Why Disability and Climate?

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Preface to the Broader Project

In recent years, there has been an increase in both academic and community-based research which outlines how persons with disabilities (PWD) have been impacted by climate change, both in Canada and globally. In fact, many scholars and activists have pointed out that systematic interventions which address the intersection between the experiences of PWD and climate change is not only an urgent matter, but also that PWD have largely been omitted from emergency response discourse, especially when it comes to meaningful engagement (Bell et al., 2020; Brossard, 2024).

This brief is one part of a larger literature review which contextualizes this intersection within the broader climate change crisis. As Brossard (2024) points out, "change to the environment is one of the greatest challenges of our time", not only because it impacts "communities and ecosystems worldwide" but also because it impacts populations made vulnerable disproportionally (p. 5). Importantly, these impacts are not experienced equally. In fact, studies have identified "higher mortality rates among disabled people than others during natural disasters and extreme weather events" and PWD are less able to access the supports they require (cited in Bell et al., p. 683). Further, as Jodoin and their colleagues (2020) demonstrate, poverty, gender, age and discriminatory attitudes all increase the likelihood of environment hazards for PWD.

Increased risk during climate change also includes mortality rates. Climate change already has negative impacts on health outcomes, and projected climate change scenarios will continue to result in worsening health impacts, such as mental health issues, trauma, and disease (Eriksen et al., 2021; Jodoin et al., 2023; Prall et al., 2023). As climate change events intensify across the world in many forms such as floods, fires, extreme cold and heat, many issues will continue to follow, such as malnutrition from limited food production, issues with relocation, and inaccessible health care systems.

Thus, there is a need for a systematic governmental and community response to the impacts that disasters have for PWD and an examination of the nuances between climate change and disability discourse— in particular, resources for PWD that are currently not adequate and calls-to-action from the diverse, disability communities have largely not been addressed. As Jodoin et al., (2023) state, while PWD are "becoming increasingly vocal in calling attention to the ways in which they are disproportionally affected by climate change" there is a continuous need to "ensure that disability rights are respected, protected, and fulfilled in climate solutions" which are aligned with the 2010 United Nations Declaration of Persons with Disabilities and other related treatises (p. 1). In this brief, we address why disability and climate movements must be considered together and the need for increased collaboration between these sectors.

Why Focus on Disability and Climate Justice?

We know that climate change impacts everyone on a global scale and will continue to do so. We also know that this impact is not distributed evenly, and that those who are already made vulnerable will be disproportionately affected (Hall, 2014). PWD are often made precarious by society, which leaves them more vulnerable to the effects of climate change. This is known as *climate precarity***,** wherein marginalized groups are at an increased risk for negative climate impacts due to existing social, economic, and policy barriers (Bell et al., 2024; Waite, 2009). For instance, the rates of poverty amongst PWD are much higher than the general population (Jodoin et al., 2020). This can result in PWD living in areas that are: more vulnerable to climate impacts, have fewer resources to adapt and respond to changes in climate or emergencies, and impact their ability to move to safer areas (Jodoin et al., 2020; Stein et al., 2024; Vig & Dwivedi, 2024). These issues can be exacerbated as PWD often have access needs which make responding to emergencies difficult. For example, some PWD have access needs (e.g., ventilators, wheelchairs) that make it difficult to access resources and evacuate their premises in a climate emergency, especially if a plan is not in place (Gaskin et al., 2017, Jodoin et al., 2020, King & Gregg, 2021). These are just some examples that show why it is important for disability and climate justice movements to work together.

Eco-Ableism

When exploring the intersection of climate change and disability, one term that is important to consider is *eco-ableism*. First coined Gregor Wolbring (2013), this concept refers to the ways in which the climate change movement excludes the perspectives of PWD, including in climate activism, policy, and emergency planning. This often leads to climate solutions that further exclude PWD and create new barriers.

This is also linked to the ways in which climate movements are often concerned with the ways that climate change can disable non-disabled people, with less attention paid to how it impacts PWD (Gaskin et al., 2017; Salvatore & Wolbring, 2021). Further, this 'fear of disablement' is a theme that is at odds with the disability rights movement, which positions the disabled body not as a problem to be fixed, but as both a social construction and an identity to be celebrated (Stienstra, 2020). This is an example of some of the “tensions” that can come up when trying to bring disability rights and justice into climate movements.

