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Making migration accessible: Inclusive relocation for people with disabilities

Alex Ghenis

*Policy and Research Specialist,
World Institute on Disability*

As climate change progresses, people with disabilities (PWDs) will arguably be the single most vulnerable population group to its many consequences, yet they have thus far been left out of nearly all policy discussions regarding adaptation and risk management. PWDs have specialized needs with regards to housing, infrastructure, medical systems, government services, support networks and more in order to maintain health,

well-being and independence. Yet each of these systems will become disrupted by the effects of climate change, endangering individuals in the process. In addition, climate-related migration will bring up a host of other issues that will cause problems for PWDs, including the need for accessible housing and social services at areas of in-migration, accessible transit between locations and maintenance and/or re-establishment of interpersonal



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support networks. And because people with disabilities are present in every community and intertwined in their social and economic systems, addressing these issues is imperative for the disability community and the population at large. It is also a matter of climate justice for one of the most under-recognized – but most vulnerable – groups in the climate change sphere.

The work towards climate justice for people with disabilities who may migrate or those who are “trapped” and unable to do so will be both complex and difficult. Unfortunately, there is a significant lack of research and policy analysis regarding the experiences of people with disabilities facing climate change – and specifically climate-related migration. There are, however, papers and other works that can be pieced together to create a starting point for baseline understandings and proposals. For example, a good amount has already been written on climate-related migration and displacement, but the majority ignores disability entirely, while the remainder simply mentions disability in a list of “vulnerable groups” without addressing its unique and complex dynamics. This is in line with mainstream climate change literature as well – for example, an online search of “IPCC¹ disability” yields nothing of substance. There is also research and policy work regarding people with disabilities and forced displacement; however, those pieces are almost universally in the context of refugees in conflict situations, while there is a very limited knowledge in the context of displacement due to natural disasters (including specific events such as Hurricane Katrina in the United States) and displacement in general terms. Finally, there is very limited research on the intersection of climate change and disability, yet all of this neglects climate-related migration as a factor to be addressed. Clearly, more work has to be done by the climate change and disability communities, ideally in collaboration. Still, it is possible to draw connections between the existing literature and use general insights on disability needs and policies to manage climate-related migration for the disability community.

Climate-related migration: The disability perspective

Persons with disabilities are not a homogeneous group; they have different capacities and needs, and contribute in different ways to their communities. When displaced, they have the same basic needs as other persons. In addition, they may experience difficulty in moving, hearing, seeing, communicating or learning. These difficulties amplify the often severe challenges posed by

forced displacement. Persons with disabilities may also need additional protection. They are at heightened risk of violence, including sexual and domestic abuse; exploitation by family members; discrimination; and exclusion from access to humanitarian assistance, education, livelihoods, health care, nationality, and other services.

– United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2011

People with disabilities are uniquely vulnerable in general and in situations of/in relation to climate-related migration. This stems from an intersection of personal characteristics, such as limited mobility or sensory disabilities (such as blindness or deafness), and social factors, such as lack of accommodations during disaster response or no accessible transportation along migration routes. It is impossible to “cure” migrants’ disabilities (a frequent focus of the “medical model” of disability), so we must instead understand their characteristics and experiences during climate-related migration – and address those experiences accordingly.

Some relevant information around disability in general include the following:

1. People with disabilities constitute approximately 15 per cent of the global population and are an extremely diverse group with a diverse set of needs; they are also present in every large population group regardless of nationality, race, location or socioeconomic status (WHO, 2015).
2. Among other things, PWDs generally have the following: (a) disproportionately high rates of poverty and unemployment; (b) greater reliance on government services, health care and individual support networks; and (c) needs around accessible housing, transportation and public spaces. More than 20 per cent of the poorest people worldwide are people with disabilities, and 82 per cent of persons with disabilities in developing countries live below the poverty line (Lewis and Ballard, 2011).
3. People with disabilities are especially vulnerable to both the direct and indirect consequences of climate change. Direct consequences include but are not limited to managing stronger storms, maintaining health during heat waves and accessing potable water during droughts. Indirect consequences include disrupted economies and government services, violence and injury from climate-related conflict, fractured communities and support networks, and climate-related migration and resettlement (Lewis and Ballard, 2011; Wolbring, 2009).

1 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).



