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PERSONS LIVING WITH DISABILITIES IN THE CLIMATE CRISIS

People living with disabilities (PLWDs) face disproportionate vulnerabilities to climate-induced injuries, psychological distress, and death due to interconnected factors such as inaccessible infrastructure, inadequate healthcare systems, and insufficient disaster preparedness. Additionally, PLWDs disproportionately live in climate-vulnerable areas, are displaced to post-disaster relocations, and are excluded from environmental decision-making.

Injustices Faced by Persons Living With Disabilities

Individuals living with physical and intellectual disabilities are at heightened risk for injuries, diseases, and mortality during climate-related hazards including poor air quality, droughts, floods, and heatwaves. About 16% of the global population live with disabilities (UNDRR, 2023). Moreover, approximately 80% of PLWDs (persons living with disabilities) live in low-income nations with 16.41 individuals out of 1000 facing intellectual disabilities (Special Olympics, 2025). Disability is a multi-faceted construct, and PLWDs are not a homogeneous group. PLWDs' vulnerability to climate harms grows out of interconnected factors at the individual and societal levels including pre-existing health conditions, economic hardships, lower educational opportunities, disability-related discrimination, and inadequate disability-inclusive disaster plans. PLWDs face "climate injustice," which is a disproportionate amount of the negative effects of climate change with infringements of their rights to protection from harm and participation in environmental rights (Levy et al., 2024). It is imperative to make urgent progress to reducing inequalities (SDG10) faced by the PLWDs worldwide.

Under-Realized Commitments to Human Rights

In 2006, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Person with Disabilities (UNCRPD) enshrined the rights of PLWDs, ensuring their safety and inclusion in emergency and disaster risk reduction efforts as well as accessibility in physical, digital, and communication spaces and their fundamental rights to life, liberty, security, freedom, education, healthcare, adequate standard of living, and political participation. Subsequently, in 2020, the UN's International Principles and Guidelines on Access to Justice for Persons with Disabilities enshrined PLWDs' equal access to justice systems including the right to make decisions for themselves, have access to facilities and services without any discrimination, and have access to free and affordable legal assistance (OHCHR, 2020). The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015-2030) and the Paris Agreement (2015) additionally stressed disability inclusion in disaster planning and implementation (UNDRR, 2023). Despite international treaties and declarations, PLWDs continue to face infringements of their rights. According to a 2023 survey of over 6000 respondents from 132 countries, 86% of PLWDs indicated no participation in community-level disaster planning, and only 8% indicated that local disaster risk reduction plans addressed their needs (UNDRR, 2023).

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Increased Vulnerability and Intersectional Vulnerability From Inadequate Disaster-Planning

PLWDs face significantly higher rates of injuries, diseases, and mortality during climate hazards due to mobility barriers, inaccessible resettlement sites, and limited access to essential services (Stein et al., 2024). A survey conducted in eight countries revealed that PLWDs were disproportionately unable to evacuate safely, with challenges to relocate (54%), to secure shelter (52%), and to find livelihoods (68%; Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre & CBM Global, 2019). The risks of harm and mortality are even higher for PLWDs facing compounded vulnerability from intersectional marginalized and vulnerable identities including by age, gender, gender identity, Indigenous identity, migratory status, race, and more (Levy et al., 2024). For example, children living with disabilities in the 2020 birth cohort (vs. the 1960 cohort) are projected to have 5 times the lifetime exposure to climate harms, highlighting a children's rights crisis (Levy et al., 2022; Stein et al., 2024). Climate-displaced individuals have an increased likelihood of ending up in unsafe and inadequate temporary housing with losses of autonomy and dignity, especially in the Global South (Grech, Weber, & Rule, 2023). The Institute of Migration estimated that 12.4 million of the 82.4 million forcibly displaced individuals globally in 2020 were PLWDs (Global Migration Data Portal, 2023).

Recommendations

1. Expansion of Disability-Inclusive Disaster and Climate Policies

To make progress, implementation of disability-inclusive climate policies must be scaled up and prioritized within and among communities. Integrating disability-inclusive policies into climate disaster management has improved resilience outcomes in countries such as Chile, Mexico, Pakistan, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Tamil Nadu, and Uganda (Saxton & Ghenis, 2019). While some governments and organizations have endorsed disability-inclusive climate policies, implementation is seriously lagging in most countries and in most communities. Immediate steps need to be taken to implement tailored programs for PLWDs addressing accessibility, digital literacy, skill development, early planning, and rehabilitation programs. Communities need to build greater capacity for emergency responses including providing emergency healthcare, providing sufficient climate literacy (SDG4 promoting quality education), accessible evacuation routes, sufficiently equipped emergency shelters, accessible communication systems, and aid distribution.

2. Expansion of Mental Healthcare

PLWDs additionally are disproportionately affected by the psychological distress caused by climate events, further challenging SDG3 (promoting health and wellbeing). It is rational and reasonable for all individuals to experience distress from the climate crisis. Anxiety, depression, and stress, however, are significantly increased due to disruptions in healthcare services, changes in daily route, disruptions in housing, and increase in health challenges directly brought on by climate events. Moreover, distress is further increased for PLWDs due to inadequate accessibility to communication services including emergency notifications and caregiver communication, reducing social support for evacuation, recovery and adaptation (Stein et al., 2024). To address these challenges, mental health care services must be expanded and tailored to the needs of communities. An increase in trained mental healthcare providers are needed to provide tailored programs that are disability-inclusive and focus on empowering and amplifying PLWD's voices and rights (Levy et al., 2024).

3. Expansion of Collaboration: Best Practices and Shared Commitments

PLWDs are at heightened risk for the worst consequences of climate change due to multifaceted factors across all levels of society; thus, a whole-of-society or holistic approach is warranted. In line with SDG17 (partnerships), all stakeholders including organizations, governments, civil society, disability rights advocates, and climate activists are needed to work together to drive stronger legal frameworks that enforce accessibility in all aspects of emergency responses including prevention and intervention. This means sharing best practices and evidence-based interventions to strengthen local and global commitments to disability-inclusive climate action. It is necessary for PLWDs to be partners in all these efforts. Inclusive governance of all oversight of climate-disaster planning is key as the needs of PLWDs are most effectively addressed when their voices, experiences, and expertise are reflected in policy development and implementation.

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