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Exploring Discrimination in Climate Change Policies:  
Intertwining Disability Justice and Climate Justice

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## **Introduction**

Though the international community has made significant strides to include marginalized groups such as women, low-income communities, and indigenous people in climate justice, the same cannot be said for people with disabilities (Kosanic, et. al. 2019). While existing research has explored how the effects of climate change negatively impact people with disabilities, this paper analyzes how even adaptation and mitigation practices, which seek to combat such effects, may do harm to disability communities across the globe. In order to reduce such harms in the present and avoid them in the future, the international community must employ ethical frameworks that bring disability justice to the forefront of climate justice.

The first section of this paper analyzes the ways in which recent strategies to adapt to climate change exclude or harm the disability community. The second section explores how mitigation strategies can similarly present threats to the disability community. Finally, this paper suggests some ethical frameworks to avoid these pitfalls in the future.

## **The Harms of Adaptation Policies**

Disabled people face disproportionate risks from the effects of climate change (Watts Belser 2019), but even more risks can emerge when policies meant to adapt to such effects are discriminatory themselves. Adaptation policies are those that seek to “[adapt] to life in a changing climate” (NASA 2020), in order to reduce human vulnerability. Unfortunately, these policies often fail to account for the needs of disabled people, as is especially clear when looking at evacuation and relief plans for natural disasters. For example, in the aftermath of hurricane Sandy, some disabled New Yorkers were trapped in high-rise apartment buildings for days (Santora and Weiser 2013). In Florida, nursing home residents died from extreme heat after their

institution failed to evacuate in advance of Hurricane Irma. And in New Orleans, wheelchair user Benilda Caixeta drowned when the city's accessible transportation never arrived in time for her to escape Hurricane Katrina. When it comes to natural disasters, “the structural barriers that disability communities face every day — inaccessible infrastructure, subpar public transportation systems, refusals to provide communication access, endemic poverty and a limited voice in civic governance — become a matter of life or death” (Watts Belser 2019).

Rather than engage in efforts to remove these physical and social barriers to the survival of disabled people, most disaster-relief strategies take them as a given. This approach may stem from conflict between the medical and social models of disability; whereas the former views disability as an inherent “defect” situated within the body that only biomedical intervention can fix, the latter advocates looking for barriers in the physical and social construction of the world (Oliver 2006). Though both models have merits, disaster-relief policies often fail to incorporate lessons from the social model (Partnership for Inclusive Disaster Strategies 2017), thereby leaving gaps in disaster relief for disabled people.

Thus, the persistence of physical barriers to disability inclusion is the result of social assumptions and prejudice stemming from ableism. One prominent attitude can best be summed up by the interaction that scholar and activist Julia Watts Belser had with a colleague here at Georgetown University: “‘It’s terrible,’ he told me. ‘But what can you do? Some people just aren’t going to make it’” (Watts Belser 2019). As Watts Belser explains, “[her] colleague had unwittingly named a core problem facing those of us organizing for climate justice: the assumption that some folks simply aren’t cut out to survive” (Watts Belser 2019). This assumption becomes a self fulfilling prophecy: policymakers fail to look for the external barriers

that prevent disabled people from surviving disasters, those barriers persist, and people with disabilities are effectively condemned to inevitable death. Ableist assumptions like those illuminated in Watts Belser's exchange put disabled people at even higher risk.

And though disaster relief strategies may be one of the most easily-recognizable instances of non-inclusive modes of climate change adaptation, they are far from the only one. For example, climate-induced migration is another adaptation strategy being employed by communities facing rising sea levels, drought, and other crises. Migration itself presents difficulties for disabled people due to the physical demands often involved in crossing borders, but discriminatory policy also plays a big role. For example, the United States and most other countries have immigration restrictions that prevent migration by disabled people by designating them as likely to apply for welfare benefits and become a "public charge" (Lewis 2020). This discriminatory policy decision, like many others, limits disabled peoples' ability to survive climate changes-induced disasters. Instead of viewing people with disabilities "as the inevitable casualties of climate change" (Watts Belser 2019), adaptation strategies need to take disability communities into account.

### **Climate Change Mitigation Policies**

Disabled people are also disproportionately harmed by many policies designed to mitigate climate change. Though previous literature has explored how "climate policies ... have distributional consequences" (Kanbur & Shue 95), disabled people are generally excluded from such discussions. Most notably, the rise of bans on single-use plastic straws has emerged as a common practice to reduce pollution, even though many disabled people need such straws in

order to drink. In fact, plastic straw sales were originally marketed to hospitals and are commonly cited as an early example of universal design (Smith 2018).

While many promote substitutes to plastic straws, such alternatives often fail to solve the access needs of different disability communities, “such as allergy concerns with plant plastics, the risk of breaking glass straws with facial tics, or paper that disintegrates under pressure” (Smith 2018). And reusable plastic straws often constitute health hazards, as they are difficult to clean and hubs for bacteria growth (Smith 2018). Thus, any ban on plastic straws deprives disabled people of a vital tool for everyday living.