In Battambang and Rattanak Mondul districts of Cambodia, hundreds have lost limbs or have been injured stepping on one of the unexploded mines that litter the surrounding fields. © IOM, 2010 (Photo: Thomas Moran)

The disparate situations and needs of migrants with disabilities are complex, but nearly universally increase their vulnerability during evacuation, transit and relocation. Factors that are especially pertinent to climate-related forced migration include the following:

1. Disproportionate rates of poverty and limited resources in the disability community, in combination with specialized and often-expensive housing and other needs, creates a diminished capacity to adapt in situ in a way that would allow PWDs to remain at their home in a secure and healthy way. This puts special pressure on PWDs to relocate to maintain safety and well-being regardless of their ability to do so.
2. Because of disability-related barriers, PWDs are likely to significantly delay their own migration and experience greater climate-related consequences in the process; they may also be abandoned outright, as those who are able to move (including friends, family and caregivers) do so and leave PWDs without necessary support. Some of these barriers include the following: (a) lack of access to accessible transportation; (b) inability to find help for the moving process; (c) reliance on location-based health care, welfare payments or government services with no ability to transfer or re-establish those services elsewhere; and (d) dependence on family or support networks who choose not to move, even though the individual with the disability would prefer to leave if they could do so independently.
3. PWDs are especially vulnerable during the migration process with regards to the following: (a) attaining accessible transportation, including for medical equipment; (b) access to appropriate housing, including mobile or temporary encampments; (c) provision of health-care and other medical needs; (d) accessible information, such as access to American sign language (ASL) interpreters or Braille communications; (e) maintenance of personal support networks; and (f) disproportionate rates of physical and sexual violence. This can lead to significant health consequences, psychological and physical trauma, delayed migration, and/or abandonment during the migration process (UNHCR, 2011).
4. For those with sensory disabilities, communication methods vary by location (for example, ASL is only used in certain countries) and potential translators may become unavailable, so migrants may encounter communication barriers that affect independence, safety and smooth migration and resettlement (UNHCR, 2011).
5. Many countries and populations have resisted or rejected immigrants with disabilities, including disabled members of otherwise-accepted groups, such as conflict refugees or persons fleeing natural disasters. These governments or populations often argue that PWDs are an unsustainable drain on resources and/or cannot contribute to the economy in a way that compensates for their presence; other times, they are rejected through outright ableism.

and disability discrimination (Mansha, 2010). PWDs who are turned away may then be stuck in unsafe border areas or forced to return home to dangerous conditions and persecution; they may also be separated from family or caregivers who are able to cross borders and choose to do so.

6. Accessible housing, infrastructure, health-care and social services may not be available at migrants' destinations; and if those systems are available in general, they may not be able to accommodate or serve all migrants with disabilities, leaving some without necessary resources or unable to navigate their community independently. The higher costs associated with accessible housing and disability in general, combined with disproportionate poverty of migrants with disabilities, will increase the difficulty of acquiring accessible housing and other services.
7. Social and personal support networks of family, friends and caregivers may become scattered or overstressed during migration. Many PWDs will thus need to re-establish or completely rebuild those support networks to maintain health and independence, and those who are not able to will experience related consequences.

Stakeholders must understand and address these issues – and more – in order to protect PWDs' lives and well-being throughout climate-related migration. Doing so will require broad-based principles and movements, as well as focused actions targeting the multitude of factors and vulnerabilities above. It will also take the efforts of stakeholders across the climate-migration and disability communities. Only through mutual understanding and collaboration can these groups create real change.

A rights-based approach

Ensuring safe and equitable migration for PWDs should be pursued by combining well-crafted policies and inclusive logistics, all done under a broader rights-based framework. The latter can be pulled from a number of international conventions and resolutions to reinforce freedom of movement in relation to climate-related migration, as well as PWDs' specific protections and rights to do so. Relevant documents include the Universal Declaration on Human Rights ("the Declaration"), the UN Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees ("the Convention") and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). These international conventions and others contain multiple



An aid station is set up to supply internally displaced people with medical and hygienic supplies in Pakistan. There is generally substandard medical care available to migrants. © Wikimedia Commons, 2010 (Photo: Jenie Fisher)

sections, subsections, articles and individual conventions, and each of these can be referred to individually or in combination to address specific situations and goals. Referencing multiple conventions and articles therein can especially highlight the broad importance of protecting PWDs in the face of adverse impacts of climate change and climate-related migration.

The three international agreements mentioned are extremely valuable as statements to support climate migrants with disabilities. The Declaration and the Convention address freedom of movement and the right to asylum, and also recognize the importance of protecting especially vulnerable populations, which the disability community absolutely is. Advocates must thus raise awareness about PWDs' importance as a "vulnerable population" within broad-based human rights frameworks; then, they must also point out the unique dynamics that are not fully addressed by simply labelling them a "vulnerable population" alongside other groups, such as women, children, racial minorities and the elderly.

