POSTER

The State of Climate Change and Disability: A Survey

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Abstract

As climate change continues to impact disabled communities around the world disproportionately, there is an urgent call to design accessible climate change interventions. However, there is a need first to understand the lived experiences of disabled populations experiencing the effects of climate change. In this poster, we analyze a diverse range of source documents (N = 168) to characterize these experiences. We highlight five themes embedded in the source documents, including the inaccessibility of the climate movement and the compounding toll on mental and physical health. Finally, we present an open call to the community as initial steps toward designing accessible climate change interventions.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing → Accessibility**; • **Social and professional topics → People with disabilities**; • **General and reference → Surveys and overviews**.

Keywords

Climate Change, Disability, Accessible Climate Change Interventions, Sustainable HCI, Climate Change and Accessibility

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1 Introduction

The United Nations defines Climate Change as "long-term shifts in temperatures and weather patterns" [30]. Two categories best describe climate change-related events: sudden- and slow-onset climate change. Sudden-onset climate change refers to abrupt changes in a climate system that result in extensive effects over a short time (for example, cyclones and wildfires) [32]. Slow-onset climate change is changes to the environment that happen over a long period of time (for example, rising sea levels and increased temperatures) [11]. These effects can be detrimental and have long-lasting consequences. Climate interventions are strategies and technologies implemented to help adapt to or mitigate the effects of climate change. These interventions include strategies such as government evacuation and communication plans, particularly during disaster response and recovery. Technology-focused interventions can include early-warning applications, monitoring applications, and systems embedded into infrastructure, such as sirens, public address systems, and monitoring and sensor arrays. Unfortunately, there are multiple ways in which climate interventions can be inaccessible to disabled populations. In this work, we aim to understand how climate change has impacted and continues to impact the lived experiences of disabled people. We surveyed existing online sources that focus on the intersection of climate change and disability. We included a diverse range of sources, such as academic articles, governing body reports, and media, including podcasts and online reflections, that detailed lived experiences. These diverse sources were intentional because not all lived experiences are represented in academic publications.

2 Methodology

2.1 Database Creation

Two team members created a dataset of source documents [1] related to climate change and disability. Specifically, this includes resources that discuss the impact of climate change on disabled people or disability in the environmental movement. We used Google, Google Scholar, and citation following to find academic papers, podcast episodes, white papers, news articles, and blog posts on these topics. When considering whether to include a resource that we found, we would consider whether it discussed and connected some aspect of disability with some aspect of climate change or its impacts. Any resource that discussed disability in a way potentially related to climate change, but not explicitly, was excluded. Similarly, any resource about climate change that mentioned disability but did not consider it in depth was excluded. Potentially relevant resources that discussed disaster response or relief without explicitly relating it to climate change were also included at first if they discussed natural disasters that could be affected by climate change.

[1] We use the term 'source' to encompass the diverse categories of information we identified.

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2.2 Database Review

Our initial dataset included 253 source documents. These sources were split among four members of the research team. Each source had two readers. Readers recorded a summary of the source, its findings, and its methods. They also tagged documents as 'relevant', 'irrelevant', and 'discuss'. Records were then swapped so that each reader could review and provide comments on the summaries of the other half of the dataset. Two team members had to agree on the assigned tags (relevant, irrelevant). Any documents that resulted in differing opinions were discussed during large group meetings. After the initial review, we identified 168 relevant sources.

2.3 Data Analysis

We used descriptive statistics to analyze the dataset's composition. The composition includes the types of source documents, the authors, and region-specific details. Lastly, we used thematic analysis to understand the themes embedded in the documents. We created a codebook that included the codes, their definitions, and examples of usage. We started with 254 codes. Through multiple rounds of discussion, we consolidated these into five themes: the inaccessibility of the climate movement, the disproportionate impact on those with multiple identities, nuanced and unmet migration needs, the compounding toll on mental and physical health, and suggested opportunities for technological interventions.

3 Findings

3.1 Contextualizing the Dataset

3.1.1 Document Type. The types of source documents included 75 Academic (Academic Article, Academic Paper, Journal, Master's Thesis, Research Project), 11 White Papers, 17 Podcasts, 2 UN published documents, 39 Online Articles (Article, Web Article, Article/Comment, Article/News Segment, Blog Post, Essay, Interview, News Article, Panel Recording) and 24 sources that did not fit in any of the above categories (Advocacy Paper, Booklet, Book Chapters, Letter to the Editor, Policy Brief, Reports, and Stories Collection).

