

Missing in Climate Action:

Stories of persons with disabilities from the
Global South



Foreword

The climate crisis is having an impact on everyone's lives. Each year, we are witnessing more and more extreme weather events resulting in natural disasters and the increased need for humanitarian assistance. The impact of environmental degradation is evidenced by the movement and displacement of communities, loss of livelihood, family and social networks. Rising sea levels in low lying islands are leaving people and communities living there no choice but to relocate.

For CBM Global and the countries and communities we work with, the climate crisis is impacting daily lives, disrupting health, economic and social systems and in many cases causing harm and irreparable loss and damage. Undertaking this research was important for us to understand how persons with disabilities and their representative organisations in the countries where we work are impacted by the changing climate and how they are also actively contributing to the activism that is urgently needed.

The key findings of this research point to the missing building blocks that are needed for a disability inclusive approach to climate action at the national level. It highlights the prerequisites for inclusion such as accessibility, inclusive participatory approaches and data, which are currently missing. These are critical for effective policy making and programme implementation. The findings also show us that there is a strong connection to the climate policy agenda, of loss and damage, the need for adaptation and the need for a disability inclusive approach to mitigation.

We trust that in reading this report, you will gain insights about the barriers and the challenges faced by persons with disabilities and their representative organisations. Most importantly though, we hope that in reading the stories of collaboration and mutual learning shared in this report, you are inspired to action, working together to pursue a more sustainable, inclusive planet for future generations.

David Bainbridge, Executive Director

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Learn more about our work on disability and the climate crisis:



Main image: Christophine, a mother of four children from Madagascar, is in her small hut with a hole in the roof. Copyright: CBM/Viviane Rakotoarivony

“Nothing about us without us. We want to lead, we want to talk ourselves, we want to build ourselves, we want to contribute for the community” – Disability activist and OPD organiser from Madagascar.

Introduction

This publication tells the story of the people, the individuals and communities affected by climate change, yet absent from key conversations and actions on climate. Its purpose is to amplify the perspectives of persons with disabilities and their representative organisations and by doing so make a small contribution into an under researched area.

This publication was born out of research with persons with disabilities and their organisations to understand barriers and opportunities to their engagement in climate action. Interviews and a small-scale survey were conducted with fourteen OPD activists representing a diverse group of persons with disabilities, including two self-advocates with intellectual disabilities and a parent of a person with a disability. The survey and interviews were conducted in two countries respectively — Bangladesh and Madagascar. The interviews were carried out in the local languages with the support of sign interpretation when required. All names and identifying characteristics such as gender have been removed to ensure the identity of the respondents is protected.

Our hope is that this publication can contribute to the lack of evidence of persons with disabilities’ own experiences of climate change and action and can inspire towards inclusion. We are very grateful for the time and contributions these vibrant disability community activists gave during this research.

Why now for this research?

The latest report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change highlights that approximately 3.3 to 3.6 billion people, which amounts to over half the world’s population, live in contexts that are highly vulnerable to climate change. The impact of climate change and the on-going climate crisis affects all sectors — the economy, essential services including water and sanitation, food and food security, cities, settlements, and key infrastructures, as well as the health and well-being of populations. The climate crisis contributes to increased conflict over access to scarce resources and contributes significantly to forced migrations. Livelihoods, the gains from poverty reduction that have been achieved over recent decades, and

commitments to Sustainable Development are also under extreme pressure and in some cases seeing a reversal.

All the impacts highlighted above are felt more acutely by different groups. The 2022 IPCC report recognises that a bottom-up approach of engaging communities most impacted is critical for adapting to the changing environment.¹ Research and policy documents have also acknowledged that the impact of the climate crisis is more profound on women and children living in countries feeling the brunt of the climate crisis and persons living in poverty. What is missing from the current analysis of the climate crisis is how it impacts persons with disabilities, the largest global minority. There is no reliable data on how many persons with disabilities are living at the front line of the climate crisis, but indications point to a significant number of persons with disabilities impacted by climate change yet absent from national policies and plans on climate adaptation and mitigations.