As policymakers and advocates address the disability–climate–migration nexus, the UNCRPD is arguably the more powerful document. The UNCRPD consists of 30 rights-based articles ranging from freedom from persecution to participation in meaningful activities, as well as 20 articles on logistics and implementation. It was signed in 2007 and currently has 160 signatories (approximately 20 have signed but have not yet ratified, including the United States). With regards to migration, it has two very powerful articles which, taken in the correct context, can be used to advocate for PWDs throughout climate-related migration. These articles, Article 11 and Article 18, are as follows:

UNCRPD Article 11: Situations of Risk and Humanitarian Emergencies

1. States Parties shall take, in accordance with their obligations under international law, including international humanitarian law and international human rights law, all necessary measures to ensure the protection and safety of persons with disabilities in situations of risk, including situations of armed conflict, humanitarian emergencies and the occurrence of natural disasters (UNGA, 2006).

Article 11 addresses protection and safety of PWDs "in situations of risk, including situations of armed conflict, humanitarian emergencies and the occurrence of natural disasters". All too often, these sorts of declarations are construed as applying to in situ "protection and safety", such as emergency shelters and humanitarian camps.

However, advocates can reference Article 11 to highlight the need for appropriate, safe and effective relocation measures as a response to both short- and long-term climate-related risks. Further, as mentioned in the special edition of *Forced Migration Review* on disability and displacement, Article 11 can work in conjunction with many others:

"Read in conjunction with other relevant articles of the CRPD, such as Article 4 (General obligations), Article 9 (Accessibility), Article 10 (Right to life), Article 17 (Protecting the integrity of the person) and Article 19 (Living independently and being included in the community), Article 11 is a powerful tool to ensure that people with disabilities are included in all aspects of humanitarian response and displacement, from recovery to rebuilding and resettlement." (Phillips, Estey and Ennis, 2010)

Thus, Article 11 is valuable when protecting climate migrants with disabilities, especially when used alongside the other articles listed in the paragraph above. Article 18, "Liberty of Movement and Nationality", is an especially powerful piece relevant for climate-related migration. It reads:

UNCRPD Article 18: Liberty of Movement and Nationality

1. States Parties shall recognize the rights of persons with disabilities to liberty of movement, to freedom to choose their residence and to a nationality, on an equal basis with others, including by ensuring that persons with disabilities:
 - a. Have the right to acquire and change a nationality and are not deprived of their nationality arbitrarily or on the basis of disability;
 - b. Are not deprived, on the basis of disability, of their ability to obtain, possess and utilize documentation of their nationality or other documentation of identification, or to utilize relevant processes such as immigration proceedings that may be needed to facilitate exercise of the right to liberty of movement;
 - c. Are free to leave any country, including their own;
 - d. Are not deprived, arbitrarily or on the basis of disability, of the right to enter their own country.
2. Children with disabilities shall be registered immediately after birth and shall have the right from birth to a name, the right to acquire a nationality and, as far as possible, the right to know and be cared for by their parents (UNGA, 2006).

Section 1 of Article 18 incorporates general statements about freedom of movement similar to those found in the Declaration and the Protocol, further highlighting the importance of these freedoms to all communities, disability included. More importantly, it underscores the right to be free from restrictions on movement based on one's disability, arbitrary or otherwise. This applies, for example, to refusal of entry through arguments about "social burdens" and non-productive bodies, or through outright ableism and discrimination. It also applies to arbitrary abandonment based on one's disability throughout the migration process – or, arguably, a lack of accommodation during the migration process that would make it difficult or impossible to undertake. In combination, Articles 11 and 18 can be used to push for safe and protective migration and relocation without arbitrary barriers or lack of accommodation.

Policies and actions

Ultimately, disability's complex and unique dynamics means that managing PWDs' migration, displacement or relocation will take a unique approach unlike any used for other vulnerable population thus far. Those other approaches generally break up population by location (denoting climate consequences, adaptation options and potential migration pathways) and broader demographic groups (denoting socioeconomic characteristics, financial and political standing, and group power dynamics). However, all of this is largely done without recognizing the diversity of individual characteristics, capabilities and needs within groups. It instead reverts to an able-bodied norm that does not question accessibility of housing and infrastructure, specialized health-care needs or capabilities or even individuals' capacity to work and sustain livelihoods. This leaves behind anybody who does not fit the healthy, productive, able-bodied narrative laid out in policy and planning, risking PWDs' lives and livelihoods (Grech and Pisani, 2015).

