

## A SEAT AT THE TABLE

**1** **MOSHARRAF HOSSAIN.** *Mr. Hossain has served as a Program Manager with Action on Disability and Development (ADD) in Bangladesh since 1994.*

During the recent national elections in Bangladesh, the organization I work with, Action on Disability and Development (ADD), deployed 300 observers with disabilities to work in eight constituencies throughout the country. The observers with disabilities showed tremendous enthusiasm in election observations. Their presence was identified as they wore their smart and distinct outfits—cream colored T-shirts, beige caps, brown and blue shoulder bag—all prominently displayed with the words: “Disabled Peoples Observation of National Election, 2001.” This effort was funded by IFES, under a grant from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Assistance (SIDA).



In addition to overseeing the deployment of the observers with disabilities, I had the opportunity to join the Election Monitoring Working Group (EMWG), an alliance of 29 NGOs facilitated by The Asia Foundation. Having “a seat at their table” was the key to the inclusion of disability issues in the mainstream election process.

In this biggest alliance of domestic election monitoring NGOs, disability was recognized as an issue, and ADD was treated as an equal member. As the ADD Program Manager, I served on the EMWG Media subgroup, the Election Commission Subgroup, and the General Coordination subgroup. Along with other leaders of the alliance, I was able to take part in critical issues of election observation and was able to raise disability issues to the Election Commission, the media, and to other national and international forums. I also presided over meetings and press conferences of the EMWG alliance, and was invited to deliver the press statement on the EMWG findings on the 2001 election to the media. This final event was highly publicized by national print and television media.

By raising the issue of people with disabilities to the NGO alliance, the issue of disability became a concern to the alliance as a whole. For example, the standard election observation form used by all of the 149,000 domestic election observers of the NGO alliance included two questions

pertaining to the electoral participation of people with disabilities. The same checklist was used by the Fair Election Monitoring Association, which deployed 80,000 domestic observers throughout the country.

Disability issues also received attention in the international arena. The National Democratic Institute (NDI), for example, included disability issues in the training manual it developed for use by party agents. They also invited me to participate and raise disability issues in a pre-election discussion meeting with a delegation from the Carter Center.

The ADD/IFES initiative in Bangladesh also looked beyond election observation. ADD was able to use its new status to promote greater participation of citizens with disabilities in the election. ADD published 50,000 posters to encourage people with disabilities to exercise their rights, and more importantly, the

Bangladesh Election Commission distributed the posters to 30,000 polling centers all over the country. ADD also developed two TV spots with the Ministry of Social Welfare to raise awareness on the voting rights of citizens with disabilities. These public service announcements were telecast across four channels, reaching an estimated 39 percent of Bangladeshis age 15 and above.

Involvement in the project also gave ADD an opportunity to meet with the Election Commission. The Chief Election Commissioner reassured the Commission that special access would be provided to people with disabilities, i.e. placing them at the front of queues and following the Peoples Representative Ordinance of special access. As a result, both voters and observers with disabilities reported that they received tremendous support from the polling officers and law enforcement agencies in casting the vote and observing the election.

The participation of people with disabilities in the election created waves in the attitude of the society to break barriers. The disability community is now planning to raise its demands with the newly formed Parliament to establish their rights as equal citizens. This social and political action of the people hopefully will bring about the inclusion of disability in the mainstream, and people with disabilities will be liberated from injustice and prejudice at last.

**2** HALIT FERIZI. *Mr. Ferizi is President of HANDIKOS and a member of the Central Election Commission (CEC) of Kosovo.*



In 1983, I created the Association of Paraplegics and Handicapped Children of Kosovo (HANDIKOS), nearly a decade after I became a paraplegic as a result of a traffic accident. I was elected President of the Coordination Board of Disabled People in Kosovo in 1985, and have served on the Central Election Commission (CEC)

of Kosovo for two consecutive terms. I oversaw the 2000 Municipal Elections and the 2001 General Elections in Kosovo in my capacity as a representative of the Kosovar NGO sector and HANDIKOS.

Being a disabled person with years of experience in the civil society movement, I have found work at the CEC both challenging and rewarding. It is amazing how many prejudices and misconceptions citizens with special needs still confront when it comes to participating in the election process. However, I can say with some measure of satisfaction, that discussions with my colleagues at the CEC have dispelled some stereotypical beliefs and have led to positive improvements. One is a better understanding of the role NGOs can play in making the electoral process more open, inclusive, and trustworthy. Another is acknowledgement that the disability sector is not homogenous, but is composed of people with different needs, represented by different interest groups.

Such improvements may sound insignificant to some in the West, but for us in Kosovo, it marks enormous progress towards understanding the real picture of the life of people with disabilities, and towards recognizing the potential role such groups can play in society. My colleagues, for example, have changed their negative attitudes towards people with disabilities and other citizens with special needs and now look at them with more understanding. Also—and this is a

major breakthrough in Kosovo—NGOs representing people with disabilities will now be a part of the entire election process, from voter registration, voter education, and outreach, to assisting people with special needs and observing and monitoring elections on behalf of the Election Commissions.

The CEC of Kosovo has also:

- Established 16 mobile teams that will help homebound voters
- Installed at least one accessible polling station per municipality
- Created special assistance services for people with disabilities on Election Day
- Produced voter and civic education materials specifically targeted towards groups with special needs

Furthermore, NGOs are intrinsically involved in this process, a huge difference compared to elections in previous years when we had just begun to rebuild our newly democratic society. The new and modern rehabilitation center the CEC is building in Pristina, with support from the OSCE Election Department and the European Union (EU), is testimony to this forward-looking Kosovo. We have worked in partnership with the OSCE and the EU to develop rules and procedures that will allow full participation of people with disabilities in the elections. These procedures are in compliance with international standards on elections. We are working hard to educate voters with special needs on the technical aspects of elections and are making them aware of their importance to us as citizens. Nevertheless, some of the biggest



challenges we face come from people with disabilities themselves. It is hard for some to accept this new reality and start hoping again. However, attitudes and situations are changing slowly but steadily with the realization that change begins with us.