

New Earth Disability Blogs:

“Climate Adaptation, Adaptive Climate Justice, and People with Disabilities”

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[Climate activism](#) tends to frame climate change as a problem to be solved by *fighting against* it, raising calls to reduce emissions in order to minimize or avoid the consequences of climate change (“climate mitigation”).

Cutting emissions is certainly important, as lower emissions will lead to smaller temperature increases, with less intense climate impacts along with it, compared to a high-emissions scenario. But in contrast to this rhetoric, the truth is that we cannot stop climate change outright and avoid its consequences – and even with our best efforts, the world will still be a vastly different place.

A [2016 report](#) analyzed the climate impacts of a 1.5°C world and the impacts in a 2.0°C world, and both showed marked increases in frequency and intensity of extreme weather events (including storms and heat waves), variations in crop yields, rising sea levels and expanding coral bleaching. 2.0°C was shown to be a drastically different world indeed.

Other experts are predicting us passing the global target to a much scarier future. A recent paper projects that [2.5°C may be possible](#) with extreme measures in a realistic political climate, but even that would prove difficult. Given this inevitability and its intensity, reducing carbon emissions is not enough – we should prepare for what’s on the way.

When we prepare, we need to keep everybody in mind, and especially the most vulnerable groups with the least resources and ability to adapt on their own. This is what I like to call “adaptive climate justice,” which also creates a level playing field in the face of historical inequalities and oppressions.

One of the most vulnerable populations with the fewest resources, and the most unique needs, is people with disabilities. The reasons are vast. Among other things, evacuating storms and other emergencies requires focused planning, heatwaves especially affect people with fragile health, climate migration is phenomenally difficult for this group, and people with disabilities are often the first to be abandoned under the age-old triage mentality.

In response to all these issues, adaptation needs to include the concerns of people with disabilities and value us as individuals to protect. This adaptive climate justice must happen with full force, and start happening now.

Climate adaptation: How the science community can help (in addition to more research)

Climate change is guaranteed to progress in the years to come regardless of our level of emissions, and each degree of warming will lead to yet stronger consequences.

As storms become stronger, oceans rise, and droughts get deeper, we must adapt our societies and way of life to match our new environment. This may mean improving our disaster response and reinforcing our infrastructure for stronger storms, or transforming our water management systems to better handle drought.

The [International Organization on Migration](#) notes a widely-cited estimate of 200 million “environmental migrants by 2050, moving either within their countries or across borders, on a permanent or temporary basis,” so in some cases, we may even need to explore managed & proactive relocation – or at least developing systems that are able to handle domestic and even international migration.

Unfortunately, climate activists are already encountering barriers to change system-wide and plenty of resistance from those in power, even when it comes to switching to renewables. Pushing for these new efforts at adaptation will be no small task and may challenge our capability for change, but it is vital to protect lives and well-being.

How can the scientific community help in these efforts? We need to be more forthright about what the science points to: climate change is going to get worse, and we need to get ready. It ultimately does a disservice to the public to tell them that things will stay stable so long as we install solar panels and wind farms and switch to electric cars.

People are liable to be caught off-guard, while governments and other actors are less likely to prepare for the one-time events (i.e. stronger storms) and gradual transformations (i.e. sea level rise or migration) coming our way. If we drive home the need to adapt – and use our public legitimacy to do so – then stakeholders are much more likely to get the ball rolling.

Our community must use our expertise to find the best actions to adapt to climate change. A large amount of energy is already spent on understanding climate consequences and developing renewable technologies, yet a much smaller resource is dedicated to developing plans for adaptation. The resources devoted to both clearly need to grow to a massive extent – but it’s vital to use a larger portion of our energy to develop plans, working with stakeholders to implement them widely.

Adaptive climate justice and people with disabilities

As the climate changes, it is increasingly clear that certain populations are affected more significantly than others – and this will continue into the future. Groups most affected include women, children, people of color, people

with disabilities, lower-income communities, and those in areas with especially distinct and significant climate exposure (i.e. low-lying island states or already-arid regions).

People in developing countries are also an incredibly important group on the international front, as they are often the hardest hit with very few resources to adapt (and historically put out the fewest emissions) – and it is a moral imperative to support those nations at a global scale.

Activists are already raising their voices in a call for “climate justice” that protects these populations from climate change itself. However, even this largely focuses on mitigation. “These populations are getting hit hardest by climate change,” the rhetoric goes, “so we must prevent warming to protect their well-being. Stopping global warming is a matter of climate justice.”

Mitigating climate change will certainly help these many oppressed and vulnerable groups, and is arguably the most essential first line of defense. Yet there is another piece of climate justice that we must include moving forward.

True climate justice also needs to provide the resources needed to adapt and create equity for all – and transform our systems to do the same. This adaptive climate justice must identify vulnerable groups, determine where their vulnerability lies, and ensure that the international community provides resources and other changes to tackle those needs head on. What might this mean? At the broad scale, wealthy countries can provide resources and assistance to aid developing countries, whether it is through disaster relief funding or technology for drought-resilient crops. (The State Department and USAID have participated in [climate-related supports](#), but these are under threat to proposed budget cuts at the federal level).

Domestic justice can do the same at many levels: for example, ensuring access to air-conditioning for people in poor quality housing or those who can’t afford higher electric bills, including the needs and voices of marginalized communities in disaster readiness and response (DRR) at the federal (i.e. FEMA) and State/local levels, and even reinforcing government services for the potential turmoil of climate stress.

At the World Institute on Disability, our [“New Earth Disability”](#) project is addressing adaptive climate justice for people with disabilities (PWD). The diverse disability population includes those with physical disabilities, sensory disabilities (i.e. low vision or hearing), developmental disabilities, psychological disabilities, chronic health conditions and more. PWDs are present in every other population group at a [rate of approximately 15%](#)-meaning that our community is spread worldwide and amongst income levels, gender, race, nationality, etc.

People with disabilities are especially vulnerable to the effects of climate change because of health factors, personal and medical needs, and already-existing marginalization. Among other things our community may be isolated during disasters and unable to maintain healthcare and personal supports, have poor health when encountering heat waves or similar effects, and experience disproportionate poverty with reduced ability to manage resource stresses or adapt overall.

Climate-related migration is an especially large issue: people with disabilities are liable to lack access to accessible transportation, become disconnected from personal support networks, lose vital government and healthcare services, or simply be turned away at borders because of their disability status. It’s our job to learn more about these many problems and tackle them head-on.

The many solutions will include resilient government and healthcare services, disability-inclusive DRR, and even managing migration through accessible transit, housing and more.

Switching to an adaptive climate justice mindset and beginning those preparations will require collaboration, focused planning, effective resources, and wide-scale public education (especially for the disability and climate change communities). As a part of the New Earth Disability initiative, we encourage other stakeholders to tackle this challenge and join us in our efforts.

Bio:

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For more details and general thoughts on the connections between climate change and disability, please visit the WID webpage at www.WID.org/NED. WID welcomes opportunities for partnership, outreach, and any projects regarding research or full initiatives. If you are interested in connecting, please email Alex Ghenis at Alex@WID.org.