Recent research highlighting impact and gaps

- OHCHR (2020) report on climate change highlights the impact climate change has on the health and well-being of persons with disabilities.
- McGill/IDA (2022) report highlights that the inclusion of persons with disabilities in national determined contributions (NDCs) is minimal, and climate adaptation and mitigation policies are not systematically including persons with disabilities.
- Pacific Disability Forum (2022) report highlights how climate change is amplifying the risks and exclusion that persons with disabilities already experience in their daily lives. It is also introducing new risks and creating new barriers, for example, food security and livelihoods.²

¹ IPCC (2022), See generally, Vulnerability and Adaptability, <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/>

² Pacific Disability Forum (2022), Disability and Climate Change in the Pacific - Findings from Kiribati, Solomon Islands and Tuvalu. Available here: <https://pacificdisability.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/PDF-Final-Report-on-Climate-Change-and-Persons-with-Disabilities.pdf>

How the analysis was approached



The theories underpinning the analytical framework for this research are used to contextualize the experiences of the respondents and key informants and come to an understanding of what the barriers to participation are, and how we may move forward towards disability inclusive climate action.

Ableism and environmental justice are concepts based in and shaped by power relations, where one group is viewed as inferior to others, whether that is from a disability perspective, or from a socio-economic political perspective when it comes to different countries.³ These power dynamics shape the way climate action includes some voices, but ignores others, and can be seen in direct and obvious ways, such as in access to power, structural access to buildings or who is at the policy table, but also in indirect and less obvious ways, such as the ways some people's experiences are valued and others are not. It also speaks to the North-South geopolitical power dynamics and amounts to a loss of skilled groups of people from different communities, including the disability community, who are not considered in climate issues coming from countries who are most impacted.

Like other -isms such as sexism and racism, ableism is also a concept which is deeply intertwined with other forms of oppression and exacerbated by poverty. As mentioned, many persons with disabilities and other groups live in poverty, which further lessens the ability for climate resilience and the ability to adapt due to a lack

³ Important to note in this research is that we recognise that the terms are derived from a Western/Global North academic perspective and may not be used colloquially by the respondents, yet it was clear from our understanding of these concepts that ableism was prevalent in our conversations.

of resources and networks. This only exacerbates the unequal power dynamics found in ableist ideas and proves the importance of environmental justice and viewing climate policies through an ableist lens.

Ableist assumptions can result in negative attitudes, discriminatory law and policies. For example, an ableist assumption which can be found in the law defines persons with disabilities as unable to own resources. Not only are persons with disabilities experiencing an unequal distribution of environmental harms, but there is also evidence of unequal access to resources such as land ownership and changemaking opportunities. Thus, the loss and damage currently reported come from those who have access to different platforms and agendas, but how do we get the perspective from those who do not and how can we capture the real costs of climate change and natural disasters? This is where the question of inaccessibility becomes important.

Inaccessibility is deeply intertwined with ableism, but also related to environmental justice. Access refers to “the power and opportunity to enter into, use, participate in, and have a sense of belonging or control over a social space or interaction”⁴.

This is similar to how environmental justice highlights a lack of participation in decision-making processes yet goes beyond that. Access can be physical, referring to access to architecture such as shelters and meeting locations, and technology such as broadcastings and information about climate change or coming disasters. Access can also be social, referring to access to communication and policies, such as being on the agenda and offered a chance to share one’s perspective, which environmental justice highlights in relation to climate.

Environmental justice calls attention to the distribution of environmental harms, which are a result of unequal access to resources and participation in decision-making processes on the environment and climate change. It emphasises the failure of governments and other institutions to provide the protections and resources needed to ensure the safety of marginalised communities in times of disasters, which may stem from ableist views. This concept brings together climate issues and social justice.

The countries we focused on and why

The facts show that natural hazard linked disasters and extreme weather events are increasing the world over, and the countries most affected are in the Global South. Many low-income countries are in climate hotspots where extreme weather events because of climate change are taking its toll. Increasingly, voices are emerging from these areas telling the stories of the irreplaceable loss and damage they are

⁴ Carey, 2022, pp376.

experiencing, yet the perspectives of persons with disabilities is often forgotten. The research focused on two of CBM Globals' programme countries, Bangladesh, and Madagascar. Two countries which have been highly impacted by climate change and are both considered climate hotspots. They are members of the Climate Vulnerable Forum and acknowledged as countries where climate catastrophes are becoming a permanent reality creating significant loss and damage.

Box 4: Country profiles⁵

Madagascar

Madagascar is the world's fifth largest island, situated in the Indian Ocean off the coast of southern Africa. Despite considerable natural resources, however, its population of about 28 million (2020) has one of the world's highest poverty rates. Madagascar is consistently ranked as one of the poorest nations in the world. About [75% of Madagascar's population](#) lives below the international poverty line.

Madagascar is extremely vulnerable to climate change. Southern Madagascar has faced back-to-back droughts throughout 2021, leaving 1.35 million people in need of emergency food and nutrition assistance. The country has also seen a surge in tropical storms, heatwaves, floods and cyclones.

