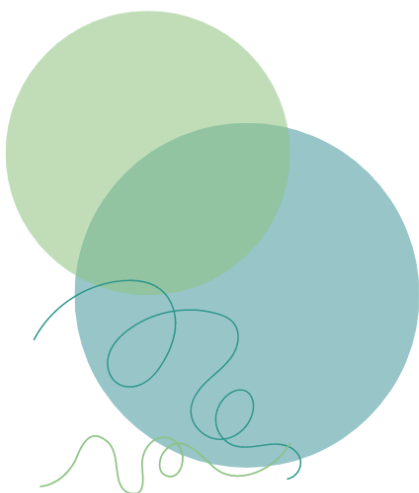


Climate Change and Disability

A Global Action Plan Briefing Paper

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OVERVIEW

Introduction

This paper sets out to explore the relationship between climate change and disability. The aim of this piece is to serve as a guide on these issues and also to provide practical examples of measures to include disabled people meaningfully in the response to climate change.

This guide is a result of the collection and analysis of data to advance the understanding of the current state of the climate and disability community. We consider the current level of inclusion and representation in this area and the attitudes towards this. A series of recommendations are then provided which can be implemented to ensure disabled people are included in climate change responses, both on a more mainstream, statutory level and on grassroots, community level.

From research conducted elsewhere, we know that:

- Climate change has a significant disproportionate impact on disabled people, both directly and indirectly.
- The cost-of-living issue posed by climate change is compounded by the cost of disability in Ireland, which ranges from an estimated €9,000 to almost €12,000 per year.
- Disabled people struggle to get access to healthcare through a number of obstacles, including attitudinal barriers, physical barriers, communication barriers, and financial barriers. This is worsened by an expected increase of pressure on the healthcare system due to climate change.
- It is beneficial to analyse climate change and disability through an intersectional framework.
- The focus of climate action should be *climate justice*.

Headline findings from our survey data

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|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• There is strong consensus among disability organisations surveyed that disabled people are not being sufficiently represented in the overall climate change response and discourse.• Over 68% of respondents either disagreed (strongly or somewhat) that the community and voluntary sector was doing a good job of including disabled people.• Of those familiar with the Government's 2021 Climate Action Plan, almost three quarters thought it did not adequately address the impact of climate change on disabled people. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Areas thought to have the most negative impact on disabled people that are related to climate change include the rising cost of living, increased pressure on the healthcare system, and the lack of disability inclusive climate change response.• There is significant concern over the potential shortages of necessities such as fuel, food, electricity, medicine, etc.• Potential supports respondents suggested include: further education and awareness about disability issues; increased representation of disabled people; increased funding and resources; grassroots supports; and improved accessibility. |
|---|---|

Summary of Recommendations

- More efforts are required to increase awareness amongst workers in statutory and community sectors of the impact of climate change on disabled people;
- Climate action and policy making should be viewed through a climate justice lens, to ensure that vulnerable groups are not left behind;
- Conscious attempts should be made to remove barriers that restrict disabled people from participating in the responses to climate change;
- All actors must seek to ensure that climate action is truly inclusive and does not inadvertently lead to a loss of accessibility;
- The Government should commit to providing further financial support to disabled people who are most affected by the cost of living crisis, which is expected to worsen as a result of climate change;
- As climate change increases pressure on the health system, steps need to be taken to improve accessibility and affordability of healthcare;
- Community support systems and initiatives which are beneficial for disabled people and wider communities should be supported.

RESEARCH PROCESS

This study is based on a mixed-methodological approach. First, a **review of relevant literature** analyses and outlines the global issues concerning disabled people¹ and the impacts posed by climate change. Second, data was collected by means of an **online survey** which contained both focused and open-ended questions, the latter of which forms part of the suggestions and recommendations for proposed future actions. An online survey was proposed in the hopes of achieving a wider reach. A total of 40 questionnaires were circulated by means of email, with a response rate of 55%.

Participant profile

The survey was sent to individuals working in Ireland in climate and/or disability in both the statutory sector and the community and voluntary sector, as well as climate and disability activists in Ireland. Within these groups, those who participated included disabled people, disability campaigners (both in a professional capacity in NGOs and disability rights organisations, and voluntarily in local disability activist groups).