3.1.2 Disability & Region Representation. In the final dataset, 51 authors self-identified as having a disability (the majority of them chose not to specify their specific disability). The sources included perspectives from the following identities: Mobility (92), Deaf and Hard of Hearing (62), Blind and Low Vision (52), Neurodivergence (52), and Chronic Illness (33) [2]. There was also representation from different regions around the world, including North America (63), Asia (31), Oceania (31), Europe (16), Africa (3), and South America (1).

3.2 Inaccessible climate movement

3.2.1 Inaccessible Climate Activism. The source documents reported that climate activism is often inaccessible to disabled individuals. Climate protests can be inaccessible due to a lack of bathrooms and inaccessible routes for those using mobility aides [20]. Events like UN meetings have historically been inaccessible to those with disabilities [13]. For instance, COP 27 lacked wheelchair access, screen readers, and sign language interpreters [12]. Previously, at COP 26, there was no priority to represent the voices of people with disabilities [10]. Additional barriers to participation include economic (unjust benefits and work policies [35], rising temperatures [23]), financial [25], and physical barriers [1, 2, 12, 29].

3.2.2 Eco-ableist Climate Action and Unwritten Eugenics-esque Policies. Several ongoing climate movements actively discriminate against disabled individuals. These include nutritional restrictions [20] and lifestyles [19]; straw bans that do not take into consideration that straws are necessary for 1 in 4 cerebral palsy patients to drink [20]; and suggesting individuals with asthma switch inhaler types to reduce carbon emissions while not acknowledging the financial burden of the switch [5, 26, 37]. There is constant discrimination and treatment of the disabled community as burdens on resources and as unavoidable deaths during sudden-onset disasters [49]. Finally, policies such as rolling or scheduled blackouts fail to consider the lives of individuals dependent on oxygen machines [5].

3.2.3 Inaccessible Transit Solutions. Alternative transit solutions are designed to help mitigate climate change, but often overlook the needs of disabled people [4, 26, 45]. Accessible taxis are not frequently available, which means that disabled people need to turn elsewhere for transportation help [45]. One paper acknowledges that accessibility is not one size fits all; it mentions that buses with audio information might be helpful for blind individuals, but could be potentially triggering to neurodivergent individuals [45]. Cycling, another alternative mode of transport, may work for some disabled people, but not others [25]. In addition, many sidewalks and bike lanes are not wide enough for accessible bikes and can cause some disabled people to risk losing their disability pension [25]. When it is hot, there are few accessible transportation options to get to cooling centers [44]. When transit is inaccessible to disabled people during regular times, it means there is no accessible transit infrastructure for disabled people during emergencies [43, 44]. Kett, Sriskanthan, and Cole [24] propose intentionally engaging with disabled communities to build just low-carbon futures.

3.3 Disproportionate Impact on those at Multiple Intersections

3.3.1 Disability and Economic Status. In some communities, disabled individuals have a harder time finding work and are more likely to experience poverty [39] or be low-income [44]. This results in disabled people being more impacted during sudden and slow-onset climate events. Furthermore, countries such as the United States have policies that place a cap on savings and asset values that a disabled person can have while still receiving disability support. This can contribute to disabled people living in homes less equipped to deal with climate change-fuelled disasters [44], and the resulting damage and repair tend to cost a higher percentage of their income [27]. Additionally, for some individuals with specific disability identities, irregular temperature patterns necessitate dependable heating and cooling systems. These installations also prove to be costly. [44].

3.3.2 Disability and Gender. Sudden onset disasters often bring unprecedented disorder; they are likely one of the most chaotic

[2]Some sources mentioned multiple disabilities in the same document

times for the disabled residents who live in affected areas. Many studies emphasize that disabled women, girls, two spirits, and feminine presenting individuals incur greater safety risk [15], especially during evacuations [34, 38, 41, 42, 50]. Additionally, disabled people are also seen as easier targets for theft and violence, and thus, they may likely disproportionately face violent interactions during disasters [34]. This results in fear that can also discourage them from accessing aid after a disaster [50]. Furthermore, rising high temperatures have influenced the menstrual health of some wheelchair users [23].

