not have been collected for the specific purpose that the researcher is interested in. Moreover, the researcher may not always be able to detect or control biases in secondary data. To manage these weaknesses, the researcher integrated secondary information and primary in same study so that the researcher to cross-checked one against the other.

Presentation of Findings of the Study

Accessing voter information and awareness

Regarding how voters with visual impairment accessed information pertaining to voter education, many of the participants indicated that they had accessed most of this information through the radio as well as campaign rallies by different political parties where they only heard the information as opposed to seeing it. None of the participants alluded to any voter education gatherings organised by the electoral authorities. Many of them were not happy with this development. A few of those who had residual vision also alluded to the fact that they got voter education information through their television sets at home. Participants however pointed out that this information was meant for the sighted people and not properly packaged for use by the visually impaired and this presented a number of challenges.

Participants were further asked to indicate the specific nature of this information which they said covered the following, procedure of voting, location of polling stations, the requirements for one to be able to vote and how to indicate the preferred choice on the ballot paper. The issue of information on secrecy in the voting process was also emphasised. It was indicated that
candidates representing various political parties provided this information. Campaign teams of contesting parties also gave information. Radio and television also played a significant role in reaching out to visually impaired voters.

One participant, Johnson, who is a general hand at an institution of the visually impaired, had this to say:

“We have obtained most of the information through gatherings of political parties where information was verbally disseminated and demonstrated. We however lacked some of the detailed demonstrated information since we could not see. Gatherings by some parties were normally tense and attendance was compulsory.”

David, another male general employee indicated that:

“Some of the visually impaired people are lured to attend the charged gatherings or meetings not because of the information they will get only, but also the material things that they got at the end, which could be in the form of caps, t-shirts, torches, groceries and other food items.”

Lucy, a partially sighted school leaver and beggar indicated that:

“Despite of the tense atmosphere of these meetings, we got valuable information on the voting procedures including how to place your X, where to put it, how to identify your preferred candidate and putting your ballot in the ballot box provided.”

It was clear, therefore, from the participants that most of the voting information came from representatives of political parties. A major concern however was that this information was not provided in the formats that were disability friendly and that one had to be a very good listener when at the meetings.

Another interesting dimension to this issue was that visually impaired people did not attend meetings out of the good will to learn but were motivated by what political parties’ items offered to them in the form of material things which included food and other non food items. Visually impaired people also attended meetings against their will. This meant that they were coerced to attend or attended under duress. Party activists were in the habit of threatening them with loss of certain privileges and rights if they did not attend the meetings. Such threats ranged from losing an acquired residential or business stand which would then be allocated to someone else if they did not tore the line. In some cases, these stands might not have been acquired procedurally and the threats could be real in such cases. Food donations could also be withheld and with the current difficult economic conditions, this could be a serious cause for concern if one had to lose out on free food handouts when he or she had a big family that he or she could be struggling to fend for. This was some form of bribery of the electorate at its worst and was very unfair to the visually impaired constituency.

Tecla, a street vendor had this to say:

“My family was openly told by some political activists of a particular party that we risked losing our small plot if we continued supporting another party. To worsen matters we did not have any title deeds to that residential property”

**Participation in Voter Education Information Programmes**

On the issue of participation in voter education information programmes organised by the electoral authorities, more than half of the participants indicated that they had taken part in voter education information programmes. Some of the participants indicated that they had not taken part in the voter education information programmes. Those who had taken part in voter education were further asked to indicate their roles in the voter education exercise. More than half of the participants who had taken part in voter education programmes indicated that they
took part as ordinary participants. A few had taken part as observers. A few others took part as facilitators. Only one had taken part as a peer educator.

For those who had not taken part in the voter education information programmes, almost half of the participants indicated that they had not been able to take part in voter education information programmes because of the general exclusion and discrimination of people with visual impairment by the authorities. A good number of the participants indicated that as individuals they lacked the interest to take part in voter education information programmes due to various reasons. These ranged from information being availed in formats that were not disability friendly, lack of privacy in the voting process which was mainly compromised by being assisted to vote by third parties and lack of specialised skills by facilitators to ensure that those with visual impairment were attended to in a way that their individual needs were effectively met. A few felt that electoral authorities did not appreciate the critical role of information on voter education on the part of voters with visual impairment. Some indicated that they were unable to attend voter information education programmes due to work commitments. Others said they had never been invited to voter education programmes and this left them excluded.

Musoni, a lecturer at an institution of higher learning had this to say:

“There is a general belief that the visually impaired have nothing to do with the political process or voting. This has left us out and excluded from the mainstream of governance issues.”

