



Rights-Based Climate Action: Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities

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Summary

- ▶ The impact of climate change as well as related natural disasters and resource conflicts is increasingly felt around the globe.
- ▶ Persons with disabilities are particularly affected by and vulnerable to climate change. Yet, they are largely marginalised in climate debates and action.
- ▶ Governments, international organisations and donors must urgently ensure the inclusion of persons with disabilities at all levels.
- ▶ The rights-based approach must apply to policies, strategies and activities related to mitigation and adaptation, disaster preparedness and response.

A) Climate Change in a Nutshell

Climate change is a global reality with many different faces. It changes weather patterns and causes extreme weather conditions like heat waves or droughts. It can also aggravate natural disasters such as floods and storms. These outcomes are increasing in scope and frequency, with one disaster expected to hit the globe per week.¹

Furthermore, climate change has diverse effects. Poverty and hunger arise if floods reduce agricultural livelihood options. Diseases spread, once droughts reduce access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH). Armed conflicts arise over dwindling resources. Where natural disasters render whole regions uninhabitable, climate change also drives displacement.²

1 Harvey, F. (2019): One Climate Crisis Disaster Happening Every Week, UN Warns,

www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/jul/07/one-climate-crisis-disaster-happening-every-week-un-warns.

2 UNHCR (2019): Climate Change and Displacement, www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2019/10/5da5e18c4/climate-change-and-displacement.html.

There are three main strategies for climate action. Mitigation looks at reducing climate change, including by cutting emissions. Adaptation focusses on its impact. Disaster preparedness and response address the impact of natural disasters, which are exacerbated by climate change.

B) Persons with Disabilities and Climate Change

Economically, institutionally and socially marginalised people are less resilient in the face of the adverse effects of climate change. This particularly applies to an estimated 1 billion persons with disabilities worldwide. They often have the least capacity to adapt to climate change, while being virtually ignored in preparation and response measures.³

Impact on Persons with Disabilities

Due to a lack of disability-disaggregated data, there is limited quantitative information on the impact of climate change on women and men, girls and boys with disabilities. This notwithstanding, several factors account for specific vulnerabilities:

- ▶ **Health:** Some persons with disabilities experience larger health impacts from extreme weather. For instance, some people with high-level spinal cord injuries have a lower ability to sweat, which makes them more susceptible to heat waves.⁴
- ▶ **Livelihood:** Adaptation to climate change and coping with its impact requires economic resources, for instance through a regular income. However, only 36% of persons with disabilities are employed, compared to 60% of persons without disabilities.⁵
- ▶ **Disaster Risks:** Women and men, girls and boys with disabilities have a higher mortality rate during natural disasters. This is not a preordained factor of disability, but the avoidable consequence of non-inclusive preparedness and response plans.⁶
- ▶ **Displacement:** If climate adaptation within the community fails, internal or cross-border migration is the only viable alternative. Persons with disabilities and their families, however, might not be able to relocate easily or quickly.⁷
- ▶ **Information:** Public knowledge and data are regularly not accessible to persons with disabilities. This also applies to information on the impact of climate change and response strategies, impeding informed decision-making.

3 UNHCR (2020): Rights of Persons with Disabilities in the Context of Climate Change. A/HRC/44/30. §§4-5. <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/44/30>.

4 Ghenis, A. (2018): Heat Waves and Extreme Heat. World Institute on Disability. <https://wid.org/2018/09/26/heat-waves-and-extreme-heat/>.

5 UN DESA (2018): Disability and Development Report. p. 152. social.un.org/publications/UN-Flagship-Report-Disability-Final.pdf.

6 Ghenis, A. (2018): Natural Disasters. World Institute on Disability. <https://wid.org/2018/09/26/natural-disasters/>.

7 Ghenis, A. (2015): Climate Change, Migration, and People with Disabilities. worldinstituteondisabilityblog.files.wordpress.com/2018/09/migration-blogs-take-2.pdf.

- **Reverse Effect:** Climate change can also cause impairments, for instance as a result of malnutrition in children. Where WASH facilities are limited, Trachoma, the main global cause of preventable blindness, spreads easier.⁸

References in the Policy Framework

The 1992 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change does not mention persons with disabilities. Subsequent agreements of the Conference of State Parties do make scattered references to them, albeit without concrete action.⁹ Human Rights Watch notes:



While women, indigenous peoples, and youth have successfully become part of discussions around climate action, persons with disabilities have largely been absent.¹⁰



States already have legal obligations to implement disability-inclusive climate action. The 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) mandates the protection of persons with disabilities in situations of risk and requires their participation in policy development.¹¹ Inclusion of persons with disabilities is a cross-cutting theme for all Sustainable Development Goals, including Goal 13 on Climate Action.¹² The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction commits all stakeholders to disability inclusion in their preparedness and response activities.¹³

Considering these normative requirements, the UN Human Rights Council called for “a comprehensive, integrated, gender-responsive and disability-inclusive approach to climate change”.¹⁴ In 2020, it will receive the first UN study on the rights of persons with disabilities in this context.¹⁵

C) Our Work

Light for the World specialises in disability inclusion, not in climate change or environmental protection. Hence, our focus is to ease the burden for people with disabilities hit by disasters and to mainstream inclusion into activities by other stakeholders. Our work includes:

