



Surviving the Storm: Independent Living in the Age of Climate Change

A position paper by the European Network on Independent Living



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Introduction

In an era where the human actions are felt everywhere on our planet and its nature, the discourse around climate change has increased, allowing the environmental concerns to reach the global consciousness – even though this is not happening fast enough. The worrying reality of escalating temperatures, rising sea levels, and a surge in extreme weather events has metamorphosed from abstract speculation to tangible experiences, manifesting in the lives of communities across the globe. Amidst the sprawling narratives of climate change, the impact on disabled people, often sidelined in mainstream dialogues, emerges as a pressing concern that needs to be highlighted and addressed.

Independent Living promotes the full participation of disabled people in all spheres of life, a paradigm where the barriers to a life of self-determination are dismantled. The principles of Independent Living underscore not a life of self-sufficiency, but one enriched with choice and control, and same opportunities with others. It is about a society that is inclusive, equitable, and allowing all its members to flourish, irrespective of their characteristics and background.

Marrying the discourse on climate change with the principles of Independent Living, and understanding their intersections, brings challenges and opportunities. The consequences of climate change disproportionately affect disabled people, as a result of inaccessibility, lack of funding and also because of the ableist approach of the so called “climate movement” and of the societies as a whole, often exacerbating existing inequalities. Examples of this is the ban on plastic straws or making inner city areas car free.

The lens of Independent Living offers a pathway to not only address the challenges posed by climate change but to envision a sustainable, inclusive and just future, where no one is left behind.

This document, birthed from discussions with the members of the European Network on Independent Living (ENIL) and their need to address this topic, hopes to showcase the multi-dimensional interplay between climate change and Independent Living.

The Intersection of Climate Change and Independent Living

The discourse around climate change often overlooks its intersection with disability, making the climate-related challenges faced by disabled people invisible. It is crucial to demonstrate how the escalating climate crisis disproportionately affects disabled people.

Nowadays, in every corner of the planet we experience a heightened frequency and intensity of climate-related disasters, including, but not limited to fires,

heatwaves, floods, hurricanes, and droughts. This surge in environmental adversities affects all members of society; however, its impact is particularly felt by disabled people, challenging our right to independent living, and amplifying the existing social and physical barriers we face.

Independent Living means self-determination, choice and control, freedom and equality. However, the advance of climate-induced disasters significantly undermines these principles.

To get more concrete, when it comes to accessibility and mobility, climate calamities such as fires, floods and hurricanes significantly impact disabled people. The destruction of infrastructure, including homes, roads, and public buildings reduces our autonomy and independence.

In addition, the disruption caused by climate disasters extends to healthcare services, which are crucial for many disabled people. The destruction of healthcare infrastructure, coupled with the strain on medical resources, compromises the accessibility to essential healthcare services, endangering our health and well-being.

Social networks and community support, such as personal assistance, constitute a crucial framework for fostering independent living. However, climate-induced disasters often result in social disintegration, thereby undermining the support structures pivotal for the independence of disabled people.

Moreover, we should not forget the economic insecurity caused by climate disasters, which disproportionately impacts disabled people and amplifies our financial difficulties. This happens in a world where disabled people already are among the poorest, because of the various barriers and oppression we face. The loss of livelihoods, coupled with the added financial burden of restoring normalcy post-disaster, exacerbates economic insecurity, making living independently a challenge.

Here, let us add and make it clear, there is an urgent need for deinstitutionalisation, also in the context of climate change. Institutions not only are places of torture and segregation, that should not exist in our societies, but also often lack the flexibility to adapt to climate-induced environmental challenges, placing disabled residents at heightened risk during extreme weather events and natural disasters. We have seen it happen numerous times, and unfortunately will continue to see it if we do not act accordingly.

In addition, in the name of eco friendliness, we have seen public funding (such as the European Structural and Investment Funds) going towards the renovation of existing institutions, instead of their closure. This is unacceptable and against the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD), as well as of the CRPD Committee's *Guidelines on deinstitutionalisation, including in emergencies*.