Despite outcries from disabled activists, straw bans have continued to gain momentum among companies big and small (Gibbens 2019). When presented with the harmful effects of such bans, straw ban advocates have often accused people with disabilities of being lazy, selfish, or anti-environment (Gibbens 2019). This kind of rhetoric is reminiscent of ableist tropes of people with disabilities who are worth less than non-disabled people, drains on societal resources, or simply not worth saving in situations of even the most limited hardship. It is also telling to note that movements to ban similar types of single-use plastics — such as cutlery and cups — have failed to gain traction. The fact that additional policies like these would inconvenience nondisabled people, who have stronger voices and credibility in climate change mitigation movements, is likely the key to their failure.

But plastic straw bans aren't the only mitigation strategy that negatively impacts disabled people. Efforts to ban prepared packaged foods (Louise 2018), disposable wipes (Pepper 2018), and other items deprive disabled people of accessible tools that help them go about their daily lives. And when suggesting an outright ban on something is infeasible, disabled people are often

still marked as scapegoats for causing climate change. For example, a recent article titled “Asthma carbon footprint 'as big as eating meat'” noted that “some inhalers release greenhouse gases linked to global warming” (Roberts 2019). Implicit in publicizing this finding is the idea that people with asthma are more to blame than others for causing climate change, and the potential solution is foregoing their medication for some ableist imagining of ‘the greater good.’ “Research on climate justice underlines climate policies’ potentially huge equity consequences” (Kanbur & Shue 95), but these findings have failed to translate into policies that are more inclusive of the disability community.

Finally, it is important to note that many disabled people face complex and compound marginalization due to the interaction of their disability with other marginalized identities. Being disabled and low-income, Black, Indigenous, a person of color, part of the LGBTQ community, or any number of other identities broadens the scope of policies that can be harmful to someone. For this reason, climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies must take intersectionality into account. When they fail to do so, “social inequality can be a death sentence” (Watts Belser 2019).

### **Ethical Frameworks for Disability and Climate Justice**

Several ethical frameworks can be employed to ensure that disability justice is considered in the formulation of climate change adaptation and mitigation policies. First, policymakers must be conscious of the three equity dimensions: “distributions of goods across countries, distributions of goods within countries, and distributions of goods between individuals in the world” (Kanbur and Shue 96). All too often, only the first dimension is considered in conversations about climate change, but disability justice becomes especially salient within the

latter two. Within countries, people with disabilities often have less access to resources and suffer from many types of marginalization when compared to their nondisabled compatriots. And disabled individuals across countries can face restrictions on their rights or privileges depending on country context. By being reminded of these two other ways to conceptualize their policies, leaders and scholars can better include people with disabilities in their efforts.

Next, those formulating policy must look past simple calculations of utilitarianism and consequentialism. Though these are often some of the easiest ways to frame justice issues, they can stifle minority voices by propping up problematic concepts of the ‘common good.’ Utilitarianism can encourage choices that benefit a majority even if they have a high cost to a minority. For example, a utilitarian view might advocate for a ban on plastic straws because it benefits most people by mitigating climate change, even though it would be detrimental to those it prevents from being able to safely drink water. Meanwhile, consequentialism might advocate for similar policies because in the end, they have a small mitigating effect on climate change. By ensuring that utilitarian and consequentialist frameworks are not the only ones used in evaluating climate policies, decision-makers can take steps towards avoiding ableist policies.

Care ethics can be a helpful framework in encouraging policies that are inclusive of disabled people. Similar to the disability justice value of “community care” (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018), care ethics “implies that there is moral significance in the fundamental elements of relationships and dependencies in human life” (Sander-Staudt 2009). It prioritizes care-givers and care-receivers, both of which include people with disabilities. Still, those exercising this framework must resist falling into the trope of viewing disabled people as objects of charity, care, and pity, rather than multifaceted human beings who both give and

receive care in different ways. Care ethics affirms the importance of caring for those who are made vulnerable and meeting their needs, both of which are necessary to include people with disabilities in climate change policies.

Finally, the capabilities approach furthered by Martha Nussbaum is another useful framework for evaluating whether climate change policies include disability justice. This approach “holds that the key question to ask, when comparing societies and evaluating them for their basic decency or justice, is, “What is each person able to do and be?” (Nussbaum 1997). In taking “*each person as an end*” (Nussbaum 1997), the capabilities approach would highlight problems in the ways that many climate change mitigation and adaptation policies prevent disabled people from achieving certain opportunities. Nussbaum even took people with disabilities into account in her original formulation of the capabilities approach, using a child with Down Syndrome as an example of an individual who is not often treated with dignity in society. Climate change policies and their failure to include people with disabilities often violate the notions of life, bodily health, bodily autonomy, affiliation, and control over one’s environment (Nussbaum 1997).

## **Conclusion**

Though policymakers and scholars have made progress in learning to incorporate some marginalized communities in climate change policies, people with disabilities are often left behind. By exploring the ways adaptation and mitigation policies often harm disabled people, this paper seeks to encourage the use of ethical frameworks that avoid such problems in the future. Luckily, the international community is starting to catch on; last July, the United Nations called on governments to adopt a disability-inclusive approach to addressing climate



change (Kosanic, et. al. 2019). Practicing true climate justice is inseparable from the practice of disability justice, and future policies must reflect this fact.

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