

YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES CALL FOR URGENT INCLUSIVE CLIMATE ACTION



Harvard Law School
Project on Disability

Climate Change Poses a Severe Threat to Children and Youth with Disabilities

The climate crisis poses an existential threat to all marginalized communities, however children with disabilities face severe impacts due to additional, unique, and compounding risks. Globally, one in ten children has a disability. The rights of children with disabilities are protected by nearly universally ratified human rights treaties. Yet, children and youth with disabilities are largely denied the right to have their voices heard or to take part in climate decision-making. In the following pages, youth with disabilities amplify their voices and advocate for their rights to global equity and climate justice.



Supporting Disability-Inclusive Climate Action

Consider undertaking outreach to organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs) to understand the climate adaptation and mitigation needs, perspectives, and priorities of children and youth with disabilities in your local context. Empower and magnify the voices of children and youth with disabilities, and address climate impacts through disability-inclusive climate responses. You can do this through the Harvard Law School Project on Disability's handbook "People with Disabilities Taking Action on Climate Change."

International Law Protects Children and Youth with Disabilities

International human rights law and humanitarian law prescribe the protection of children and youth with disabilities. Importantly, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities mandates that government climate responses, and all international cooperation protect the rights of children and youth with disabilities. Notably, Article 11 requires taking all necessary measures to ensure the protection and safety of children and youth with disabilities in situations of risk, including humanitarian emergencies and climate disasters.

Additional Unique Risks Faced by Children and Youth with Disabilities

Extreme Weather

Emergency planning often disregards the needs of children and youth with disabilities who must fight to survive in the face of inaccessible early warning systems, evacuation routes, transportation, and shelters. Discrimination and structural barriers also cause this group to be more exposed to extreme weather, and abandoned or separated from caregivers. The impact of climate disasters on children and youth with disabilities is compounded by the loss of assistive devices and medicine, inaccessible and discriminatory healthcare responses, and neglect in recovery efforts.

“During those storms, my cerebral palsy made everything so much harder... I couldn’t move quickly or navigate my surroundings like others could... I cannot walk on the narrow path to go to the shelter... We don’t have access to safe shelters, we don’t get the help we need to rebuild, and we don’t even know about the opportunities that could make our lives better.”

Khojan, India

“Cyclones are not the only challenge—it is the unbearable heatwaves that have become a part of life in Odisha. These heatwaves make it impossible for me to step outside. I cannot go to college so miss classes, but if I go, I will be very sick.”

Laxmipriya, India

“[W]hen government people asked us to evacuate, my father did not take me with him and said... Why should I think about a child with Polio, I have to keep myself safe.”

Santosh, India

“My visual disability, common with albinism, makes it harder to see hazards or find safe paths, and the lack of melanin means I can’t be out in the harsh sun post-flood to help with cleanup or to seek help. Moreover, the social stigma associated with albinism can lead to neglect or misconceptions about my ability to handle myself during crises, further isolating me from community support networks.”

Bolanle, Nigeria

Gender, Disability, and Disaster

Children and youth with disabilities are at heightened risk of gender-based violence in climate emergencies.

“The shelter was overcrowded, and everyone was trying to find a safe space for the night. Safety not only from the cyclone but people touching you when you are asleep.”

Laxmipriya, India

Water Insecurity



Climate change increases water insecurity. Children and youth with disabilities face challenges carrying water long distances which takes more time, leaving less time available to spend on education and livelihood, and heightening safety threats.

“In our village, water is a daily battle. The groundwater levels are so low that our borewell has run dry. Every morning, I help my father fetch water from a distant place. The long walk is exhausting for me, and sometimes my disability makes it even harder to carry the heavy pots back home.”

Sanjaya, Indigenous person with disability, India

“In our community, women are traditionally responsible for fetching water. With my visual disability and sensitivity to sunlight, this task becomes a daily ordeal. Fetching water often involves long walks to wells or boreholes, which are not only physically taxing but also risky due to my vision limitations. During dry seasons, when water is scarce, these challenges intensify, and I’m often left to wait until safer hours or rely on others, which isn’t always dependable.”

Osaro, Nigeria

“We get tap water only once in four days. For bathing we have to walk more than a kilometer. We go in a group, but I still feel that someone may be watching.”

Laxmipriya, India

Wellbeing

Climate impacts, including hot temperatures, air pollution, and infectious diseases negatively affect the physical and mental health of children and youth with disabilities. This group faces heightened exposure because of structural barriers to adequate housing, clean water, personal mobility, and health care. Individuals with disabilities affected by heat and other climate stressors experience additional risks.

“I’ve always known that my pale skin and sensitive eyes were different, but now the climate is making those differences life-threatening. The scorching sun, which we used to enjoy in moderation, now beats down relentlessly. Every step outside feels like walking through fire, my skin burning and peeling despite my efforts to shield it. The UV index has spiked, and with it so has my anxiety about skin cancer—a real danger for those of us without melanin’s protection. The heatwaves have become more frequent, making simple tasks like walking to the market a painful ordeal. My eyes, always sensitive, now water incessantly in the glare, making it hard to navigate or read, even indoors.”

Ada, Nigeria

“[I]n the past 4-5 years, the summers have become unbearably hot. For someone with my physical limitations, coping with this intense heat has been especially difficult... In the day I cannot go out, at night I cannot sleep. I have never felt so alone. Life should not be like this.”

Balaram, Indigenous person with disability, India



“The intense heat, combined with my disability, made me more susceptible to heat-related illnesses. I often found myself feeling weak and unwell. My skin felt like it was a heated pan. Breathing was difficult. I needed water to wash my body whenever temperatures went up, but there was no water.”

