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## GULU COUNCILS VOTE TO MAKE SERVICES AVAILABLE TO WAR-DISABLED IN NORTHERN UGANDA

November 25, Kampala, Uganda: In a major victory for disability rights, the Gulu district and municipal councils in Northern Uganda have voted to make schools, hospitals and health centers accessible to people with disability.

If implemented, the decisions could improve the quality of life for thousands of Ugandans who suffered from the war in the north. They also mark a major success for the Gulu Disabled Persons Union (GDPU), a network of advocates which has pressed the government to integrate disability into reconstruction plans.

[Teddy Luwar](#), a leading advocate for disability rights who also sits on the Gulu municipal council, said the council clearly understands the importance of accessibility and will now decide on the allocation of funds to modify buildings.

The GDPU is supported by Survivor Corps and The Advocacy Project (AP), which opened a joint program in Uganda in the summer of 2008. John Francis Onyango, who coordinates the program for Survivor Corps, welcomed the decision by the two councils. Mendi Njonjo, director of AP's Africa program, described it as "truly exciting - a huge testament to the persistence of advocates."

Meanwhile, in another sign of the growing power of the disability lobby in Uganda, five members of parliament who have formed a disability caucus announced on November 11 that they will push to incorporate the new UN Convention on disability rights into Ugandan law. The Convention significantly expands the definition of the rights of persons with disability.

The rebellion by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in northern Uganda caused massive displacement and left a terrible legacy of mutilation and disease. One local official in Gulu told an AP mission in August that 14% of the population may suffer from a form of disability - significantly higher than other parts of the country. In most communities, however, disability is a cause of stigma and exclusion.

Responding to a request from GDPU, Survivor Corps and AP have trained a GDPU assessment team, drafted accessibility bylaws, supplied IT equipment and sent two volunteers (Peace Fellows) to help the GDPU with information. Earlier this year, the program organized a fundraiser which raised \$3,000 from 12 Ugandan corporations. GDPU activists are [profiled on the AP site](#).

[Simon Ong'om](#), the GDPU chairman, told AP this August that the international support has given

his group the profile and confidence to petition the Ugandan authorities and international agencies. At the GDPU's urging, he said, the World Food Program (WFP) has organized a separate distribution of emergency food aid for refugees with a disability and increased rations. The GDPU has also joined a key NGO disaster management committee in Gulu.

The GDPU has long complained that public buildings are largely inaccessible to people with disabilities, and decided in October 2008 to campaign for change. Using technical standards prepared by the [Uganda National Action of Physical Disability \(UNAPD\)](#), the GDPU team identified 34 buildings in need of modification, and secured a written commitment from twenty local parish committees (The Lalogi Declaration) to modify buildings. The recent decision by the two Councils gave formal approval to the policy throughout the district.

The GDPU now plans to hold the two Gulu councils to their pledge and also exert pressure from the villages, by nominating at least 30 people with disabilities for election on parish development committees. Committees are where village resources are allocated, and play a critical role in influencing community attitudes.

[Santos Okumu](#), a leading member of the GDPU management team who is himself blind, agreed that standing for election could present a huge challenge to someone who has been isolated from community life. But, he said, GDPU will help through its network of local associations and information tools. These will include local radio, which is highly popular in the villages. AP will deploy a full-time Peace Fellow to provide logistical and other support.

- For more information, contact [The Advocacy Project](#).
- Learn more about the [Campaign](#).