Madagascar ratified the CRPD in 2015. There is no data on the specific number of persons with disabilities in Madagascar, it is estimated that persons with disabilities comprise about 2.8 million in the country.

Bangladesh

Bangladesh is a huge delta in South Asia, with a population size 171.68 million, and 20.01% of people living under the national poverty line (ADB 2022). The Climate Change Vulnerability Index from 2015 suggests Bangladesh's economy is more at risk to climate change than any other country. However, the National Climate Change Adaptation planning process did not consider consulting with the persons with disabilities and their organisations [2]. Recently, Bangladesh has experienced record-breaking floods with 7.2 million people affected, and it is estimated that one in seven people will be displaced by climate change by 2050⁶. The country also frequently experiences droughts, floods, thunderstorms, waterlogging, cyclones, tornados, river and coastal erosion, landslides and hailstorms.

Bangladesh ratified CRPD in 2007 and subsequently enacted rights-based law and policies. However, concerns and doubts have been raised by the rights groups about the extent to which the rights and entitlements are being protected. There is no reliable data of persons with disabilities.

⁵ Need to add in the footnotes from the boxes in here

⁶ Saha & Ahmed, 2019, pp146.

Key findings from the research

This section outlines the key findings that have come out of the key informant interviews across both countries. They revolve around several themes; personal and community experiences and impacts of climate change, lived experiences of barriers to participation in climate action, the possible and existing partnerships that emerge from inclusive climate policies, and the value of awareness-raising to ensure disability inclusive climate action. The themes shared in this publication resonated within both countries and are shared across both development and humanitarian sectors.



Impact on Wellbeing, Livelihoods, and Health.

“It is the rainy season now in Bangladesh. But I am in a room which is very hot - around 36 degrees, which is unusual and nearly unbelievable. This is because of climate change that is happening. During the high tide, our city is submerged under water. It has been happening for five years. Because of climate change, the sea level has increased. I am personally highly impacted by climate change.” - Disability activist and OPD organiser from Bangladesh

Respondents and key informants both in Bangladesh and Madagascar, expressed concern over the changing climate and what the high-risk persons with disabilities face during extreme weather events and natural disasters. It was clear that the

respondents all had personal experiences of the impacts of climate change on their communities. Recurrent themes in this research concerned impacts on livelihoods, health and wellbeing, including mobility difficulties and loss of homes.

Health and wellbeing

A key informant from an OPD in Bangladesh highlighted; “The changing climate is constantly having a negative impact on our daily lives”. This was echoed by a key informant OPD activist from Madagascar.

“People with disabilities are among the most vulnerable people, even if there is preparedness, protection and resilience, when it comes to cyclones. They’re always victims because most of them are poor, and they have bad houses. And then, after the cyclone, most of the houses are destroyed and it is very difficult for them to get back to the normal life”

A key informant disability rights activist from Bangladesh expressed concern for the danger persons with disabilities are in as a result of climate change, in particular the floods which have been plaguing Bangladesh lately. They highlighted “we are trapped in the water and can’t get out anywhere”. This worry of climate change causing mobility restrictions was echoed by a key informant self-advocate with an intellectual disability from Bangladesh who said that climate change has made them feel afraid to go outside on their own, resulting in a lost sense of self-dependency:

“[There is] too much stuff to move anywhere, [...] I feel very problematic, afraid to move myself. [...] Climate change cannot make me self-dependent, or it cannot be easy to move for me.”

This shows some examples of the unequal distribution of environmental harms that persons with disabilities experience, such as floods and cyclones as highlighted by the key informants. Mobility restrictions, poverty and a lack of access to emergency aid lowers climate resilience and puts persons with disabilities more at risk by climate change. Lack of access to emergency aid is included in the next section.

Livelihoods

Mobility restrictions during disasters not only affects persons with disabilities’ health and wellbeing, it also affects livelihoods. One key informant disability activist, who has a physical disability, described their experience of the recent floods in Bangladesh. The floods caused mobility issues which led to a financial crisis for them and their family:

“I belong to one of the flood affected areas of Bangladesh so I experienced the last flood that occurred in Bangladesh. And the most difficulty I faced was that I couldn’t move at all, I couldn’t go to my office or markets. Due to these problems my family income and business failed, and we faced financial crisis.”

Another key informant from Bangladesh who is a person with an intellectual disability, owns paddy fields which have been highly impacted due to the heavy rainfall his region has been experiencing. They highlighted:

“The soil in the riverside has gotten affected by huge soil breakdowns due to heavy rain, and relatives are losing their homes who have villages nearby rivers”.