¹ We understand that there is a complexity concerning disability and language. The aim of this paper is to reflect the social model of disability, which stipulates that: “people have impairments but that the oppression, exclusion and discrimination people with impairments face is not an inevitable consequence of having an impairment, but is caused instead by the way society is run and organised.” (Inclusion London, 2015: 7). In other words, ‘disability’ in this context refers to the understanding that “people are **disabled by barriers in society**, not by their impairment or difference” (SCOPE UK, 2022).

CONTEXT

In order to understand the relationship between climate change and disability, it is important to consider relevant literature and materials to assist in identifying the main themes. In a national context, approximately 13.5% of the population have a disability, according to the most recent census data (Central Statistics Office, 2016).

Disproportionate impact

It is said that climate change has a significant disproportionate impact on disabled people. The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) found that disabled people “are at greater risk from the adverse impacts of climate change owing to a variety of social and economic factors”, and that “poverty, discrimination and stigma are key components that affect the exposure of persons with disabilities to the impacts of climate change.” (2020: 15)

While there are very direct impacts of climate change that negatively affect disabled people, there are also indirect effects. Higher ambient temperatures, elevated air pollutants, and increasing exposure to extreme weather events disproportionately threaten access to healthcare for disabled people. This exacerbates existing inequalities in the lack of access to healthcare and other issues such as poverty, lack of access to education, employment, and accessible housing (Stein and Stein, 2021).

In relation to accessing healthcare, disabled people encounter a range of barriers that take on numerous different forms, according to the World Health Organisation (2011: 62):

- **Attitudinal barriers:** prejudice and limited knowledge about the needs of specific disabilities from medical professionals.
- **Physical barriers:** Many medical facilities located outside of city centres and said buildings not built with accessibility in mind.
- **Communication barriers:** Medical information and prescriptions often not being available in accessible formats such as braille or large print, and often presented in a complex manner.
- **Financial barriers:** Inability to afford private healthcare and having to resort to being put on long waiting lists.

Another area of concern relates to the fact that the mortality rate for disabled people is two to four times higher than for non-disabled people when natural disasters and extreme weather events occur (Izutsu, 2019: 37). Similarly, it has been found people with pre-existing mental illness such as psychosis, dementia and substance abuse, are two to three times more at risk of death during heatwaves. This is partly due to medication potentially becoming less effective and the side-effects of medication affecting the body’s ability to regulate temperature (Lawrence et al, 2021: 11).

A final disproportionate impact relates to the cost-of-living crisis. The median income for disabled people in employment in Ireland is 56% of the state median (CSO, 2021). In addition, the average annual costs of disability in Ireland ranges from over €9,000 to almost €12,000 (Indecon, 2021: 115). With this in mind, the issue compounded further, as Watkiss et al (2016: 3)

predicts that climate change will lead to major increases in the price of food, water, energy, housing costs and insurance - among many other direct and indirect costs.

Intersectionality

The concept of intersectionality is an analytical framework which is based on critical race theory and feminist studies. It focuses on social characteristics such as gender, race, class, age, disability, and sexual orientation and how “they intersect each other to drive and exacerbate privilege, discrimination, and oppression” (Amorim-Maia et al., 2022).

In the context of climate change and disability it is important to consider that these issues cannot be viewed in a vacuum; other overlapping factors (such as race, gender, and sexual orientation) must be considered to fully understand the extent to which people will be affected.

These considerations bring the concept of climate justice into focus. This is where one recognises that “actions taken to deliberately shift social-ecological systems towards more sustainable trajectories can have substantial social impacts and exclude people from decision-making processes” (Bennett et al., 2019: 11). Proponents of this form of climate action argue that it is not enough to simply attempt to tackle climate change in isolation, but instead it should be intertwined with social justice, and it should attempt to foster a sustainable and inclusive society at the same time. An example of this can be seen in the earlier reference to the cost-of-living crisis, where there is an ‘intersection’ between disability and class. Only considering disability when analysing this issue would lead to an incomplete picture; considering disabled people are more exposed to living on lower incomes.

Consideration and Inclusion

The final notable aspect of the literature review is the importance placed on the consideration and inclusion of people with disabilities in climate action, as well as a common consensus that most mainstream climate responses are lacking in this area. There has been criticism from organisations, such as the International Disability Alliance (2021: 2), that their active inclusion is essential, given that disabled people were identified as one of the groups most acutely affected by climate change in the 2015 Paris Agreement. The IDA stated that disabled people have been “largely excluded from decision-making processes and outcomes under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, as well as from States’ climate change policies and plans at the domestic level”. They argue that this has very serious consequences, causing disabled people to be left behind in relief and response efforts “due to inaccessible disaster preparedness plans, systemic discrimination, and widespread poverty.”

