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Climate policy and activism need to make space for disabled people

Disabled people are disproportionately affected yet highly underrepresented, writes **Pauline Castres**

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Last year at COP26, inaccessibility was briefly the subject of media attention when it was reported that Israel's energy minister, Karine Elharrar, who is a wheelchair user, couldn't access the conference centre in Glasgow. But lack of access to the climate space for the one billion disabled people across the world doesn't stop at the built environment: it is multifaceted and embedded in the wider climate action movement and the political and policy frameworks that govern and influence it.

Climate change disproportionately affects disabled people as it widens health and socioeconomic inequalities and threatens to destroy or damage the physical environment, which includes accessibility features such as ramps and lifts, as well as resources and equipment disabled people rely on for both medical and non-medical reasons. Moreover, 80% of disabled people live in developing countries, where the most severe effects of climate change are seen and will continue to be experienced in the years to come.

Disabled people are more likely to be killed or injured during an adverse weather event caused by the climate crisis, yet inclusion aspects are overlooked in local and national emergency disaster planning and preparedness. Extreme climate events can worsen or cause flare-ups of existing conditions, and new infections or illnesses can arise by contamination through dirty water, animals, and insects. Climate emergencies can also restrict access to medication, including vaccines, and social care.

The loss of personal equipment (which is often expensive, customised, and not easily replaceable), such as wheelchairs, is another risk specific to disabled people. During extreme climate events, accessible features of the built environment are at risk of being destroyed and not rebuilt afterwards. Disabled people who have underlying health conditions are also disproportionately affected when healthcare facilities, including hospitals, are destroyed or damaged. Disabled people constitute some of the poorest people in the world, and climate change threatens their sources of income, especially in developing countries, where many people lose their incomes as a result of droughts, floods, and wildfires. In those events, many families decide to stop paying to send some of their children to school, and disabled children are the first to lose out. All these risks are heightened when climate events cause migration, as disabled people are less likely to be included in evacuation plans and to find the support they need in shelters and temporary accommodations.

Despite this disproportionate risk, the disability community hasn't been at the forefront of climate

policy and activism. This is reflected in international climate treaties, including recent ones. Since being mentioned in the Cancun Agreements 12 years ago, disabled people are barely referenced in international climate treaties, including the Paris Agreement, where the only reference is in the preamble, and the more recent Glasgow Declaration. This trend is equally visible in decision making processes at a local level. In the UK, for example, the 2021 net zero strategy published by the UK government, which was judged unlawful in July 2022 as it was deemed to be in breach of the Climate Change Act, didn't contain a single explicit reference to disabled people.

Other marginalised groups such as women and indigenous people have had strong commitments in climate treaties—with specific strategic plans rolled out to acknowledge the disproportionate effects on those communities and to take steps to embed the knowledge of those communities in the climate movement. If the inclusion of women and indigenous people is far from where it should be, valuing those voices and enabling them to be heard and to lead climate conversations is the first step. The disabled community needs similar acknowledgment.

Challenging misrepresentation to enable authentic leadership of disabled people

The misrepresentation of disabled people often stems from a narrow, medically focused lens, through which disabled people have been portrayed as only recipients of care and not participants. The portrayal of disabled people as part of “the vulnerable”—an all encompassing term whose meaning and appropriateness is highly debated in disability justice—is used profusely but rarely conveys participation, and eventually leads to exclusion. The term has been commonly used in the context of covid, for example, but did not lead to greater recognition of the voices of those shielding or those who developed long covid. Nor did it help create long term policies centred around those groups.

Designing and implementing scalable solutions to tackle climate change—while also empowering and engaging people, especially the most marginalised, to hold policy makers to account—will require collaboration, creativity, collective resilience, and resourcefulness. And disabled people are experts at these.

When disabled people challenge norms and disrupt rigid ways of thinking, they create individual value beyond basic economic concepts such as productivity and market value—they create flexible and adaptable frameworks that work for everyone. These are the skills needed to adapt to a changing climate and to introduce mitigation measures. Many disabled people

fought for the right to work remotely before covid-19 hit, for example. Disabled people asking for remote working also helped other groups such as parents and carers to advocate for this right before the covid-19 pandemic started.

Disabled people are also known for creating support networks in their community. Progress towards reaching net zero and keeping the increase in global temperature below 1.5°C is slow, patchy, and often focuses on low hanging fruit and the least financially disruptive solutions. If we must continue to push for systematic change and policy action at local, national, and international levels, we must also learn to build support networks and create systems and places that welcome people regardless of their perceived economic value or income.

Climate change is one the single biggest threats to the disability community, and yet disabled people have long been ignored and forgotten in climate activism and policy. If we are to create a just transition to a greener economy that is fair to everyone and tackle the underlying problems that have caused and driven climate change, we need to put disabled people—a diverse, resourceful, and knowledgeable group of people—at the heart of the climate movement. We must not simply focus on tokenistic and time limited representation and mentions, but enable sustainable leadership across all environmental platforms, networks, and policy frameworks.

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