Tensions Between Climate Action and Disability Rights

While climate action initiatives and disability rights share the common objective of ensuring a sustainable, equitable, and safer world for all individuals, there have been tensions between the two discourses. This is especially the case because lived experiences of disability are often complicated, diverse, and fluid. PWD may require individual supports that may seem at odds with ecofriendly initiatives, such as the need for disposable plastic products like drinking straws, need for individual transportation, specific dietary needs (International Disability Alliance, 2021; Ortiz, 2023; Salvatore & Wolbring, 2021). Scholars and activists who work on disability issues have called attention to this issue and generally ask us to consider the nuances of the intersections between disability rights and climate action (Bell et al., 2020).

It is important to address these tensions because these issues can lead to PWD being excluded from climate movements. For example, heavily focusing on individual actions (i.e. using plastic straws) without considering diverse needs and accessibility may leave PWD feeling like they are doing climate action "wrong" (Cram et al., 2022; Salvatore & Wolbring, 2021). Further, environmental movements are often seen as young, fit, and able-bodied movements, which means PWD may not see themselves in these spaces (Dietz, 2020). In some cases, the fear of disablement is used to try and motivate non-disabled people to act on behalf of the environment (Bell et al., 2024). While it is important to communicate the possible harms of climate change, using people's fear of disablement in this way may lead to further exclusion for PWD and obscure the larger picture of the need for intersectional and cross-sectoral systemic advocacy

Finally, for some PWD, online activism and campaigning may be the most accessible route for engaging in climate change discourse, yet this is often viewed as "not enough" (Salvatore & Wolbring, 2021). While some online actions may be written off as performative and ineffective by some, dismissing these contributions disregards the usefulness of social media and increased virtual connection. Having multiple ways for people to be engaged in movements is an effective and powerful way to ensure enhanced accessibility for PWD

These tensions do not mean that PWD are not involved in climate action, but climate action groups and advocates should consider ways to make their work more accessible and intentionally work with PWD and Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) to better understand how to do so. Considering these tensions is important to better understand where more work and attention might be needed as we work towards more collaboration between these movements.

Shared Interests and Sites for Solidarity

Despite (and at times because of) the tensions mentioned above, there are many shared interests and avenues for solidarity between disability, climate, and other human rights movements. It is equally important to consider what these movements have in common and explore shared goals. Solidarity is essential—and one theme that came up in many of the readings was the idea that 'no one should be left behind' when generating discourse about climate change advocacy (Eriksen et al., 2021; International Labour Organization, 2019; Mac-Seing, 2023; Makuyana & Dube, 2024). Further, there is much to learn from disabled persons themselves about potential solutions to climate change (Osborne, 2023).

One important site for solidarity is agriculture. Labour around food production can be dangerous due to risky interactions with livestock and heavy machinery as well as exposure to pesticides and chemicals (Von Essen & McCurdy, 1998). Further, the precarity of the work can lead to high stress and pressure for farmers. This can negatively impact disabled agriculture workers and can further disable or newly disable food labourers (Cram et al., 2022). We do not mention this issue because disability is something to be feared, but rather because of the impacts that this can have on already precarious workers. For example, these compounding issues contributed to the largest wave of farmer suicides in history in India (Cram et al., 2022). This is why food sovereignty and agricultural labour must be considered not only through an environmental lens, but also through a disability and workers' rights lens. This also connects to other social movements like the migrant rights movement, as migrants make up the majority of farm workers (Von Essen & McCurdy, 1998).[1]

Food sovereignty and migrant labour are important examples of possible sites for solidarity between not only climate and disability justice movements, but for other human rights movements as well. There are many important sites for collaboration and solidarity, and perhaps one of the most urgent is the need to resist militarism and ongoing colonialism. Both disability studies and environmental studies are increasingly exploring the degradation and debilitation of people and environments of global militarism and colonialism (Paur, 2017; Ray & Sibara, 2017 It is important to consider these forms of harm as systemically interconnected, especially when these issues are individualized. For example, Cram and colleagues consider the term *body burden* which focuses on chemical build up in the body because of environmental factors, manifesting the issue [2]rather than social (Cram et al., 2022).

[1] For more information about migrant rights movement, check out https://migrantrights.ca/
[2] For more information on body burden, see our Definitions brief for a full definition.