The loss and damage experienced by persons with disabilities often goes unaccounted for. Lack of disaggregated data on disability and discriminatory laws that can prevent persons with disabilities owning land and assets, can mean it is not counted. This is an example of how ableism seeps into the lives of many, leaving persons with disabilities at risk, as well as lowering resilience and abilities to recover once the disaster has passed. If the resources persons with disabilities own are not accounted for, resources for recovery measures might not reach those who truly need it.



Access to humanitarian aid including shelter

Several respondents interviewed expressed concerns about how they would fare during natural hazard linked disasters and emergencies. They recounted experiences of not being able to access emergency aid including accessible shelters, as well as a lack of access to safe drinking water and suitable sanitation facilities.

Emergencies and humanitarian aid

Ableist views were shown in the lack of consideration for inclusive and accessible humanitarian responses which can cause difficulty for persons with disabilities to access certain emergency aid provided by the government or NGOs during natural disasters. This was a theme across both countries. An OPD activist from Bangladesh with a physical disability described their experience of using inflatable rafts provided by the government during a flood in his community:

“In 2017, my area where I live in the north part of Bangladesh was flood affected. At that time, I had to move using a raft. So, using a raft for a disabled person is quite difficult. There was no other alternative for me to make movement during the flood”

For many persons with disabilities, it can also be difficult to reach distribution points for emergency aid. One key informant, a visually impaired OPD activist from Bangladesh, highlighted an experience in their community when relief bags from the government were dropped by helicopters, which many persons with disabilities were unable to reach.

“There are thousands of people gathering to catch those relief bags, there were a lot of people gathering in the crowds, so they couldn’t receive those relief bags. There were persons with disabilities, who were visually impaired or with [physical disabilities], none of them could receive those bags. These bags should be received particularly to persons with disabilities according to the information.”

A key informant OPD activist with a physical disability echoed activists from Bangladesh and described their experience with the drought in the southern part of Madagascar, where people had to travel far to access water during the disaster:

“They have to go far away to get water and if they manage to go to the source of the water, they cannot bring some water back, so they have to drink there and they cannot take some water. This really affected the people with physical disabilities because they cannot...it will be difficult for them to carry a pail of water for example so they will have to drink there and do their washing there and come back.”

Shelters

Access to evacuation shelters was another area highlighted by key informants where persons with disabilities are at risk during natural hazard linked disasters. Many are unable to access the shelters, and those who do may be unable to access sanitation facilities or bring their assistive devices with them. Moreover, not everyone is able to leave their homes in the first place, as a key informant OPD activist with a physical disability from Bangladesh noted:

“So, what I have seen, especially for persons with disabilities, in some cases even family members also leave them as [...] no one wants to provide a special shelter for them. The shelter centre for the flood affected areas, which is provided by the government, has barely any accessibilities. For those reasons, people who are dependent on wheelchairs or other disabilities, those shelters become inaccessible.”

A key informant disability rights activist, also with a physical disability and from Bangladesh, echoes this:

“People with disabilities face many dangers due to the lack of shelters for people with disabilities in our vicinity. [...] The cyclone centre [is] too far away and there are no facilities for people with disabilities to enter and there are no suitable bathroom facilities.”

Many shelter bathrooms are difficult to access for those with mobility restrictions, and they may be breeding grounds for diseases due to waterlogging.

Accessibility is a precondition for participation

“I strongly believe that this type of work needs to be included and maybe somewhere it is being started. On the other perspective [...] the people who work on climate change are not concerned about people with disabilities. Even if they are, they don't think that people with disabilities are important or significant enough to include them in these events.” - An OPD activist from Bangladesh



A recurring theme that emerged from the research across both countries centred on accessibility issues. Some key informants highlighted experiences of not being invited to participate in meetings on climate and disaster risk reduction. If there was an invitation, the meetings were not inclusive or accessible. Access to inaccessible information on climate change and coming disasters was highlighted across both countries.

A key informant disability activist from Bangladesh expressed very clearly how accessibility can impact the participation of persons with disabilities in climate action:

“Accessibility can be the biggest contributor for the participation in the climate change activities, including programs, meetings and many other facilities for people with disabilities”

A key informant OPD activist with a physical disability from Bangladesh shared an example of how inaccessibility caused a lack of participation for their organisation. They shared that they were invited to a meeting in a government building which was located on the first floor, causing the meeting to be inaccessible to certain members of the OPD. The meeting locale was asked to be moved to the ground floor in the future, which was agreed upon, though they have yet to see it happen.

The key informant OPD activist also explained that there are committees working with the OPD they are engaged with who shares information on coming events in the district and sub-district offices — a collaboration which is an important step by way of including persons with disabilities in climate events and achieving environmental justice. However, the key informant highlighted that they “face the problem of accessibility in those offices”, leading to a loss of representation, participation and safety for persons with disabilities.