Patience, a school teacher narrated how she was treated by electoral authorities:

“I was trained in a voter information education programme for five days. When it was time for deployment, they realised that I was blind. They then indicated to me that I could not be deployed and that it was a mistake to have been invited for training in the first place. On my part I felt that there was nothing that could have prevented me from executing my duties effectively. In addition I had my assistant who could have helped when the need arose. I was not amused at all.”

Another school leaver, Tonderai, pointed out that:

“Electoral authorities should consult those trained in the area of visual impairment. At present, electoral officers are not aware of the information needs of individuals who are visually impaired.”

Ruth, a clerk employed by the government indicated that:

“I could not take part in voter education when I had been selected because my employer gave a directive that only those who were on leave could take part in the exercise. I was not on leave then but I really wanted to take part since it was going to be my first time to do this.”

A female street vendor, Nyarai, had this to say,

“I am not sure why I am always left out from voter education information programmes, but I suspect that it has to do with the general exclusion of people with visual impairment from governance matters.”

The implication was that not all people with visual impairment had taken part in voter education for different reasons. Visually impaired people felt shortchanged in this area. They therefore lacked appropriate education about what they were supposed to do if they had made a decision to vote. The electoral authorities were not doing enough to ensure that this section of society accessed the electoral process just like any other citizen. Provision of relevant electoral and voting information was the first step to achieving this goal.
Availability of information (N= 50)

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<th>Item</th>
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<tr>
<td>Non availability of information in appropriate format.</td>
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The issue of limited or lack of voting information was a thorny subject. All the participants indicated that information contributed immensely to their inclusion in the electoral process. It came out clearly that most if not all the information on voter education was presented in ordinary print. This effectively shut out or excluded individuals with visual impairment. Most of them could not read information in print. They indicated that if this information was availed in either Braille or enlarged print depending on individual needs, this would go a long way in empowering them. They indicated that electoral authorities should avail pamphlets, banners, print media articles and others in Braille and enlarged print. They further indicated that radio and television programmes with content specially prepared and programmed for those with visual impairment needed to be easily accessible to them. Visually impaired voters strongly felt that the system grossly shortchanged them in this respect.

Visually impaired voters who were lawyers and educators in institutions of higher learning were very clear on what should be done.

Tsitsi, a school teacher had this to say:
“Information is vital because of the role it plays in enabling us to make informed decisions on whom to vote for.”

Themba, a lecturer at a local university stated that:
“Lack of voter information has resulted in us being represented by people with questionable credentials and characters. The little information that is available is not even user friendly.”

Musoni, who is a lecturer stated that:
“It appeared there was a general belief that the visually impaired were exempted from the political process or voting leaving us out and excluded.”

Patience, a teacher had this to say:
“We are left out and not invited for meetings. We are regarded as objects of pity on the grounds that we will be assisted to vote anyway. Because of this no real inclusion will be realised for a long time to come.”

Janet, a high school teacher added that:
“I could not vote last year because I did not have information on what was really involved. Lack of information excludes people with visual impairment. Information was not readily available because authorities preferred use of television, clear print or newspapers all of which were not accessible to many visually impaired voters. As for the recent (July 2013) elections there was very limited information for us.”

Information on voting was not availed in the correct format for visually impaired voters. This meant that people with visual impairment were unable to take part in exercising their right to vote which was very unfortunate. Availing important voter education information in the wrong format meant voters with visual impairment were left out of the electoral process.

Discussion of Findings

Participation in the electoral process and availability of information

The study established that there was a glaring lack of information as well as limited information on the electoral and voting processes in Zimbabwe. This was the
popular view coming from the visually impaired people themselves, the electoral authority and organizations of people with disabilities who all concurred on the issue of inadequate information and inappropriate formats through which information is availed to people with visual impairment. This could be explained by the fact that visually impaired people and their advocacy groups, being people on the ground and mostly affected by any loopholes were indeed the best to give a realistic picture of how things stood. They were the ones who had been shortchanged and affected most. This was supported by the experiences they highlighted.

Some of them had not taken a keen interest in voting because they lacked the information that enabled them to make informed decisions. Some stayed away because they felt that the system deliberately excluded them from taking an active role in electoral issues. This was further supported by the fact that almost half of the participants who took part in interviews had not taken part in any form of voter information education programme. Another concern that compounded issues could have been that critical voter information was availed in the form of ordinary print, which to all intents and purposes could not be accessed by visually impaired voters, most of whom had either very low vision or were blind. This shortcoming appears to have given rise to the non availability of voter information for people with visual impairment to a very large extent.

