Good Practices for Accessible Websites

Why it matters

One of the easiest ways for election management bodies (EMBs) to connect with the public is through a website. Official EMB websites are often the first place that stakeholders visit to learn about an upcoming election. EMB websites should incorporate accessibility standards to guarantee that persons with disabilities have equal access to online content. This resource provides examples of good practices, a checklist for creating an accessible website, and a list of resources, including services that EMBs can use to test a website's accessibility and identify areas for improvement.

Good practices

Hire web developers and other vendors experienced in meeting accessibility standards

When creating or renovating websites, it is important to ensure that persons with different types of disabilities are able to use them. An accessible website should be coded and designed by a website developer who is aware of and follows international standards on accessible design – especially the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines produced by the World Wide Web Consortium.

Provide content that is accessible for persons with disabilities

The content on an EMB's website provides valuable information on how to participate in elections. It must be accessible for all users, including those with disabilities. Many users with visual disabilities use screen readers to navigate web content. All content posted to an EMB's website, as well as the architecture of the site itself, must be formatted for compatibility with screen readers.

One way to ensure compatibility is through the extensive use of alt text – descriptive text that conveys the meaning of and provides context for visual online content. Alt text for all images and graphics on a website enables people who use screen readers to access all the same information as other readers. Alt text should also be used for integrated, third-party content that browsers may not support, such as plug-ins or widgets.[1]

Video and audio content on a website should also be accessible for persons with disabilities. Include captions or sign language interpretation for video content and transcripts for audio content. IFES provides information on accessible audio and video in its learning series document on Using Video and Audio for Voter Education.[2] The Swedish Election Authority provides sample videos in sign language to share information on the country's electoral system.[3]

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[1]   Accessible Social Media in Elections in *Learning Series on Disability-Inclusive Election Technology* | IFES – The International Foundation for Electoral Systems. (October 2023). www.ifes.org.

[2]   Using Video and Audio as Accessible Voter Education Tools in *Learning Series on Disability-Inclusive Election Technology* | IFES – The International Foundation for Electoral Systems. (October 2023). www.ifes.org.

[3]   *Det svenska valsystemet på teckenspråk.* (2023, October 4). Val.se.

EMBs must provide content that is easily understood by persons with intellectual disabilities or low literacy, and by non-native speakers of a language. One solution is to offer text in easy read format. This is text with simplified content and illustrations that are digestible for ease of use. The Australian Electoral Commission provides easy read guides on different aspects of the election cycle, including how to register to vote, vote at a polling station, and vote by mail.[4]

Ensure the website is easy to navigate

Easily navigable websites improve user experiences for everyone, but especially for those who use screen readers and other website navigation tools. EMBs or their website developers and managers need to organize content clearly and logically. Using menus with headings for commonly sought resources, such as voter education, voter registration, and electoral disputes, is a great start. Identify links consistently across the website by underlining text or using a different font. Color can also be a useful way to identify links, but it should not be the only indicator, in order to increase accessibility for website visitors with visual disabilities or who are colorblind. Use text to label buttons or clickable images with the action they take – for example, label an image of an arrow that users click to access another page of text as "next page." To assist users in returning to previous pages, a breadcrumbs feature may be useful. Breadcrumbs display a progression of links to show users how they moved to the current page. They usually appear at the top of a page and may look something like this: **About Us** >> **History** >> **1950s – 1960s**.

Voters visit an EMB's website to access important information about registration, Election Day procedures, and election results. Wherever possible, share information directly on the website. If you must provide a document for download, make sure the website clearly labels the information it contains, such as by noting "Click here to download election results." Also ensure that any documents available for download are accessible for persons using screen readers or other assistive devices.

When an EMB website includes forms or other ways to collect user input, select options that enable users to enter text directly (for example, to list their city or constituency), rather than by using dropdown menus. Such menus can be difficult for people who use screen readers to navigate.

Some accessibility solutions can be as simple as adding new web pages. It may be helpful to provide a page entitled "How to Use this Website" or "Accessibility." Such a page might describe the accessible features of the site and provide instructions for features such as increasing the font size or making captions visible. The websites of the Philippines Commission on Elections[5] and the United Kingdom's Electoral Commission[6] provide these types of features.

Give users options for how to view the website

It is best practice to incorporate as many options as possible to engage with the content of a website. Visual features like high-contrast mode, or the ability to increase font size, can make websites more accessible to many visitors. Audio descriptions or text-to-speech conversion can also improve access for persons with visual disabilities. Audio descriptions enable users to listen to a version of website content without using a screen reader. Many web browsers already incorporate these features, and web developers can build them into websites as well.

