



Disability-Inclusive Approaches to Climate Action

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Humanity & Inclusion (HI) is an independent and impartial international aid organisation that has been working for over 40 years to ensure that people with disabilities and vulnerable groups are never left behind. The organization is present in nearly 60 countries, where it runs projects focused on the inclusive development of people with disabilities, provides humanitarian aid to populations in crisis, and helps to reduce armed violence through awareness-raising, mine clearance and explosive ordnance education. Recognized for its advocacy work, HI is one of the founding organizations of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) and the International Network on Explosive Weapons (INEW), co-recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997 and winner of the Conrad N. Hilton Award in 2011. In Canada, HI has been based in Montreal and Ottawa for 20 years.





Introduction

Climate change is a “threat multiplier” that escalates pre-existing inequalities, making people with disabilities especially vulnerable to its associated effects and disasters.[1] In climate disaster situations, people with disabilities often lack access to timely and inclusive early warning systems, and logistical and transportation constraints contribute to their inability and reluctance to evacuate such situations.[2] This is especially true for women and girls, who regularly stay back to protect dependents or need male permission to leave their homes.[3]

People with disabilities are also more vulnerable in the immediate and long-term aftermath of climate catastrophes.[4]

The United States Census Bureau found that 70% of deaf evacuees reported living in unsanitary conditions one month after the disaster, compared to only 7% of evacuees with no hearing impairment.[5] Even outside of disaster situations, the effects of climate change negatively impact people with disabilities. For example, more than 75 million people across the world live with autism and are especially susceptible to extreme heat caused by climate change due to sensory sensitivities that affect their ability to regulate temperature. Children with autism are also more likely to experience rapid mood shifts, with extreme heat elevating their stress and anxiety due to their inability to spend quality time outdoors.[6]

While global actors are increasingly recognizing the impacts of climate change on disability, the recognition has not widely translated into concrete, comprehensive, and geography-specific climate policies and initiatives that account for the unique needs of people with disabilities, and in particular, women with disabilities. With approximately 1 billion people worldwide living with disabilities,[7] including 80% living in low- and middle-income countries, it is imperative this vulnerable group be prioritized. This paper provides an overview of the current state of disability inclusion in climate change policy worldwide and within Canada, outlines NGO action in this space, and provides recommendations to improve disability inclusion in climate action.

International Obligations of States in the Context of Disability & Climate Change

States are obligated to respect, protect, and fulfill the rights of people with disabilities in their responses to the climate crisis.[8] The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), a treaty adopted in 2006, plays a crucial role in clarifying and articulating the human rights of people with disabilities.[9] Ratified by 188 parties, it sets forth an international framework of principles and obligations that should guide the development and implementation of all national climate policies impacting individuals with disabilities. [10]



In addition, the preamble to the Paris Agreement recognizes the importance of respecting, promoting, and considering human rights obligations, including those of people with disabilities, during climate change action.[11]

Despite the existing international frameworks, several challenges and gaps exist that hinder the effective protection of the rights of individuals with disabilities from the impacts of climate change. 80% of the parties to the Paris Agreement do not make any reference to people with disabilities in their Nationally Determined Contributions, showcasing a widespread neglect of this vulnerable demographic.[12] Among the 39 parties that do mention disabilities, the references are often broad and lack specificity, and only 15 parties include concrete measures for disability inclusion.[13]

This systemic exclusion from policymaking processes perpetuates the vulnerability of the disability community and neglects the unique impacts faced by this diverse group from climate change. Even when treaties and agreements acknowledge the rights of people with disabilities, challenges arise in the implementation and enforcement of these rights at the national level.

The Current Status of Disability Inclusion in Canadian Climate Policies

Canada has key obligations to ensure that the rights of people with disabilities are respected, protected, and fulfilled, stemming[14] from various legal frameworks including the UNCRPD,[15] the Paris Agreement,[16] and the Accessible Canada Act 2019.[17]

Currently, the policies and programs that globally support climate action fall under the country's Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) - a feminist approach to international assistance supports the economic, political, and social empowerment of women and girls while making gender equality a priority.[18]

The Partnering for Climate Fund,[19] established as a part of FIAP's Environment and Climate Action Area, reflects Canada's commitment to the Paris Agreement and the G7 2030 Nature Compact.[20] The fund has an allocation of \$315 million, and Canada supports climate change adaptation in Sub-Saharan Africa, Afghanistan, Peru, and other parts of the world. The fund requires the involvement of people with disabilities in conducting vulnerability assessments, which evaluates the impact of projects on vulnerable populations. However, there is no explicit requirement for the project design to include considerations for people with disabilities.

Canada also has a National Disability Inclusion Action Plan, which aims to identify, remove, and prevent barriers to accessibility by 2040.[21] However, the plan does not mention disability-specific climate change adaptation strategies. A report [22] by the Disability-Inclusive Climate Action Research Program found that Canadian climate and disability policies categorize people with disabilities as a part of "vulnerable groups" but fail to include specific language on the unique vulnerabilities of people with disabilities.[23] This has resulted in the absence of solutions that adequately address the needs of people with disabilities impacted by climate change.

Overall, there is an absence of explicit integration of disability considerations within the criteria for both funding for nature-based solutions (NbS) and climate action in Canada.

Based on the Environment and Climate Action Area policy and the Disability Inclusion Action Plan it is evident that the policies and programs addressing climate impact and disability inclusion currently operate in silos, lacking the necessary coordination and attention required to effectively address this intersectional issue.