3.3.3 Disability and Race/Ethnicity/Nationality. In some countries, hazardous waste sites have historically been located in low-income communities of color [36], which exposes these communities to more pollutants. Additionally, disabled individuals who do not speak the local language have a harder time accessing real-time and disaster preparedness information in their area [16].

3.4 Nuanced and Unmet Migration Needs

3.4.1 Temporary Relocation. Temporary relocation pertains to shelters and temporary housing used in response to sudden-onset climate events. These shelters often contain inaccessible toilets and a lack of ramps or handrails for individuals with mobility impairments [31, 50] and require them to sleep on the floor rather than providing cots [40]. In one case, a shelter was so inaccessible that a disabled individual opted to drive back into an evacuation zone rather than stay at a shelter [40]. Additionally, inaccessible temporary housing can be a significant problem. For example, one individual struggled for months to get accessible housing because mobile homes do not have built-in ramps [49]. At the same time, another had been moved to six different homes within the span of a few months because none of them had the right accommodations [7]. This presents a significant problem because disabled individuals were twice as likely to be in an evacuation zone [3]. Disabled people also struggled to access post-disaster resources like food and water. In some shelters, food and water were distributed on a first-come, first-served basis, which made them inaccessible to disabled individuals [31]. Additionally, the food provided in shelters oftentimes did not accommodate the dietary needs of individuals with specific chronic conditions [21]. Lastly, heating and cooling centers were often inaccessible, as they can require individuals to walk long distances to access them [48] and do not have proper accommodations for service animals or low sensory areas [44].

3.4.2 Permanent/Long Term Relocation. Permanent or long-term relocation focuses on migration resulting from slow-onset climate change, as well as relocation following disasters that destroy previous living situations. As climate change continues, slow-onset events will force people to relocate (primarily affecting agrarian-based communities, [17]). However, disabled climate refugees will face additional barriers in the migration process. Disabled climate migrants may experience additional difficulty crossing country borders due to unfavorable immigration policies [6] and limited independence due to inaccessible living conditions in the host country [22].

3.5 Compounding Toll on Health

A significant concern resulting from sudden onset events is the aggravation of a disability. A study investigating the impacts of a sudden-onset event found that two-thirds of people with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS) had relapse symptoms, as opposed to the 8.3% of the control group (those with CFS but did not experience Hurricane Andrew) [28]. Additionally, the mental health of caregivers and disabled people is severely impacted before (climate anxiety), during (access to resources), and after (adaptability to post-disaster context) climate-fueled events [14, 19, 33, 46, 47].

3.6 Opportunities for Tech Intervention

Several sources mentioned opportunities for new technologies. One source suggested leveraging technology to improve shelter communication within facilities, awareness of shelters with accessible restrooms, and accessible routes to shelters [33]. There are also opportunities to make early warning systems accessible to people with sensory impairments and tactile maps to communicate risk to blind and low vision communities [18]. One final area of technological solutions was to address the need for more and better data on climate change and the disabled population [39]. Most of the current data focuses on the adult and elderly populations, so there should be more research on the impacts of climate change on disabled children and teenagers [27].

4 Implications and Conclusion

In this poster, we present an initial look at the intersection of climate change and disability. The high-level themes include understanding how the climate movement can be inaccessible, the disproportionate impact on disabled individuals with multiple marginalized identities, the lack of consideration around migration policies, and the compounding toll of these events on mental and physical health. These findings reveal glaring gaps in current policies and present an opportunity for the ASSETS, Human-Computer Interaction (HCI), and Sustainable HCI communities to engage deeply with these challenges. There is a need for researchers, activists, and policymakers to understand the nuances of the challenges presented in the previous section in order to design effective interventions. Researchers also have the opportunity to redefine inclusion and participation contextually – for instance, critiquing popular and widely accepted climate action policies from the perspective of a disabled person who holds multiple identities. Unfortunately, engaging with this work also means coming face-to-face with the realities of uncertainty. The unprecedented impact of climate change is continuously evolving. For instance, this poster presents a snapshot of work published online between 1999 and 2023. Since conducting this research (January 2024 to December 2024), we have seen recent reports that confirm some of the findings presented in this work — specifically, the impacts of a climate change-fueled wildfire that resulted in the loss of life of several disabled individuals [8, 9].

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