Transitioning towards community-based living arrangements not only upholds the rights of disabled people to live independently, but also enables more agile and personalised responses to climate emergencies. Such a shift demands robust support systems, including personal assistance, accessible emergency services, climate-aware health care, and resilient infrastructures within communities.

Emergencies and Evacuations

The urgency and unpredictability of climate-related disasters often triggers immediate evacuations. While these evacuations are meant to preserve life and mitigate harm, the process is full of barriers for people with various impairments, making it dangerous rather than safe.

Everything starts from inclusive emergency planning. The lack of disability-inclusive emergency planning increases the challenges faced during evacuations. The absence of protocols to identify and assist disabled people, along with the inadequate training of emergency personnel on disability awareness, undermines the effectiveness and inclusivity of evacuation efforts.

It is significant that the pivotal aspect of evacuations is the availability and accessibility of transportation. However, the lack of accessible transport options poses a serious challenge. The lack of accessible vehicles, inadequate assistance for boarding and getting off, and the absence of clear and accessible information regarding transportation arrangements significantly hinder the safe and timely evacuation of disabled people.

Another crucial factor are shelters. Following evacuation, accessible shelters are paramount to ensure the safety and well-being of people affected. The inadequacy of shelters equipped to accommodate the needs of disabled people, such as wheelchair-accessible restrooms and sleeping areas, exacerbates the problem.

Finally, effective communication regarding evacuation procedures is critical to ensure the safety of all. However, the lack of accessible communication channels and formats for disabled people, particularly those with hearing, visual, or cognitive impairments, makes the evacuation situations much more difficult and inaccessible. The absence of sign language interpreters, visual alerts, or easy-to-understand instructions compromises the ability of disabled people to receive critical evacuation information in a timely manner.

Climate-Related Health Risks

The climate crisis is also a health crisis, with grave implications for disabled people, especially those with pre-existing health conditions.

The escalating distress of climate change, epitomised by soaring temperatures and polluted air quality, poses a serious threat to public health. However, these climatic conditions are particularly hazardous for individuals with pre-existing respiratory conditions (such as asthma), something that is quite common in the disability community, but also among older people. This affects not only their health, but also their quality of life.

Disabled people may also exhibit an increased sensibility to heat-related illnesses like heat strokes. Certain conditions might reduce the body's ability to regulate temperature efficiently, or hinder individuals' capacity to access cooler environments during heatwaves. Furthermore, the limited mobility, the nature of impairments or energy poverty may also restrict people from accessing cooler environments or adequate hydration; factors crucial in mitigating the risks associated with high temperatures. The absence of accessible cooling centers, public transportation to such facilities, and disability-inclusive heat emergency plans further compounds this issue.

Climate disasters such as floods, hurricanes and wildfires can wreak havoc on medical facilities. The damage or destruction of these facilities not only hinders the provision of medical services, but also poses a grave challenge for disabled people who rely on these facilities for their healthcare needs. Even if the physical infrastructure remains intact, the operational capacity of medical facilities may be severely compromised due to power outages, water shortages, or the evacuation of medical personnel, disrupting the continuum of health care for those in need.

Climate adversities can also disrupt the supply chains crucial for the delivery of medical supplies. The resultant scarcity of essential medical supplies such as medications, medical equipment, and other healthcare resources can increase the health risks of disabled people.

The digital divide, exacerbated by climate adversities, may further impede access to online healthcare information and telemedicine services, which have become increasingly important, especially in remote healthcare provision during emergencies.

Policy Recommendations

As the consequences of climate change continue to unfold, the urgency for an inclusive and adaptive societal framework becomes increasingly pronounced. As we saw, disabled people, because of the multiple barriers and oppression, often find ourselves at a higher risk. The consequent impact on our lives transcends the physical realm, affecting also the social, economic, and health domains.