The UNHRC (2020: 15) is similarly emphatic in its beliefs that proper consideration of the impact of climate change on disabled people is vital, stating that it is “critical for effective climate action and to prevent climate change from exacerbating inequalities.” As with the case with the IDA, the UNHRC stresses the need for disabled people to be active participants in the fight against climate change. They add that it is important for states and other relevant stakeholders to secure meaningful, informed, and effective participation of disabled people and their representative organisations at all levels.

The stances that these two leading organisations hold speak to two central concerns that have been highlighted throughout this review of relevant literature. First, it is vital to consider the impact of climate change on disabled people through a climate and social justice lens. Second, significant improvements are needed in the representation of disabled people in the response to climate change.

Furthermore, the literature review has highlighted three main themes:

1. A widespread understanding that climate change disproportionately affects disabled people.
2. The importance of an intersectional framework when analysing climate change and disability.
3. A consensus that not enough has been achieved to ensure that disabled people are included and considered in climate action.

SURVEY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section we outline the findings of the data collected through an online survey. This survey was completed by individuals working in Ireland in climate and/or disability in both the statutory sector and the community and voluntary sector, as well as climate and disability activists in Ireland.

The survey received 22 responses in total, with almost six out of ten people surveyed working in the community and voluntary sector, the remainder working in the statutory sector.

- Respondents were asked to assess the degree to which they felt a number of climate change related issues are currently affecting, or will in the future affect, disabled people from 'no impact' to 'very high impact'. The most prominent concern was the issue of the rising cost of living, with 17 out of 22 respondents indicating that they felt this was a 'very high impact' issue.
Other issues ranked as very high concerns include increased pressure on the healthcare system and a lack of a disability-inclusive response.
- Participants were invited to provide further climate change related issues which they felt were impacting on disabled people. The most common issue raised was the potential shortages of numerous vital resources, including fuel, food, electricity, and medicine.
- There was a notable level of disagreement (91%) amongst respondents when asked if they thought that mainstream responses to climate change have adequately considered and accommodated for the effects of climate change on disabled people.
- Most respondents indicated that they did *not* feel disabled people had been properly included in the mainstream climate change response, with 77% of people either strongly or somewhat in disagreement.
- The majority (68%) stated that they were familiar with the Government's 2021 Climate Action Plan. Of this cohort, an overwhelming majority of 73% of respondents felt that the plan did

not adequately address the effects of climate change on disabled people. The remainder (27%) said the plan 'somewhat' addressed these issues.

- Respondents were subsequently asked how they would assess the implementation of the government strategy in the area of climate change and disability. Responses were mixed: 50% stated they felt it was either 'very poor' or 'poor'; 31% assessed it as 'fair'; and 9% described it as either 'good' or 'very good'.
- Attitudes towards the community and voluntary sector were also assessed. A majority of 68% either strongly or somewhat disagreed that the sector was doing a good job in considering disabled people in their climate change response. More than a fifth (23%) somewhat agreed, however.
- In the final question surveyed, participants were invited to outline practical supports or resources they would like to see introduced that would improve the inclusion of disabled people in responding to climate change. Of the 68% of individuals who offered examples, these included:
 - Further education and increased public awareness about disability issues;
 - Increased representation for disabled people;
 - Increased funding;
 - Grassroots supports;
 - Improved accessibility.

Discussion

Reflecting on the findings above, an interesting parallel can be drawn between the survey results and the review of the literature. The most prominent responses that were assessed as 'very high impact' effects on disabled people included: rising cost of living; increased pressure on the healthcare system; and lack of a disability-inclusive response. These are issues which were identified in the literature review as being major concerns.

Notably, in an Irish context, some direct effects/impacts did not rank as highly in comparison to our international counterparts such as: water shortages; flooding; forced displacement; and extreme weather. Similarly, food insecurity and changes in food consumption were seen as issues which would have 'some' to 'high' impact. However, it is important to be aware that these issues are significant and ever-present concerns elsewhere.

The opportunity for participants to highlight further issues which they observed to be impactful provided interesting data. These responses were able to be broken down into two main themes:

1. Concerns over shortages of basic necessities

- Such as fuel, food, electricity, and medicine.
- Shortages such as these have the potential to worsen the cost-of-living issue, which is already compounded by the cost of disability, and deepend existing inequalities.

