

Climate Justice for All: Including Disability Conservation Initiatives**Ime Edet Sam (Ph.D)**

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Corresponding Author: Dr. Ime Edet Sam (imesam12@yahoo.com)**Abstract**

Climate justice debates often overlook the rights and needs of persons with disabilities, despite evidence that climate change disproportionately affects them. This opinion paper argues that climate justice cannot be achieved without the intentional inclusion of persons with disabilities in conservation and climate-action initiatives. It highlights barriers faced by persons with disabilities during climate-related disasters, such as inaccessible evacuation routes, communication gaps, and exclusion from policy dialogues. The paper contends that disability inclusion is not an act of charity but a matter of social and environmental justice grounded in human rights principles, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It proposes practical strategies for disability-inclusive conservation, including accessible infrastructure, inclusive communication formats, participation of disabled persons' organizations, and the integration of disability considerations into disaster risk reduction and green-economy programs. The article concludes that meaningful climate justice must ensure the participation, protection, and empowerment of persons with disabilities so that conservation efforts truly benefit all members of society.

Keywords: Climate Justice, Disability Inclusion, Conservation Initiatives, Human Rights, Environmental Policy, Disaster Risk Reduction.

Introduction

Globally, more than 1 billion people with disabilities are disproportionately and differentially at risk from the climate crisis. Yet there is a notable absence of climate policy, programming, and research at the intersection of disability and climate change Wisner, B., M. Fordham, I. Kelman, B. Johnson, D. Simon, A. Lavell, H. & Günter Brauch, U. (2017). Advancing climate justice urgently requires accelerated disability-inclusive climate action. Advance disability-inclusive climate research and responses identified by a global interdisciplinary group of experts in disability, climate change, sustainable development, public health, environmental justice, humanitarianism, gender, Indigeneity, mental health, law, and planetary health. Climate-resilient development is a framework for enabling universal sustainable development.

Inclusive climate-resilient development (ICRD) integrates climate action with poverty reduction, equity, and sustainability, ensuring vulnerable groups aren't left behind by focusing on low-emission, adaptable systems that build capacity, strengthen livelihoods, and promote just transitions through community involvement, green infrastructure, and policies that address both climate risks and social needs, creating pathways for prosperous, healthy, and equitable futures. Advancing inclusive climate-resilient development requires a disability human rights approach that deepens understanding of how societal choices and actions characterized by meaningful participation, inclusion, knowledge diversity in decision making, and co-design by and with people with disabilities and their representative organisations—build collective climate resilience benefiting disability communities and society at large while advancing planetary health Araos, Jagannathan, K & Shukla R. (2021).

Climate injustice describes the unequal burden of climate change impacts, where vulnerable communities, least responsible for emissions (often low-income, communities of color, Global South), suffer the worst consequences (like extreme weather, food/water insecurity) due to systemic inequalities, while richer nations/corporations that caused most of the problem have more resources to adapt, creating a "triple injustice" of unequal contribution, impact, and adaptation capacity. It reframes climate change as a human rights and equity issue, demanding fair solutions that address root causes and historical injustices. Amplifying this climate injustice, people with disabilities have to impel climate action amid social discrimination that positions them as "the least worth saving". Discriminatory processes largely exclude this population from climate-related decision making, knowledge production, and power Cissé, G., McLeman, R., Adams H, et al. (2022). Consequently, disability marginalization diminishes societal understanding of the urgent need for climate action and how to collectively respond to the climate crisis. Exclusionary processes are further intensified as poverty, gender, ethnicity, and other dimensions intersect, affecting the extent to which organizations of people with disabilities (OPDs) can participate in debates on climate solutions (Araos, et.al 2021). According to Stein and Stein (2021), internationally, there is no disability constituency in the United Nation (UN) Framework Convention on Climate Change (2021), in contrast to the constituencies that exist for Indigenous people, women and gender, and youth. Consequently, people with disabilities are adversely affected by mitigation and adaptation approaches designed without their participation, such as inaccessible evacuation shelters (Stein & Stein 2021)