Best Practices in the NGO Sector

NGOs across the world demonstrate an awareness of the dangers faced by those with disabilities in climate change emergencies and are working to approach the issue from multiple angles. Despite these efforts, the sector faces challenges in ensuring comprehensive inclusion and accessibility for people with disabilities. Issues such as limited access to resources, inadequate data disaggregation, and insufficient collaboration with relevant stakeholders hinder the effectiveness of current initiatives.



Best Practices in the NGO Sector

Based on an environmental scan, below is a list of best practices in this space. These practices were extracted from exemplary projects, provided in Annex A, based on the following criteria: they collectively aim to promote meaningful participation, remove barriers, empower, and make data collection and monitoring more inclusive for people with disabilities.

- Providing people with disabilities with an increased understanding of their rights and the impacts that climate change will have on their lives increases their ability to respond to impacts and their agency to access the resources they need.
- Engaging people with disabilities on climate resilient agriculture protects their livelihoods and autonomy.
- Incorporating gender-specific analysis helps to acknowledge and mitigate the unique difficulties that women with disabilities face in climate change.
- Ensuring the needs of people with disabilities are included in policy decisions creates more comprehensive and effective policies.
- Addressing income gaps and social vulnerabilities makes communities more resilient to climate change impacts.
- Promoting the participation and leadership of people with disabilities in NbS programming expands economic opportunities and community inclusion and promotes One Health.
- Removing barriers for people with disabilities encourages participation in environmental conservation efforts.

Beyond individual NGOs, coalitions have been formed to allow organizations to share knowledge, resources, and audiences to amplify one another's voices. The International Disability Alliance, which HI is a partner of, has advocated for the inclusion of people with disabilities at COP28, amplifying the voices of people with disabilities who have historically been excluded in these discussions. HI is also involved in the Canadian Humanitarian Coalition (CHC), which works to share resources and amplify one another's voices in shaping Canadian International Assistance policy.[24]



Recommendations

Canadian Government



1. **Create calls for proposals that include disability considerations and require leadership by people with disabilities** under Canada's International Climate Finance Commitment. Selected proposal require monitoring and evaluation of overall impact on people with disabilities to refine policy and program design.



2. **Include specific language on the unique vulnerabilities of people with disabilities** in Canada's climate related foreign aid policies and programs to ensure they address the specific needs of and are accessible to people with disabilities.



3. **Expand accessibility features in GAC's funding application mechanisms**, so people with disabilities can be meaningfully involved in the process.[25]



International Development NGO Sector

4. **Ensure information is accessible to people with disabilities in all situations**, through prioritizing materials that accommodate visual, auditory, and cognitive disabilities. This includes larger fonts, text to speech technology, braille, and simplified language documents.



5. **Disaggregate data by disability, gender, and geographic region** to comprehensively analyze who is absent from current initiatives and programmes and account for such data in future climate action.



6. **Strengthen global collaboration** between governments, NGOs, and climate action initiatives to develop inclusive policies and programs and provide forums for people with disabilities to voice their concerns regarding how they are impacted by climate change.



7. **Recognize the additional challenges faced by women and girls with disabilities and ensure that they are included in advocacy and project leadership** by allocating funds to capacity development of women with organizations led by women with disabilities, intersectional feminist movements, and activists in the global South



8. **Use tools created by experts on climate change and gender inclusion** to strengthen intersectional policies, such as the Guidance Note [26] by the World Bank and Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery.[27]

Annex A

EXAMPLES

Humanity & Inclusion (HI) conducts different initiatives addressing the intersection of climate change and disability, such as a 3-year risk reduction project implemented in Madagascar, the Philippines and Haiti.[28] HI also conducts research to better understand the unique challenges and opportunities for people with disabilities in the face of climate change.[29]

Light for the World is a disability-led NGO with programming in Burkina Faso, Malawi, Mozambique, and India. Their Spark Inclusion program organizes educational campaigns for people with disabilities to understand their rights and for family and community members to better understand how to support them in facing the challenges of climate change.[30],[31]

Spark Inclusion also leads disability-inclusive campaigns on climate resilient agriculture. The campaigns provide education and enable people with disabilities to be community leaders on implementing new, climate resilient practices.[32]

CBM conducts gender-specific analysis. In Bangladesh, lower rainfalls have reduced access to sources.[33] Clean water is essential for maintaining hygiene and avoiding poor health outcomes.

The **Women's Refugee Commission** works around the world to address the needs of women in situations of forced displacement, including those resulting from climate disasters. In addition, they have toolkits for disability inclusion in gender-based violence programming[34] and policy advocacy.[35]

The **World Bank**, in collaboration with the Vietnamese government, has implemented a project aimed at enhancing coastal resilience through nature-based solutions (NbS) such as mangrove planting and ecotourism. This project prioritizes women and includes measures to ensure that people with disabilities can access and benefit from these initiatives.[36]

The **Australian-Pacific NbS Challenge**, a partnership between the Australian government and WWF-Australia, supports NbS programs with disability inclusion elements. Conservation organizations involved in the challenge recognize the need to improve accessibility and promote economic opportunities for people with disabilities, showcasing a model for inclusive environmental action.[37]

Ni Vanuatu Women Leading Solutions to Climate Change empowers 1,000 women, including those with disabilities, in Vanuatu's Tafea Province to implement agroecology solutions, safeguarding agro-biodiversity against cyclones and climate disasters.[38]

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