Persons with disabilities represent a diverse population. However, climate crisis information and alerts are not designed to respond to such diversities. A key informant, deaf OPD activist from Madagascar described difficulties with using hearing alert whistles, as well as accessing information about climate change and coming natural hazard linked disasters as the information often is not available in sign language. The key informant further highlighted how information about climate change and coming disasters comes from Facebook and networks of other disabled people, or through the national television channel. However, communication is often an issue, and the responsiveness of humanitarian aid is delayed for many victims all over Madagascar due to these communication issues. The key informant highlighted the example of the cyclones Madagascar has faced these past two years:

“[The affected people] are cut off from the rest of Madagascar in terms of communication because there’s no cell phone, there is no tv. And right after the cyclone there is flooding, the level of water is very high and they kind of are almost isolated at the place where they are without any means of communication. It’s only when [we] can go to do a field visit and do a consultation to see what’s going on exactly—it’s only then that we get the real information from those other places, those isolated places. And it’s

only then that we can gather information and make a report. [...] This means that there is a very big delay on the responsiveness of the...I mean when there's a cyclone, there is a very big delay before we take action, curative and corrective actions."

A key informant disability activist from Bangladesh, added that this is an issue that extends beyond just persons with disabilities. They highlighted how information about natural disasters comes from radio and phones, and these are not accessible, in some cases neither to persons with disabilities or persons without disabilities:

"Most of the people here don't have access to electricity, and even if they have access to electricity, they have no phone. They might not have access to radio, even if they have mobile phone, they don't have access to the internet so there are various problems in the accessibilities."

Another OPD activist from Madagascar echoed this and added that television is not accessible to everyone in the country, showing the importance of varied emergency responses and information sharing to benefit all:

"But the problem is, not everybody in Madagascar honestly has access to a tv set or a radio, not every Malagasy. So even the person who is not a person with disability, he or she may not have access to the information. Because if you only rely on radio and tv, some people won't have access to the information."

An important point highlighted by a key informant OPD activist from Madagascar, was that "access to information depends on the type of disability". A person who is deaf needs information to be relayed to them in a different way from a person who is blind or someone who has an intellectual disability. Even individuals with the same impairment group may need information brought to them differently, as not all deaf persons use sign language for example. This needs to be taken into account when creating climate policies as well—just as the distribution of information and emergency aid needs to be varied, as do climate policies.

Disability inclusive policy processes to improve collaboration

“I’m not seeing the implementation of the UNCRPD or SDGs in the climate change movement for ensuring disability issues. [...] We need international commitment on climate change and disability inclusive climate change. We need local level implementation and a local level framework on climate change.” - A disability activist and OPD organiser, Bangladesh

Several respondents across both Bangladesh and Madagascar highlighted different types of issues they faced when working with the government, at national, district, and sub-district level. Key informants interviewed also expressed a hope for bigger international NGOs to create more disability inclusive climate policies.

A key informant disability activist from Bangladesh, commented they had:

“never seen any type of reasonable accommodation from an organizational or government level for letting us know about the effect of climate change”.

They further highlighted that as information is not given to them as organisations or individuals about coming events, they are not able to attend and give their perspectives. Linkages between climate change organisations and OPDs to increase communication about relevant events, as well as collaboration between the two movements is critical.

A key informant OPD activist from Bangladesh expressed a wish to be more included in climate activities or special themed days, like climate change day or persons with disabilities day, hosted by the government:

“It's on these special days that the local government never includes us in their activities of climate change or discussions on climate change.”

The key informant also highlighted how their view on why an inclusive approach is not yet reality is because of the ableist views government officials have of persons with disabilities, and the government's lack of knowledge on disability issues:

“Higher officials don't think persons with disabilities are so important to take part in such discussions. Higher officials, or people from the offices, think themselves that they are enough for that kind of information, or they're enough for representing people with disabilities. That's why they might not include persons with disabilities.”

Another key informant OPD activist from Bangladesh raised similar issues and added that they have not seen many advocacy or awareness-raising projects, nor projects linking climate and disability issues:

“In general, the disabled have no voice, I can say we have poor voices. We are not seeing many persons with disabilities who are surveying climate change areas, and there is not much advocacy projects or awareness progress by DPOs or OPDs and NGOs, who are working on disabilities. They are also reluctant about climate change issues. Not much funding on disability and climate change, not much research has been done back there, mainstream climate change organisations are highly reluctant, they never consider that disability could be an issue. ”

Another key informant OPD activist from Madagascar mentioned that measures are being taken to fight climate change, but these are not inclusive due to not being given opportunities to gain experience in the field:

“She can see some actions being implemented in terms of fighting climate change. But there is no inclusion...there is no feasible inclusion, because one thing for sure is people with disabilities have no experience in terms of fighting climate change. So, if they don't have experience, they're not considered by decision makers and they're not included in the discussion. So that's a visual sign that there's no inclusion.”