This finding could also be accounted for by the fact that electoral authorities may not have had specific funding set aside for producing voter information in other disability friendly formats such as Braille, enlarged print or other relevant formats. Their budgets could have been strained by other obligations in which case sideling issues to do with visually impaired voters could always provide a way out on grounds that they were a minority. Adjustments for people with visual impairment were normally expensive since they involved importing a lot of the resources required such as Braille paper or specialised machinery and assistive devices. In addition very few people are trained in Braille writing and reading in the country. Many of the resources needed by people with visual impairment were not locally available in the country, but had to be imported from other countries. One supplier quoted the following prices at the time the research was carried out: one Braille embosser was going for $7 000, a Perkins Braille machine – cost $1,500 and one ream of Braille paper cost close to $700. These prices were prohibitive and one could not rule out the fact that these costs were being used as a scapegoat for not providing the resources required by visually impaired voters.

Lack of expertise on what exactly needed to be done could also be a factor in explaining why voter information had been lacking. Electoral authorities appeared not to have qualified people in the area of visual impairment to advise them on what had to be done and how it had to be done and when it had to be done. It would appear relevant consultancy had not been sought from people who were knowledgeable in the area.

This finding was at variance with Lerclec (2012) who indicated that positive strides in the provision of information had been registered in Canada for example. The role of voter information for the benefit of people with visual impairment was well captured in Quebec. In one Referendum Report it was indicated that the manual for voters was adapted to alternative media such as Braille, audio-cassette as well as enlarged print and video cassettes. The essence of these measures was to give people with visual impairment and other disabilities as much information as possible on the details of legislation on electoral issues as well as the methods that were availed to create room for easier access to voting (Quebec Referendum Report, 1992). The finding did not also agree with what was happening in the United King-
dom where the Electoral Commission was obliged to provide information to visually impaired voters through its website called “about my vote” and other appropriate media (United Kingdom Electoral Commission, 2013). The electoral Commission was also compelled by law to provide campaign material and information in alternative and relevant formats for the benefit of voters with visual impairment without undue delay or extra costs (National Council on Disability, 2013).

This finding, however, had something in common with what was highlighted by the National Association of Societies for the Care Of the Handicapped (2010), which demonstrated the fact that ill-informed community beliefs that people with disabilities were not supposed to vote were common hence the withholding of information was not surprising. The finding also concurred with a request by visually impaired voters in Malawi in which the Electoral Commission petitioned Electoral Authorities to involve people with visual impairment in civic and voter education (Nyasa Times June 28, 2013).

Conclusions

A number of grey areas were revealed by this study. One of these was that there was need to redouble efforts in the provision of voter information to people with visual impairment. This would eventually lead to more people with visual impairment participating in the electoral and voting processes. Indications were that at the time the study was carried out, many people with visual impairment were excluded from mainstream governance issues by virtue of not accessing the mode through which information was relayed to them. Authorities, for reasons best known to themselves preferred and continued to provide voter information in the form of ordinary print. Many of the people with visual impairment had either very low vision or were blind making it impossible for them to read this clear print.

In the case of those with functional residual vision enlarged print was not availed either. This revealed complete disregard for the inclusion of voters with visual impairment, presumably on the grounds that they were a minority and could always be attended to when resources were next available. Pamphlets, books and newspapers need to be availed in either Braille or enlarged print for the benefit of visually impaired voters. Radio and television programmes also need to be specially packaged to be understood by the visually impaired. This area needs to be attended to by electoral authorities as a matter of urgency. Voter information in the media also needs to be specially tailor made so that it becomes disability friendly to those for whom the message is intended, namely the visually impaired voters. Visually impaired people lack critical voter education information since it is presented in the form of ordinary print which is not accessible to them by virtue of lack of sight or low vision.

Recommendations

The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission

- The Electoral Authority needs to put in place clear strategies to ensure that they reach out to voters with visual impairment with voter information that is packaged in formats that are accessible to the visually impaired such as in Braille, enlarged print and appropriate information technology such as compact discs which they could play.
- There is also need for a comprehensive needs analysis by the Zimbabwe Elec-
toral Commission to determine and establish all the major and peripheral needs of voters with visual impairment.

People with Visual Impairment

- People with visual impairment should redouble their efforts in lobbying and advocating for disability friendly voting formats and information as well as creating awareness among the general public about their electoral needs.
- People with visual impairment should also engage cabinet ministers, civic society, arms of government and other stakeholders with a view to sensitising them on their electoral and voting needs.

References