Worldwide, disability communities facing stigma, and discrimination are disproportionately excluded from the socioeconomic gains accrued from capitalism and colonialism and are disparately harmed by atmospheric colonialism (Engelman, Craig & Iles, 2021). Climate change disproportionately affects minoritized people subjected to intersectional discrimination on the basis of disability, race, gender, class, caste, age, and other categories, as well as geography, culture, and migratory or People with disabilities are at disparately high status risk from worsening climate hazards as the biophysical effects of global warming, ableism, systematic oppression, and histories of colonialism intersect, increasing disability human rights harms in many spaces, such as within minoritized communities and especially in low-income countries and small island states (Kosanic, A., Petzold, J., Martín-López, B. & Razanajatovo, M. (2022). Children with disabilities in low-income countries in the 2025 birth cohort will encounter more than five times the lifetime exposure to extreme weather events under present emission-reduction pledges compared with the 1960 birth cohort, causing severe harms that result in intergenerational inequality (Thiery, et al., 2021). Unjustly, people with disabilities who are greatly affected by climate-related harms are often the least responsible for climate change, including those inhabiting low-income countries and small island states, children, and Indigenous people with disabilities.

Global environmental change and anthropogenic climate change are causing unprecedented biodiversity loss, jeopardizing the provision of nature's contributions to people (NCP), that are 'all the contributions, both positive and negative, of living nature (diversity of organisms, ecosystems and their associated ecological and evolutionary processes) to people's quality of life' Diaz, S., Settele, J., Brondizio, E. S., Ngo, H.T., Agard J, Arneth A, Balvanera P, Brauman KA, Butchart SHM, Chan KMA et al. (2019). The assessments of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) (2018) demonstrate that the impacts of climate change, biodiversity loss and environmental degradation are unevenly distributed across

different social groups. In fact, the impacts from these changes disproportionately affect the wellbeing of vulnerable and marginalized communities, such as the poor, women, elderly and Indigenous Peoples Pacifici, M., Foden, W.B., Visconti, P., Watson, J. E. M., Butchart, S.H. M., Kovacs KM, Scheffers BR, Hole DG, Martin TG, Akc, akaya HR et al. (2015). Despite efforts to include marginalized communities, both intergovernmental bodies did not specifically consider another highly vulnerable sub group of society — disabled populations. It is important to note that often disabled populations are also a part of other marginalized groups, such as poor people, Black, Indigenous People and People of Color (BIPOC) or women, inter-binary, trans-binary or non-binary people. Therefore, there is an urgent need to address the challenges of climate and environmental change for the world's disabled populations from an intersectionality lens in order to effectively foster sustainable inclusive and just futures. More specifically, it is necessary to understand the interconnections between the context specific impacts of climate and environmental change for disabled populations (intersecting with other marginalized social groups as mentioned above) and environmental justice (UN, 2018). Transforming our societies towards sustainability requires the consideration of environmental justice and all marginalized groups, including disabled populations (Bennett, 2019).

Climate Justice and Disability Conservation Initiatives

The concept of inclusivity emphasizes the importance of creating environments where everyone, regardless of ability or disability, can participate fully and equally. Disability is a complex and multifaceted concept that encompasses physical, sensory, cognitive, and mental health impairments (WHO, 2011). Vulnerable populations, including people with disabilities, are often disproportionately affected by social, economic, and environmental factors that exacerbate their vulnerability. In the context of climate change, people with disabilities are particularly vulnerable due to inaccessible infrastructure, lack of access to information, and inadequate support systems (Kett & van Ommeren, 2019). Inclusive approaches to disaster risk reduction and management prioritize the needs and perspectives of people with disabilities, ensuring their safety and resilience. This requires a shift from a charity-based approach to a rights-based approach, recognizing the autonomy and dignity of people with disabilities.