Disability-inclusive planning must thus begin by challenging this able-bodied framework and incorporate migrants with disabilities in a way that maintains health, physical access and necessary support throughout the migration or relocation process and once at their destination. This involves maximizing accessibility of transit and infrastructure (namely temporary camps, long-term housing and public spaces); maintaining personal care and communal support networks; and guaranteeing vital health-care and social services. Concrete actions can be pulled from existing guidance on accommodating refugees with disabilities, as well as extrapolating on climate-related migration proposals in a way that addresses PWDs as a group.

Some of these actions include the following:

1. **When planned relocation is necessary as the last option, pursue planned, proactive relocation** (Schade et al., 2015): Preparing to support migrants with disabilities takes time and investment, from building accessible housing to reinforcing social services for more recipients. Establishing those investments and support will be significantly easier if they are done in advance; they will also be easier if planners are able to identify the projected amount of incoming migrants with disabilities and their disability characteristics. Similarly, personal support networks (family, friends and caregivers) are much more likely to remain intact when migration is proactive rather than reactive.
2. **Strive for universal access in all infrastructure and services along migration routes and at destination areas** (Wolbring, 2009): Physical access includes, for example, building standards for new residences or temporary encampments to accommodate wheelchairs, full accessibility of public spaces and accessible transportation networks. Programmatic access may include the provision of sufficient health-care and personal support services, available communication assistance for those with sensory disabilities and employment support to help PWDs become self-sufficient and fully integrated into the community.
3. **Institute disability-inclusive disaster response and evacuation to protect lives and well-being during initial displacement**: This includes measures, such as providing accessible transportation, ensuring sufficient personal support and distributing appropriate evacuation warnings and instructions for those with sensory disabilities. Inclusive disaster response will also transport PWDs to destinations that provide accessible infrastructure and programming, as mentioned above.
4. **Assist PWDs to maintain personal support networks throughout migration**: Many PWDs require help from friends, family and caregivers for activities of daily living and personal care to remain healthy and independent in the community. It is thus imperative to keep support networks intact to the greatest extent possible, from the migration source through the end of relocation. If networks become scattered, decision makers can explore alternatives, such as providing temporary personal support through newly established entities or systems and streamlining rebuilding processes at destinations.



Some migration pathways are difficult or impossible to manage for wheelchairs or other mobility equipment.
© Rick McCharles, 2007

5. **Work with local, regional and international disability organizations wherever possible, and actively include migrants with disabilities in all relevant education and decision-making** (UNHCR, 2011): Disability organizations can provide expertise and insight that will facilitate smooth migration for PWDs and ensure their relevant rights, as well as advocate for PWDs' needs. Migrants themselves will provide first-hand information on personal situations and so that decision makers can take necessary action in appropriate, situation-specific manners.
6. **Implement human rights conventions, including the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, the UN Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees and the UNCRPD:** Following these conventions entails guaranteeing the right to movement and asylum, the right to safety through migration and protection from violence and persecution throughout. It also compels decision makers to ensure that PWDs are not denied the right to movement or denied entry to any country because of their disability. Relevant actors should also identify all other conventions, treaties and protocols that can be used to safeguard safety and well-being, then implement them fully and push all other stakeholders to do the same.

Both the climate-migration and disability communities must act to achieve these goals, and they must work together with mutual respect and mutual understanding. However, few in those communities are even aware of the intersection of climate-related migration and disability in the first place. With that in mind, decision makers and advocates must raise awareness and build capacity of all stakeholders about this critical connection. This also means informing PWDs, disability organizations, advocacy partners and relevant agencies about the dynamics of climate migration and its effects at all levels. The intersection of climate-related migration and disability represents new territory and challenges for all. It also raises opportunities for fully inclusive planning, comprehensive policies, and the true pursuit of climate justice. It is thus imperative to learn more about this critical intersection, and take action to protect the lives and well-being of people with disabilities worldwide.

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About the Author



Alex Ghenis is a Policy and Research Specialist at the World Institute on Disability in Berkeley, California. He specializes in climate adaptation and climate justice for people with disabilities at all scales. This initiative began in 2015 with the founding of the New Earth Disability project, which so far has compiled many relevant resources and presented original research on extreme heat waves, climate-related migration, and general climate change subjects. In addition, Alex works on revising benefits policies and expanding economic empowerment of people with disabilities in order to increase employment, financial well-being and independence.

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To discuss any aspect of the *Migration, Environment and Climate Change: Policy Brief Series*, or to submit an article, please contact:

Frank Laczko (flaczko@iom.int)
Susanne Melde (smelde@iom.int)
Sieun Lee (silee@iom.int)
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