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- 8 WHO (2019): Adapting to Climate Sensitive Health Impacts. www.who.int/globalchange/publications/adapting-to-climate-sensitive-health-impacts-content/en/.
 - 9 CCD, Inclusiva & CIEL (2019): The Rights of Persons with Disabilities in the Context of the UNFCCC, pp. 21-25. www.ciel.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Disability-Rights-in-Climate-Action_Dec-2019.pdf.
 - 10 Schulte, C. & Gazendam, I. (2019): People with Disabilities Should Be Included in Climate Action. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/15/un-climate-resolution-emphasizes-protection-disability-rights>.
 - 11 See particularly Art 4(3), Art 11, Art 32 in UN (2006): Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convention_accessible_pdf.pdf.
 - 12 EDF (2018): How the SDGs Support the CRPD. www.edf-fep.org/how-do-sdgs-support-convention-rights-persons-disabilities.
 - 13 NAD, NUDIPI & FEDOMA (2017): Disability Inclusion and Disaster Risk: Policy Brief. resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/13261/pdf/2017_brosjyre_internasional-nad_net.pdf.
 - 14 UNHRC (2019): Human Rights and Climate Change. <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/41/L.24>.
 - 15 UNHCR (2020): op. cit.

- ▶ **Environmental Policy:** We developed a comprehensive internal policy and annual implementation plans, which set out guiding principles and targets for our internal administration and our programme work.¹⁶
- ▶ **Empowerment:** We provide support to the regional organisation of persons with disabilities in Sofala Province, Mozambique to advocate for disability-inclusive disaster response in the aftermath of Cyclone Idai and ongoing flooding.¹⁷
- ▶ **Direct Support:** We provide food, water and medicine to beneficiaries in need after natural disasters. For instance, we provided accessible direct support in Burkina Faso and Ethiopia after draughts and in Mozambique after the cyclone.
- ▶ **Resilience:** Through a partner in India, we support integrated natural farming in rural communities. While protecting the environment and biodiversity, this generates stable family incomes to strengthen resilience.
- ▶ **Awareness-Raising:** In Bolivia, we support partners to include training on climate change and environmental protection into their community-based programmes.
- ▶ **Disability Mainstreaming:** We engage with relevant UN entities to ensure disability inclusion in their programmes, for example with UNHCR in South Sudan or with UNICEF in Mozambique.

D) Recommended Action

Mitigating and adapting to climate change is instrumental in sustainable development. The economic recovery after the global COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, must be green and sustainable. Climate change is the defining topic of our times and addressing it will only become ever more pressing.

To leave no one behind, governments, international organisations, the humanitarian and the development sector as well as civil-society movements urgently need to develop disability-inclusive responses. Among other actions, this entails:¹⁸

- ▶ Applying a rights-based, disability-inclusive and intersectional approach in all climate action and climate financing.
- ▶ Involving women and men, girls and boys with disabilities and their representative organisations in sustainable climate action planning, decision-making and review processes on the international, regional, national and community level.
- ▶ Providing and disseminating information about natural disasters in all relevant accessible forms, including Sign Language and Easy-to-Read.

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 16 Light for the World (2019): Environmental Policy.

www.light-for-the-world.org/sites/lfdw_org/files/download_files/06_2019_policy_environment_accessible.pdf.

17 Light for the World & UNICEF (2019): Access to Humanitarian Aid.

www.light-for-the-world.org/sites/lfdw_org/files/download_files/policy_paper_lftw_unicef_def_digital_accessible_0.pdf.

18 For a full list of recommendations see UNHCR (2020): op. cit., §§61-68.

- ▶ Ensuring that all disaster risk reduction infrastructure is accessible, including efforts to build back better and more accessibly after natural disasters.
- ▶ Collecting data on the impact of climate change on individuals and communities, disaggregated by disability, gender, age and other relevant variables.
- ▶ Consistently applying the OECD DAC Disability Inclusion Policy Marker and the OECD DAC Climate Markers to monitor disability inclusion in climate actions.
- ▶ Building up expertise on inclusive climate change policies and advocacy within organisations of persons with disabilities.

Further Reading

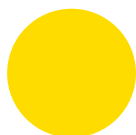
- ▶ Gaskin, C.J. et al. (2017): Factors Associated with the Climate Change Vulnerability and the Adaptive Capacity of People with Disability: A Systematic Review. *Weather, Climate and Society*, vol. 9, no. 3.
<https://journals.ametsoc.org/doi/full/10.1175/WCAS-D-16-0126.1>.
- ▶ Saxton, M. & Ghenis, A. (2019): Disability and Disaster Readiness – Policy Overview & Recommendations.
<https://worldinstituteondisabilityblog.files.wordpress.com/2019/09/disability-disaster-readiness-overview-recs-wid2019.pdf>.
- ▶ UNHCR (2020): Rights of Persons with Disabilities in the Context of Climate Change. A/HRC/44/30.
<https://undocs.org/A/HRC/44/30>.
- ▶ World Bank (2018): Five Actions for Disability-Inclusive Disaster Risk Management.
www.gfdr.org/sites/default/files/GFDRR%20Disability%20inclusion%20in%20DRM%20Brief_FO.pdf.

About Light for the World

Light for the World is a global disability and development organisation, breaking down barriers to enrich society and unlock the potential in all of us. Our vision is an inclusive society for all where no one is left behind. We enable eye health services and empower people with disabilities in some of the poorest regions of the world.

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