By promoting accessibility and inclusivity, we can reduce vulnerability and enhance the capacity of people with disabilities to cope with and adapt to environmental hazards. Inclusive policies and programs can also help to address the social and economic determinants of vulnerability, such as poverty and exclusion. Ultimately, inclusivity is essential for building resilient and sustainable communities that benefit everyone, regardless of ability or disability (United Nations, 2020). By working together, we can create a more just and equitable society that values diversity and promotes human rights. Inclusivity is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic opportunity to harness the collective potential of diverse stakeholders. People with disabilities are not vulnerable by nature, but rather by neglect and design. Recognizing and addressing the needs of people with disabilities is crucial for promoting inclusivity and reducing vulnerability.

People with Disabilities and Environmental Hazard: Vulnerability by Neglect and Design

People with disability are disproportionately affected by the consequences of all kinds of natural and human-made hazards: floods, fires, terrorism, war, earthquakes. This is true whether the hazard be large or small scale and relatively every day a fire or other need to evacuate a public building. The additional danger and risks posed to disabled people are several folds and relate to issues such as the added vulnerabilities that accompany poverty, the accessibility of information about risk and hazard, the design of the built environment and prejudicial, structural attitudes towards disabled people, as a group, arguably, as 'the least worth saving'. Priestley and Hemingway (2017) argue that disabled people are usually amongst the poorest in both rich and poorer countries.

When infrastructure is damaged by environmental hazard there may be particular difficulties for disabled people, who may have greater reliance on, for example, public transport and public services, as well as interruptions to the range of relationships that disabled people may rely on to facilitate and support independent living. Attempts at rescue may well prove problematic for disabled people and those with

health conditions disproportionately when affected by adverse conditions such as flood, drought, and so forth (Shakespeare, 2009).

Planning responses to the risk of environmental hazards may have ableist assumptions about how people can respond based largely on ignorance of the needs of disabled people. Where disabled people are mentioned in planning and policy documents, it is usually by way of classification of ‘vulnerable, ‘special needs’ and lacking in any differentiation of support, access or information need. These approaches not only miss the point on the range of needs different disabled people may have but also perpetuate the focus on the individual over the need to challenge the collective imagination of how society is structured to privilege certain kinds of bodies and minds over others. So, for example, information about emergency responses may be in inaccessible formats, may assume the capacity to be physically mobile or physically autonomous, may assume alerts can be heard or seen, and so forth.

Underlying these assumptions are ideas of normalcy and the ‘ordinary body or mind’. The normal body situates the abnormal and deviant body (Davis, 2015) and in that our society requires a fit and economically active body, it is possible to argue that the construction of responses to risk and disaster which privilege the privileged and the norm are extensions of eugenics ideology. When environmental hazard leads to significant loss of public and social infrastructure, then, as Priestley and Hemingway (2017) suggest, attitudes can be shaped by a value system that prioritizes non-disabled people who are viewed as most important—presumably because they are viewed as more economically useful or viable.

Beyond Vulnerability: Missing Out on the Participation and Expertise of People with Disability

Shuttleworth and Meekosha (2013) argue the largely unquestioned, widely accepted and socially constructed category of ‘vulnerable’ for people with disability allows us to remain unchallenged and unthreatened and neither expect, or indeed allow, people with disability to exercise their roles. Vulnerability is also exacerbated, even created by the absence of disabled people in conceptualizing and planning responses to hazard. There may well be a lack of basic participation opportunities for people with disability to voice concerns about environmental issues (Charles & Thomas 2017). Wisner, B., M. Fordham, I. Kelman, B. Johnson, D. Simon, A. Lavell, H. & Günter Brauch, U. (2017) suggest that a merit in moving away from the category of ‘vulnerable people’ to thinking about ‘vulnerable situations’ in which everybody faced risk would mitigate against the prioritizing of one group over another. Imrie and Thomas (2018) point out that people with disability face ‘environmental injustice’ all the time by virtue of the physical barriers and obstacles they face, which exclude them from all kinds of different physical spaces in both urban and rural areas. As mentioned above, one of us has reflected on the way negotiating outdoor spaces requires anticipation of blockages.