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[4]   *Easy Read guides*. (n.d.). Australian Electoral Commission.
[5]   Republic of the Philippines Commission on Elections. (2018, July 3). Accessibility Features
[6]   *Accessibility* | ***The Electoral Commission***. (2021, August 25).

Make sure developers and other vendors design the site with these features in mind. Consider providing instructions on the site for accessing these features in different browsers. The website of the Fijian Elections Office offers text-to-speech automatically. To use this function, visitors hover their mouse over text to hear it read aloud. The website also offers a menu of other accessibility features, including adjustable text sizes, contrast, and background color.[7]

Ensure the back end of the website is accessible

A website's public-facing content is not the only place where increased accessibility is needed. The back end should be accessible so employees or consultants with disabilities can work on and maintain the website. The back end of a website is the part that visitors don't see, but that provides structure and information for how the site looks or behaves. The back end also stores and tracks information that the website receives from user input, such as information from forms that users fill out.

Train employees and consultants on maintaining the website's accessibility

Anyone who is responsible for updating and maintaining a website should understand its accessibility features and how to maintain them. For example, communications and public relations staff who will update content on the site should understand the purpose of alt text and how to write it and enter it in the website's back end. EMB employees who interact with the public should also know the site's accessibility features and be able to explain to users how to utilize them.

Involve persons with disabilities in the design and testing of the website

Persons with disabilities are the best experts on which accessibility features meet their needs. Involve persons with different types of disabilities in the design and testing of websites and integrated, third-party content that will become public resources. In addition, involve persons with disabilities in creating accessible content, such as easy read voter guides.

Checklist for Creating Accessible Websites

Hiring Website Vendors

- ☐ Does the vendor have experience developing accessible websites?
- ☐ Can the vendor provide suggestions for accessible features?
- ☐ Does its portfolio contain examples of accessible websites?
- ☐ Has the vendor developed websites that an external organization such as WebAIM (www.webaim.org) has certified as accessible?

Website Back End

- ☐ Is the back end accessible so web managers with disabilities can use it with ease?
- ☐ Does the site include alt text for photographs and images?

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[7] *Fijian Elections Office | My Election, My Fiji*. Fijian Elections Office.

Website Content

Navigation and Directions

☐ Does the website have a page entitled "How to Use this Website" or "Accessibility"?

☐ Are breadcrumbs available on the site?

☐ Are buttons clearly labeled with the actions or processes they initiate?

☐ Do text input forms enable users to enter text directly rather than using dropdown menus?

Text

☐ Is content organized clearly and logically?

☐ Is alt text provided for website features that may not be supported (for example, applets or plug-ins)?

☐ Does the site provide text summaries of graphics and charts for people who use screen readers?

☐ Is text offered in an easy read format?

Video and audio files

☐ Does the site provide captions for videos posted on the website?

☐ Does it provide provided for audio files, such as radio broadcasts?

Website Design

Color and font

☐ If a visitor is unable to perceive color, is it easy to tell the difference between a title, a subtitle, a hyperlink, and other types of special text?

● To help make the appearance of these items different, use larger or smaller text or bold, italic, or underlined text.

☐ Does the site use a sans serif font (which is easier to read than a serif font) most of the time?

● Examples of sans serif fonts are Arial, Tahoma, Trebuchet MS, and Verdana.

User options

☐ Does the website have a high-contrast mode?

☐ Does it have options to increase the font size, with directions on how to do so?

☐ Is there an option to listen to an audio version of the website (text-to-speech)?

Testing Websites

☐ Before the website is launched, have persons with disabilities (especially those using screen readers) test the website. Your contract with the vendor should require such testing.

☐ If funds are available, has an organization such as WebAIM evaluated and certified the website?

● WebAIM offers evaluations at no cost but requires all compliance issues to be resolved. Visit www.webaim.org/services/certification/ for information.

Resources

The World Wide Web Consortium has Web Content Accessibility Guidelines.

The Web Accessibility Initiative has a list of guidelines and accessibility standards at www.w3.org/WAI/guid-tech.html and www.w3.org/standards/webdesign/accessibility.

Lighthouse International provides web accessibility guidelines to improve accessibility for persons who are blind or have low vision: https://lighthouseguild.org/style-guide/website-accessibility-guide/.

Read and download *Good Practices for Accessible Websites* on www.IFES.org.

IFES's **Learning Series on Disability-Inclusive Election Technology** provides EMBs and civil society with guidelines and recommendations to ensure the technology they use, procure and develop is fully accessible for persons with disabilities.

Learn more at Learning Series on Disability-Inclusive Electoral Technology.
Follow @IFESDisability to stay up to date on IFES's work on inclusion of persons with disabilities.
Contact media@ifes.org for more information.

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