2. Concerns over climate action not properly considering the needs of disabled people

- o Well-meaning green initiatives can make things less accessible for disabled people.
- o An example of this can be noted from the introduction of paper straws to replace plastic straws. While paper straws are good for the environment, they are far less practical to use for those who need them as they are prone to melt.
- o Similarly, the push for more bike lanes and walkable communities can be very positive and can lend itself to areas becoming more accessible. However, it can present with the opposite outcome of being inaccessible for disabled people if they are not properly consulted and considered from the beginning of the process.

Elsewhere, the findings indicate a distinct disapproval over the lack of consideration and representation for disabled people in climate change efforts. This reflects concerns stated in the literature. In a similar vein, respondents were overwhelmingly of the opinion that not enough is being done to understand and mitigate the impact of government climate policy in Ireland on disabled people. Of those familiar with the Government's Climate Action Plan, no participant was of the opinion that the plan adequately addresses these issues.

The final question which invited participants to offer practical solutions to the issues they observed continues the thread of respondents being dissatisfied with the current state of disability action in Irish climate action. It is clear that respondents are in favour of drastically overhauling the status quo. Their answers can be broken down into five main themes:

- **Further education and increased public awareness about disability issues:** Further education about disability issues for people working in the climate sector. Attempts needed to increase awareness among those working in the sector and also the general public about how climate change is affecting disabled people.
- **Representation:** Increased representation for disabled people, both at a government level and at local organisational level. It should allow for disabled people to have a voice and opportunities for them to get involved in climate action.
- **Increased funding:** More investment from the state into the community and voluntary sector to allow new supports and initiatives to be established.
- **Grassroots supports:** More support at community level to help disabled people cope with climate change-related difficulties.
- **Improved accessibility:** It is important to appropriately facilitate disabled people by improving accessibility to ensure they can engage in climate action.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER ACTION

The following recommendations are based primarily on the themes and information identified in the literature review and the data collected in the survey. The themes identified show a number of key areas that need to be addressed. Here, we provide practical examples and ideas from practitioners on how improvements might be achieved.

To increase workers' awareness on the impact of climate change on disabled people:

- This is applicable to individuals working in statutory and community/volunteer sectors.
- Findings of the survey indicate that those working in the area feel that their colleagues are not sufficiently aware of the disproportionate impact of climate change on disabled people.
- Initiatives such as workshops and information sessions may be beneficial to help them become more informed.

To conduct further research and analyses using an intersectional framework:

- We know from the literature review of the importance of using an intersectional framework regarding any assessment of the impact of climate change on vulnerable groups.
- Further research on the topic of climate action, justice, and responses should incorporate intersectionality as much as possible, to allow for a fuller understanding of why and how disabled people are impacted.

To ensure climate action is based on climate justice:

- For climate action to be truly effective, it is clear that it is necessary to focus on incorporating social justice and intersectionality.
- This is important to ensure that vulnerable groups are not left behind and instead given the opportunity to have an equal and constructive voice in creating a sustainable future.

To improve accessibility of climate action and increase representation of disabled people:

- The survey results highlight the barriers preventing some disabled people from engaging fully in climate action due to a lack of accessibility.
- It is important that hybrid/online options are offered to allow people to engage. Physical spaces and meetings need to be accessible, also.
- Climate groups and organisations should create a permanent accessibility officer position.

To ensure that climate action does not inadvertently lead to a loss of accessibility:

- Robust systems are needed by groups and organisations who are involved in any form of climate action to be sure that plans have properly considered the needs of disabled people. Disabled people should be consulted in this process.

- As mentioned above, the appointment of an accessibility officer would be hugely beneficial in this regard.

To provide Government aid for cost of living:

- The Government should commit to providing further financial support to disabled people who are most affected by the cost of living crisis, which is compounded by the annual cost of disability.

To improve access to healthcare:

- As climate change worsens along with the existing pressures on the health service, this will disproportionately affect disabled people who require healthcare.
- The government needs to prepare accordingly to mitigate these challenges.

To create more grassroots community support for disabled people:

- Community supports based on mutual aid being set up would be beneficial for disabled people and wider communities.
- Initiatives such as community gardens could provide a means for people to access food and essentials, alleviating the cost-of-living crisis.

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