A key informant disability activist and OPD organiser from Bangladesh, highlighted that climate issues are not disability friendly. Meaning that the mainstream climate organisations are not inclusive, and there is not much discussion on climate change and the impacts on persons with disabilities on a policy level either:

“The people who are implementing [policies], they thought ‘okay, climate change is an environmental issue, it is not really related to persons with disabilities, and maybe persons with disabilities are not an active part of it’. Even though there are many projects implemented by the government for climate change adaptation, persons with disabilities are not much engaged with them.”

The aspect of not seeing implementation of existing policies was brought up by several other key informants in both Madagascar and Bangladesh. They expressed their disappointment in agencies not holding up their policy commitments. A key informant OPD activist from Madagascar:

“The reality is still that the situation in Madagascar is politicized. I mean everything goes through politics, and if even leaders say [...] that there will be inclusive development, there will be inclusive education, most of the time this remains words. There is no visible action put in place in order to implement these words. So, when it comes to politics there are always threats. The threats are...you need to do advocacy but there is a regular change in the government [staffing] and the advocacy does not come to a reality and that’s a main problem”

The key informant highlighted changing personnel in government as a challenge for advocates. They explained when working with the government through advocacy efforts the staffing is regularly changed, causing their matters to consistently have to be restarted and reintroduced to the new agent. This results in advocacy efforts falling through the cracks and no progress being made.

A key information OPD activist, also from Madagascar, had a similar experience and said that there is a lack of accountability from the government:

“Sure, Madagascar signed a treaty regarding the rights of people with disabilities, that’s right. But even if they signed it, there’s not enough commitment that we can see. The government has not given us a visible commitment protecting the rights of persons with disabilities.”

A key informant OPD activist from Bangladesh expanded on this and pointed out the responsibilities of the government to protect the lives and rights of persons with disabilities:

“The rights of protection committees are supposed to, according to the law, have some responsibilities for protecting persons with disabilities, instead these committees are not functional”.

The same key informant suggested the addition of a people’s representative for persons with disabilities, and that a ministry for persons with disabilities should be established, like the one established for Indigenous communities in the country. This would help ensure that disability issues are considered in government proceedings, including climate policies. They also suggested that the government notify OPDs on what facilities can be provided for persons with disabilities when actions or initiatives are taken by the government offices.

Learning from each other

“[The OPD is] now trying to include some ideas and points about climate change because people are now aware that persons with disabilities are always victims of climate change. At the youth network for sustainable development they are now starting to invite persons with disabilities to join in, because the more people with disabilities being members the more ideas [...] will be discussed in the network.” — An OPD activist from Madagascar



Different movements learning from each other is an important part of bridge building between communities and activists. A key informant OPD activist from Madagascar quoted above highlighted their involvement in a youth network for sustainable development and climate justice, as well as an OPD which did not originally discuss climate issues. However, since being involved in both organisations they have taken inspiration from each other. The OPD has started including climate issues, and the sustainable development network has started including persons with disabilities in their work. This is a great example of how the mainstream climate movement and the disability movement can work together to share knowledge and ideas and work towards more inclusive climate policies.

Another key informant OPD activist from Madagascar has also combined the two movements into his organisation where they do climate sensitive work such as tree planting, beach-clean-ups, and endangered bird preservation which all include persons with disabilities into the work. They also work to bring persons with disabilities onto the agenda in mainstream disaster risk management during the meetings they attend within a national bureau for fighting natural disasters.

A third key informant OPD activist from Bangladesh explained that this type of work linking climate change and disability issues is starting to appear, but that this is still rare:

“My organisation is one of the first organisations who have talked about climate issues. As OPDs, there is a number of OPDs there and they have implemented projects on climate change, and mitigation and adaptation of climate change programs, and created awareness among persons with disabilities, and conducted some studies, so these types of work have been done in my rotation.”

However, these cases were unique in the research and there is still much to be done when it comes to awareness raising and promoting ways to learn and work together. Moreover, funding is not easy to come by to support this work. A key informant OPD activist from Bangladesh mentioned that many are still too busy fighting for their basic human rights to be able to focus their resources on climate action:

“When we are still fighting for these fundamental rights the impacts of climate change are less important to us for now”.