An important take away from the literature was that extractive and exploitative labour and resource practices are causing harm to the environment, and we must consider ourselves as part of the environment, not as separate entities which are also being harmed. For example, Bell and colleagues (2024) describe *solastalgia* as the loss of belonging, identity and feelings of distress that can arise when environments begin to change or degrade (p. 57). The authors compare this to feelings that can arise as one's body changes or impairments progress. This not only reminds us that we are part of nature and share similar vulnerabilities, but it also emphasizes that PWD have very valuable contributions to environmental movements. As the authors state, PWD have experience and skills "…related to anticipation, contingency planning, resourcefulness, ingenuity, and living within limits" that can inform policy and practice for adaptation and mitigation (Ibid., p.57).

Osborne (2023) takes this idea a step further, arguing that we have much to learn from marginalized groups which have been made vulnerable for decades. Osborne contends that we should advocate for safe and sustainable work and life environments without reinforcing a dependency on States or governments which have contributed to climate change, and/or ignore research indicating the necessity of addressing climate change. Based on this, Osborne suggests looking to those who have a long history of being ignored and oppressed by systems in place. Drawing on the work of crip and intersectional feminist writers like Johanna Hedva and Audre Lorde, Osborne posits that "crip, queer and anti-racist theories of care are especially important if we are interested in practices of care and survival by those who, 'were never meant to survive, because this world was built against their survival.'" (2023, p. 241). These lived experiences also extend beyond care practices, as marginalized and oppressed groups (i.e., First Nations Peoples, people of colour, PWD, 2SLGBTQ+ people) also tend to have experience being at the front lines of fights for justice (Cram et al., 2022; Osborne, 2023).

Paths Foward

With the knowledge that there are so many shared interests and sites for solidarity, it is crucial to build out frameworks and practices which reflect the complexity of these issues and aim to connect movements working towards common goals. From the literature, we learned that there are a few pertinent concepts which aim to encompass and connect these struggles, which will be explained in this section: a disability climate justice framework; climate resilient development; and the concept of building back better. These concepts are explained below.

A disability climate justice framework recognizes that PWD are important climate actors and that their lived experiences and expertise are shaped by their disability, race, gender,

sexual identity and other social categories, as well as the societal systems they interact with (Stein et al., 2024). This framework emphasizes the importance of intersectionality, human rights, interdependence, and environmental stewardship with the ultimate goal of a safe and sustainable environment for all (Stein et al., 2024).

Climate-resilient development aims for sustainable development, especially related to energy use that fosters well-being for people and the planet. This includes actions such as reducing greenhouse gas emissions and specifically doing so in a way that builds people's capacity for climate action through social and economic justice (Schipper et al., 2022; Stein et al., 2024). Unlike a disability climate justice framework, climate-resilient development does not centre a disability lens but rather looks more broadly at how to maximize the potential of social justice initiatives. We recognize the importance of the climate resilience movement; however, it is important to draw out how these two approaches intersect. Stein and colleagues (2024) argue that not explicitly and intentionally including disability in climate justice approaches is a missed opportunity because disability studies has problematized the way we have thought about vulnerability and interconnectivity for several years. More specifically, disability movements have illuminated the ways in which vulnerability is created by systems and policies which exclude and disenfranchise.[3]

Finally, 'building back better' generally refers to using phases of reconstruction after disasters to enhance accessibility and sustainability of infrastructure and social systems with the goal of greater resilience for communities and nations more broadly (Jodoin et al., 2020, p.43). Jodoin and colleagues (2020) put forth that this needs to be pushed further, especially as it relates to disability and climate action because as we shift away from fossil fuel dependence, we need to do so in a way that promotes justice and inclusion for all.

Overall, many of the articles we reviewed suggest that PWD must be meaningfully involved in climate action at all levels, and that there is a need to collaborate with OPDs (Calgaro, 2021; International Disability Alliance, 2021; Stein et al., 2024). This ensures that the expertise and lived experiences of PWD are respected and included; this is especially important because PWD have historically (and continually) excluded from these conversations.[4]

[3] See our Vulnerability & Resilience in Climate and Disability Discussions Brief for more information.
[4] For more information on paths forward, see our brief on Climate Strategies and Solutions.

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