Sujata, India



Food Insecurity

Climate change poses a significant threat to food security. Children and youth with disabilities are disproportionately at risk due to discrimination, growing inequity, and physiological factors. This group faces barriers to accessing food, earning adequate income, and preparing food. Families of children and youth with disabilities often lack access to government social protection. Households facing food insecurity may withhold food from children with disabilities.

After the cyclone, “[w]e had to rely on our neighbours, who provided us with food during those tough times.”

Sujata, India

“Salt water has come into our fields. My father, once able to cultivate enough to support us, now faces fields without rice. The government’s lack of support has been a constant source of frustration for us.”

Santosh, India

“My need for a diet rich in nutrients to protect my skin and eyes can be harder to meet when food supplies are disrupted by climate... As a woman with albinism, I might not have the same opportunities to travel or barter for food, especially since traditional roles expect me to be homebound or engaged in less lucrative activities.”

Osaro, Nigeria

“Often, decisions about cultivation and resource use are made by men, without considering the needs of women or people with disabilities. Furthermore, when income decreases, women are often the last to receive support for training or tools that could facilitate work.”

María, Ecuador



Education

Extreme weather heightens the barriers children and youth with disabilities face accessing education. Education on climate change and disability is lacking, impeding disability-inclusive climate action.

“The heat is no longer just uncomfortable; it’s a barrier. For children like little namesake Ada, who as well has albinism and struggles with her vision, the bright sun means she rarely sees the outside world. She’s become a shadow in her own home, her education halted by the conditions outside. The rains, when they come, are torrential, flooding our streets, making them impassable for those with mobility issues. Schools close, and for many, learning stops. The unpredictability of the weather affects everything... trapping our youth in a cycle of isolation and missed opportunities.”

Ada, Nigeria

“There’s this gap in education where we should be learning how the changing climate affects us uniquely. Teachers are well meaning but often lack the resources or training to adapt lessons for our needs. Sometimes, we hear about climate change in assemblies or through community programs, but it’s surface-level. We need to understand how to protect ourselves, how our disabilities make us more vulnerable, and how we can be part of the solution. It’s about equipping us with knowledge, making us advocates for our own lives.”

Tompolo, Nigeria

“My gender adds another layer of cultural expectations around marriage and domesticity over education, which can pressure me out of school earlier than my male counterparts.”

Osaro, Nigeria

“Schools here are not always equipped to handle students with disabilities like mine. The glare in classrooms, the lack of visual aids, or even the distance to school can be prohibitive. During disasters ... the recovery time for those with disabilities to return [to school] is often longer due to inaccessible infrastructure or the need for special considerations.”

Osaro, Nigeria



Livelihood

Climate change stressors such as floods can devastate the crops of households already facing poverty. Children and youth with disabilities seeking a livelihood face discriminatory attitudes, a lack of assistive devices or inclusive measures, and financial barriers.

“Agriculture is the main source of livelihood in Koraput but is not an option for me because of my physical disability. [W]e use bullocks and I sink into the ground...”

Balaram, India

“Floods ... turn streets into rivers, making it nearly impossible for me to reach my workplace, especially since public transportation isn’t designed with our needs in mind. I’ve had days where I couldn’t work at all because the road to the market was impassable, and the alternative routes were too dangerous or too far for someone with my visual sensitivities.”

Obinna, Nigeria

“I’ve seen initiatives start, like workshops on composting or basic solar panel maintenance, but they’re not tailored to our needs. Imagine, a young person with albinism wanting to learn about gardening but needing to avoid direct sunlight, or someone with mobility challenges wanting to learn about recycling but needing accessible locations. We crave this knowledge, not just for employment but to live more sustainably, to heal our environment. There’s potential, but it requires programs that see us, that adapt to our unique challenges, turning our dreams into tangible skills.”

Tompolo, Nigeria

“The government could help with training programs on more resilient crops and better production practices. It would also be useful to have projects that ensure access to drinking water in rural communities. For people with disabilities, it would be crucial to have tools and job opportunities adapted so that we can continue contributing livelihood.”

María, Ecuador



Disability-Inclusive Climate Action

Children and youth with disabilities are urgently calling on all partners, including humanitarian organizations, governments, civil society, and the private sector to ensure that global climate action is disability-inclusive and centered on all children and youth. We need to act now through disability-inclusive climate policies, initiatives, and investment to save lives today and ensure an inclusive, equitable, and sustainable future.

“[O]ur youth are not just victims; they are eager to be part of the solution. They talk about creating green spaces that are truly accessible, planting trees for shade that they can enjoy, too. There’s a desire to start awareness campaigns ... on how climate change affects us uniquely. They want to organize community clean-ups to prevent floods, using tools and methods that don’t exclude them. There’s an interest in learning about sustainable practices, perhaps even starting small, inclusive gardens where they can grow food, teaching others in the community. They envision a movement where they can lead by example, showing that even with disabilities, they can contribute to combating climate change, advocating for a more inclusive, resilient community.”

Tompolo, Nigeria

“We dream of a government that sees us, that understands our plight. [W]e’d be grateful for accessible healthcare... We need infrastructure that considers us: schools with shaded areas or buildings that aren’t flooded during the rainy season. Financial support or subsidies for protective gear could change lives. Education policies tailored to our needs, ensuring continuity when the weather turns against us, would be a godsend. And advocacy, real advocacy, not just words but actions, to educate the broader community about our challenges in the face of climate change.”

Ada, Nigeria



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