In addition to fighting for survival, many persons with disabilities face stigma and prejudice with negatively held, or ableist, views of capabilities. A key informant OPD activist from Bangladesh said that in their community persons with disabilities face discrimination from people around them:

“People around persons with disabilities give odd looks to them when they go outside, they show abnormal behaviour to them, and normally people around them can’t stomach them any longer, and their family also, they face different kind of discrimination. Most of the time their family doesn't want to accept them.”

A key informant OPD activist from Madagascar explained that there is still a belief and culture in the country that persons with disabilities have received a curse, or spell, which reproduces harmful ableist stereotypes. There are many levels to the stigma, sometimes resulting in internalised shame.

A key informant OPD activist from Madagascar who is deaf further described how society views persons with disabilities as incapable and dependent:

“It is society itself that still thinks that persons with disabilities are always [an extra] charge, not only for the family but really for the society in general”.

Another key informant OPD activist from Madagascar explained how she experiences double discrimination as a disabled woman, showing the importance of an intersectional lens in climate policies:

“As a person with disability, one is the victim of discrimination and stigmatization in the community and the non-accessibility of certain services (infrastructure, transport...) Sometimes, as a woman and as a disabled person, we have experienced double discrimination, especially when it comes to participating in the life of society.”

A key informant from Madagascar also highlighted an issue with community chains of information-sharing being broken due to shame for different reasons:

“Some people with disability are ashamed to share the information because we already...almost all of the time we get rejections, we face discrimination from the other people [...] The people will just kind of blame us or say bad words to us just because we share that kind of information so this is one way why we tend to keep the information.”

As a result of this, the information does not reach everyone. They also said that this happens with the work of their OPD also:

“Some people are...they’re supposed to get some assistance or help but they’re ashamed to admit the fact that they do need assistance, they do need help and they do deserve that help because it’s...that help is designated for them. [...] He or she thinks that ‘I’m only deaf and that’s all, I’m still a normal person’, so why should I be considered as a person who needs support. ”

Two key informant self-advocates with an intellectual disability who are both from Bangladesh, highlighted how they struggle with people around them not accepting them, underestimating them, and believing they are not capable of understanding or accomplishing much, including employment. One self-advocate said:

“They mock me very much. They don’t receive my qualities or my caliber, they just mock my challenge and aspects of the negative side of my disability. I think it’s my main challenge to overcome.”

The key informant comments show how the dominant culture still reinforces the idea of shame and incapacity to participate in general society, which carries into being seen as active contributors into climate action. Inclusive policies, then, need to look at, and address, the traditional and bureaucratic cultural practices that end up negating participation to be effective. However, there is positive evidence of increased sensitization and awareness-raising leading to collaboration between different organizations and groups, and more disability inclusive climate action.

The World We Want

Each key informant was asked what world they envision in the future for persons with disabilities. The overarching message was for persons with disabilities to be more included and accepted in general society and by their national governments, as well as increased accessibility and participation in climate work. A key informant deaf OPD activist from Madagascar described a future of equality, where all persons with disabilities are treated equally:

“I want to see it like this — that there is no discrimination, there’s no exception, but all the people with disabilities get exactly the same assistance, the same aid. [...] There should be no more discrimination, there should be inclusion.”

A key informant disability activist and OPD organiser from Bangladesh commented how they want to see more disability inclusive international commitments and policies on climate change, as well as local frameworks and implementation. The key informant commented:

“Nothing about us without us. We want to lead, we want to talk ourselves, we want to build ourselves, we want to contribute for the community”.

A key informant OPD activist, from Madagascar, wished for the future; “there will be more consideration, more value given to people with disabilities”. Similarly, another OPD activist from Madagascar wants the future to be more focused on action instead of words, and that in their country people may say they want change but “most of the time this remains words, there is not visible action put in place in order to implement these words”, as has been shown throughout this publication.

The key informants interviewed also had suggestions and ideas on how to take this forward. A key informant disability activist and OPD organiser from Bangladesh gave some ideas as to how disability representation and participation can be improved. They highlighted that their organisation is one of the first to discuss climate issues, and that several OPDs have begun to implement projects on climate change, mitigation and adaptation, and awareness-raising, which is a start. However, more needs to be done:

“Firstly, the disability movement should raise the issues [of climate change] as one of the core issues of the disability rights movement. Secondly, I think international agencies who are supporting climate change, they must include disability inclusion. [...] Like UN agencies who are working on climate change, they need to raise the issues and bring the issues to the front, and they can ask their partner to include disability in their activities, it is very important.”

