

14th -17th September 2002, Sigtuna, Sweden

Report from Mary O'Hagan

The aim of the workshop was to draw up a Bill of Electoral Rights and standards for people with disabilities. It was convened by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) and by the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), both international NGOs. The workshop was funded by Swedish International Development Assistance (SIDA), a government agency.

The participants included various international disability representatives, electoral officials and parliamentarians from around the world. There were representatives from the following IDA member organisations: World Blind Union, World Deaf/Blind Union, Rehabilitation International, Inclusion International and WNUSP.

Most of the first day was spent observing the Swedish elections. We identified a number of barriers to voting for people with mobility and sensory impairments. When I asked Swedish election officials at polling stations about voting for people in psychiatric institutions, none of them could answer my questions.

Participants were given a draft Bill and a draft set of Standards before the meeting. Everything in the drafts supported the rights of users and survivors to vote and otherwise participate in public affairs, except for one sentence in the draft standards "Any restriction to the right to vote on the basis of intellectual disability or psychiatric illness is prohibited, unless due process specifically restricts the right to vote". In my talk to the participants I said this was not a justifiable reason to restrict the right to vote. Its inclusion would be totally unacceptable to WNUSP and we would not sign up to any documents that allowed any restriction of our electoral rights. The participants supported this view and the reference to due process was removed.

There was wide recognition at the meeting that users and survivors are far more discriminated against than any other disability group, when it comes to electoral rights. Many jurisdictions around the world still deny electoral rights to people in institutions or subject to compulsory treatment.

The Bill of Electoral Rights and the draft Standards will be emailed to all participants soon. I will pass these onto the Board. As the Standards are still draft, WNUSP has the opportunity to suggest changes to them.

IFES and IDEA intend to draw up an action plan to promote the Bill and the Standards throughout the world. They plan to involve WNUSP in this process.

Suggested WNUSP actions:

- Post the Bill of Electoral Rights on WNUSP website and email to member organisations
- Suggest changes to the draft Standards and email these back to IFES and IDEA
- Disseminate the Bill and the finalised Standards to WNUSP members and networks

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