Burns, Paterson (2018) suggest that disabled people who do negotiate what is seen as ‘risky’ outdoor spaces and challenge environmental barriers do challenge caricatures of disabled people as helpless and vulnerable and develop risk management and problem-solving skills. But this is a rare suggestion and bad status, an underlying refusal to make a ‘mind-shift’ from disabled people as inherently needy and vulnerable to disabled people as assets, as people with expertise that would benefit all and not just so-called ‘specialized’ or ‘vulnerable’ groups (Kett & van Ommeren 2019).

Making Environmental Conservation and Ecosystems Restoration Inclusive.

Making environmental conservation and ecosystems restoration inclusive is crucial for promoting social equity and community resilience, according to David Ndungu, a Project Assistant at Light for the World. Inclusive ecosystem restoration recognizes the interconnectedness of environmental and social justice, ensuring that benefits are accessible to all, regardless of ability or socioeconomic status. By engaging diverse stakeholders, prioritizing marginalized communities, and fostering partnerships, ecosystem restoration efforts can be more effective, sustainable, and equitable (Ndungu, 2024). The following could include inclusivity in environmental conservation and ecosystem restoration.

1. Recognize that environmental and social justice are interconnected: People who are often left out local peoples, people with disabilities, and those with low- or no-income – are also most affected

by the climate crisis. Making sure they're part of the plan and meeting their specific needs is a crucial step towards making restoration fair and sustainable.”

2. Engage diverse stakeholders in decision-making: Involve local communities, indigenous peoples, and other stakeholders in all stages of the restoration process, from planning to implementation. This ensures that restoration efforts are responsive to the needs of all social groups – including people with disabilities, and their representative organizations (OPDs).
3. Priorities and empower marginalized communities to participate: Provide training, education, and resources, including skills development and access to funding, and ensure people with disabilities have access to green employment opportunities. Ensure communities have ownership of restoration projects, which can improve long-term sustainability.”
4. Consider gender intersectionality: Women often play crucial roles in natural resource management and conservation but are frequently marginalized in decision-making processes and resource allocation and disproportionately bear the impacts of environmental degradation. Actively involving women, especially women with disabilities, in restoring ecosystems, providing equal access to resources, and addressing barriers to their engagement can lead to more inclusive, resilient, and equitable ecosystem restoration.”
5. Support locally led conservation: Providing technical assistance, training, and resources to strengthen capacity and ensure the sustainability of community-based initiatives can enhance the effectiveness and scalability of restoration efforts. Advocate for inclusive restoration policies and engage with policymakers to prioritize these approaches in local and national agendas, to ensure they are locally led and contextually specific.
6. Foster partnerships: There is a need to work together – government agencies, NGOs, private sector actors, and local communities – to leverage resources and expertise. Collaborate with existing community organisations and networks and establish monitoring and evaluating mechanisms to build more resilient and sustainable ecosystems. As World Environment Day is marked, it becomes important to rally behind the call for inclusive ecosystem restoration, leaving no one behind on the path to a brighter, greener future. By embracing inclusivity in our restoration efforts, we can cultivate resilient ecosystems, empowered communities, and a more just and sustainable world for all.”

Challenges of Inclusive Conservation Initiatives

Despite multiple benefits, inclusive conservation presents various tensions and challenges, such as whether and how to combine values across different scales; how to surface and manage issues of consensus and dissensus; and how to build trust and partnerships between actors who live in and outside of protected areas. Such emerging tensions should first be acknowledged, then softened and sometimes reframed to find effective pathways for nature conservation, equity, and well-being (Raymond et al. 2022).