Disability inclusive policies: Policy initiatives tailored to eliminate disparities are necessary to foster a more inclusive, resilient and accessible world for all.

They should address the period before, during and after emergencies occur. It is essential for all actions to be aligned with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD), the 2030 Agenda with its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Sendai Framework. Policies must prioritise independent living for disabled people in the context of climate change.

Housing and support: This involves creating accessible, climate-resilient housing (as opposed to renovating or building new segregated settings that are energy efficient), equipped with assistive technologies that foster autonomy and safety, in parallel with adequate support, such as personal assistance.

Built environment and transport: Urban development should integrate accessible green spaces and public transportation, ensuring full participation in community life.

Employment and training: Training and employment initiatives in environmentally sustainable sectors must be inclusive, offering disabled people opportunities to contribute to and benefit from green economies.

Health care: Healthcare systems should adapt to climate challenges while maintaining accessible services crucial for those in need.

Social protection: Adequate social protection is key, especially after emergencies. Without adequate social protection, disabled people will inevitably find themselves in precarious situations.

Co-production: All policies should be co-designed with disabled people, as we have the expertise and knowledge needed, ensuring that our voices and insights are central in all climate adaptation and mitigation strategies. By ensuring representation from the disability community in climate policy formulation, we move closer towards a more equitable and effective climate resilience strategy. Embedding the lived experiences and needs of all community members in all green strategies and policies can ensure that they are accessible and inclusive for all.

Funding: Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs) require access to financial resources to work on climate and environmental justice, to do capacity building, to work on disaster risk reduction (DRR), and to be able to do planning in local communities, at the national or international level.

Climate justice and just transition: The discourse on climate change is enriched and rendered more holistic with the inclusion of diverse perspectives, especially from communities that bear a disproportionate burden of climate adversities. Climate justice and just transition principles need to be at the heart of every action taken.

As we stride towards a future full of climatic uncertainties, anchoring our policies and actions in inclusivity and equity will not only mitigate the adversities but also fortify our collective resilience in the face of climate change.

Conclusion

With this document, which is just a beginning of ENIL's climate-related efforts, we aim to highlight the growing challenges faced by disabled people due to climate change. These challenges stretch from physical and social during climate disasters, to increased health risks and barriers in getting necessary support. **This narrative underlines a pressing need to act fast**; to not only to address the climate crisis, but also to ensure a supportive environment for all, in a society where no one will be left behind.

Collaboration is a strong theme that resonates through the text. The complex and vast nature of the challenges at the intersection of climate change and disability requires a united effort that goes beyond individual or organisational efforts. After all, climate change is the biggest challenge humanity has ever faced and everyone must get on board with addressing it.

Governments play a key role in setting up policies that prioritise inclusivity and resilience. On the other hand, activists and organisations, including DPOs and NGOs, can drive education, advocacy, and engage with different stakeholders to build a more inclusive response to climate challenges. **Cross-sectoral collaboration is essential to develop innovative and comprehensive solutions.** Such collaboration, fueled by shared understanding and commitment, can significantly enhance the effectiveness of efforts.

In conclusion, **the narrative opens up a compelling call to action.** The urgency of the issue, teamed with the potential of collaborative action, paints a pathway towards a more inclusive, resilient, and fair society. As the climate crisis unfolds, the solidarity, understanding, and collective action from all parts of society are essential to ensure that no one will be left behind and that everyone will be empowered to navigate and thrive amidst the changing climate scenarios.

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About the European Network on Independent Living

The European Network on Independent Living (ENIL) is a Europe-wide network of disabled people, with members throughout Europe. ENIL is a forum for all disabled people, Independent Living organisations and their non-disabled allies on the issues of Independent Living. ENIL represents the disability movement for human rights and social inclusion based on solidarity, peer support, deinstitutionalisation, democracy, self-representation, cross disability and self-determination. For more information, see: www.enil.eu



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