The issue of access to humanitarian aid and shelters will continue to be on the advocacy agenda, until persons with disabilities have access on an equal basis with others to humanitarian aid. A key informant deaf OPD activist from Madagascar described their experience during the recent cyclones in the country where information was delayed for persons with disabilities:

“Last year and this year Madagascar had at least seven cyclones and they went one after another. So, people almost didn’t have time to recover from the destruction left by the first cyclone and then the second cyclone already

hit again and so on and so forth. This caused very much damage for everybody, especially for persons with disabilities. The problem is also a problem of communication. They don't get communication; they don't get information in real time."

The same key informant also mentioned that even when there is emergency aid and other measures available for persons with disabilities, it is often only in certain areas of the country, or for certain disability groups. The key informant gave an example of a cyclone where the government only asked for statistics of victims in select regions to send aid to, but she highlighted that there are victims in all regions across the country who are not receiving that aid:

"The government should visit all the places in Madagascar, not only target or focus on one or two places, because in every region of Madagascar there are persons with disabilities, there are people with hearing disabilities. She wants that all of them will be considered and all of them will be visited. [...] When there is aid, most of the aid go to the people with physical disabilities, I notice very little help for people with hearing disabilities. I want to see that there's no discrimination, there's no exception, but all the persons with disabilities get exactly the same assistance, the same aid."



Key recommendations and ending remarks

Studies show that respecting the rights of persons with disabilities and other marginalised groups by including them in policy and decision-making processes leads to “stronger climate actions and more resilient societies”⁷. Despite this, persons with disabilities’ perspectives are often excluded. Persons with disabilities have a unique set of skills and knowledge invaluable to climate action and mitigation that come from their everyday experiences of navigating through different types of barriers through assessing risks, overcoming hazards, and problem solving. The question is how can we create climate policies and inclusive climate action if some groups are excluded? Climate change affects all humans on earth, and many are differently affected than others, which means that comprehensive climate policies need to be inclusive to make a real difference. Beyond a benefit for persons with disabilities themselves, inclusive climate policies and a disability perspective is also a benefit to broader society as accessibility benefits others such as pregnant women, injured individuals, the elderly, and children⁸. Accessibility and associated budgets need to be an integral part of any disability inclusive climate action policy and its associated implementation plan.

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) calls on all governments to ensure persons with disabilities and their representative organisations are included in all policy making, including climate policies. Whilst inclusive climate justice is increasingly being addressed and considered to contribute to wider social transformation for all, including persons with disabilities and other marginalised groups, there is a gap in the application of the CRPD in environmental justice. Moreover, the UN body monitoring the CRPD has been the least active of all on climate change⁹, proving a lack of priority for the intersections of climate and disability.

It then becomes up to the international community, civil society and OPDs to provide humanitarian support during disasters, as well as to raise the issue of climate and disability onto the agenda. Many agencies, such as Humanity & Inclusion, Women’s Refugee Commission and CBM Global ourselves, have developed guidelines for humanitarian action for persons with disabilities¹⁰, but more international and national policies that link disability and climate are needed. One such policy document which has been influenced by disability advocates is the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction which aligns with Article 11 of the CRPD, concerning the rights of persons with disabilities to be protected during emergencies. However, the existing policies that do link climate and disability are mainly concerned with disaster risk management and miss the importance of the wider debate on inclusive climate policies.

⁷ CCD et al., 2019, pp4

⁸ CCD et al., 2019, pp4-5

⁹ Twigg et al., 2018, pp30

¹⁰ Twigg et al., 2018, pp10

As there is no conclusive data on persons with disabilities and the impacts of climate change, a conclusive statement as to what extent they are affected is hard to justify as many of these population categories are not even recognised by the governments and societies. However, climate change does impact persons with disabilities in many ways, and disability inclusive climate policies would go a long way to ensure that ableist views are curbed and persons with disabilities are included.

We will conclude with the hopeful words from one of the key informants OPD activists from Madagascar:

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“There are not very many people who choose this kind of theme [...]. But you¹¹ dared, you decided to do that and it’s very important to me. [...] If [more people] choose to discuss or to learn about climate change it will be a higher contribution to the fight against climate change in this world and there will be certainly a greater result. Especially another good point is you included disabled people. Because most of the time those are the vulnerable people and they’re always victims in any...in almost every change in this world”

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To conclude we only want to echo these words and encourage everyone of us to dare! Dare to be the change you want to see in the world and to amplify perspectives of people who are rarely emphasized. Together we can achieve an environmentally just and inclusive world for all.

¹¹ Informant is addressing the researcher.