Inclusive conservation has also been criticized from political ecology perspectives as its intrinsic search for consensus might jeopardize values and knowledge of historically underrepresented groups of society (Matulis & Moyer 2017). Protected areas are diverse in many aspects, such as IUCN protected area categories I-VI, governance, or biogeographical and socioeconomic contexts, and thus face different challenges and opportunities. This highlights the need for interlinked context-based and multi-scale approaches to address the extent to which participation, equity, and inclusion can effectively be implemented in conservation strategies (López-Rodríguez et al. 2020). Inclusive conservation has indeed been identified as a separate leverage point by Chan, et al. (2020), which includes creating spaces for diverse actors to become part of conservation initiatives (Zafra-Calvo et al. 2020). However, the level of involvement of disabled people regarding inclusive conservation in have not yet been identified nor analyzed.

In addition to the aforementioned Inclusive conservation initiatives face significant challenges, including institutional barriers that marginalize indigenous voices and favor scientific approaches over traditional knowledge systems. Power imbalances can disadvantage marginalized groups, while conflicting land-use interests and limited policy support hinder effective conservation. Additionally, socio-economic

challenges, such as poverty and lack of access to resources, can impede local communities' ability to participate in conservation efforts. Overcoming these challenges requires fostering inclusive governance structures, promoting collaborative partnerships, and recognizing indigenous rights and knowledge systems

Conclusion

As we conclude this exploration of inclusive conservation initiatives, it is clear that leveraging disabled perspectives is crucial for effective climate change and environmental conservation. By recognizing the valuable contributions of disabled individuals, we can foster a more equitable and sustainable approach to conservation. Inclusive conservation initiatives have the potential to promote social justice, enhance community resilience, and drive innovative solutions. Disabled people's unique experiences and perspectives can inform context-specific adaptation strategies that prioritize the needs of marginalized communities. Moreover, inclusive conservation can help address the disproportionate impacts of climate change on vulnerable populations. To achieve this, it is essential to promote accessibility, inclusivity, and equity in conservation efforts. This requires a paradigm shift in the way we approach conservation, one that prioritizes the rights and dignity of all individuals.

By working together, we can create a more just and sustainable future for all. Inclusive conservation is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic opportunity to harness the collective potential of diverse stakeholders. As we move forward, it is crucial to prioritize the voices and perspectives of disabled individuals in conservation decision-making. This will enable us to develop more effective and sustainable solutions that benefit both people and the planet. Ultimately, inclusive conservation initiatives have the potential to drive transformative change and promote a more equitable and sustainable future. By embracing diversity and promoting inclusivity, we can build resilient communities and protect the environment for future generations. In conclusion, inclusive conservation initiatives that leverage disabled perspectives are essential for achieving a more sustainable and equitable future. By working together, we can create a world that values diversity, promotes inclusivity, and protects the environment for all.

Way Forward

To ensure that the all envisaged inclusive conservation initiative is achieved, it is important that the following should be adhered to as a form of recommendation.

1. Policymakers should integrate disability-inclusive approaches in climate change policies and programs to ensure equal participation and benefits for disabled individuals.
2. Conservation organizations can empower disabled people's organizations through capacity-building, funding, and resources to enhance their engagement in conservation decision-making.
3. Local governments need to foster inclusive governance structures that prioritize the voices and perspectives of disabled individuals, indigenous communities, and other marginalized groups.
4. Environmental practitioners must develop accessible and inclusive conservation practices that address the unique needs and experiences of disabled people, promoting equitable access to environmental benefits.
5. International organizations can promote collaborative partnerships among government agencies, NGOs, private sector actors, and local communities to leverage resources, expertise, and support for inclusive conservation initiatives.

Revision Questions

1. What is the concept of disability and vulnerable inclusiveness?
2. Define disability and inclusivity
3. To what extent does environmental hazard relate to people with disability?
4. Discuss in details how inclusivity can be included in environmental conservation and ecosystem restoration
5. What are the challenges facing inclusive conservation initiative?

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