

Beyond the single story of climate vulnerability: centring disabled people and their knowledges in 'care-full' climate action

Summary

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Introduction

Without rapid policy change, the climate crisis will cause increasingly unpredictable, harmful environments for everyone. It is already preventing people from meeting their needs and impacting on mental and physical health.

Climate change itself is disabling. Yet, the people who know best how to live in a disabling world – disabled people – remain largely excluded from climate action and policy. If considered at all, disabled people are typically framed as one of several 'climate vulnerable' groups. In this article we challenge this framing, recognising the knowledge, skills and rights of disabled people as central to new forms of climate action.

The article is informed by an analysis of literature on disability and the climate crisis. We include literature on the impacts of climate breakdown on disabled people, the role(s) of disabled people in climate action and climate justice movements, and the potential and limitations of disability rights in addressing the climate crisis.

We draw on the work of disability and feminist scholars and activists to highlight the need to move from careless capitalism to inclusive cultures of climate care to achieve genuine climate justice.

Summary of main arguments

There is growing awareness of the urgent need for action to address climate harm. Disabled people are 2-4 times more likely to die or be injured in extreme weather events. Yet, if climate vulnerability is understood as the inevitable or direct result of impairment, then the lives of disabled people are either framed as disposable, or the 'common sense' solution becomes to change or 'fix' the individual. Neither of these forms of action address the causes of climate change, the inequalities of its impacts, or the reality that *all* humans are vulnerable.

The disproportionate impact of the climate crisis on disabled people is in part due to specific impairment needs, but it is also due to being disproportionately among the poorest in societies in the UK and internationally. People are disabled by inequalities in the ways that society is organised. Similarly, the climate crisis is caused by political and economic systems that fail to value people before profit. Capitalist economies – economies that burnout people and the planet in the pursuit of endless economic growth – both drive climate crisis and devalue disabled people. The social model of disability was originally explicitly anti-capitalist. It critiqued how this pursuit of profit harms, excludes and discards bodies that are not deemed 'productive' in capitalist terms.

To create a just response to the climate crisis, the insights and rights of disabled people must be at the forefront. With disability comes experience of living within limits and navigating environments that are rarely made for disabled people. This requires creativity, adaptability and resourcefulness; qualities that are essential to adaptive capacity in the context of climate disruption yet commonly overlooked in climate policy and scholarship.

The disabled people's movement also has many years of experience of collective action, mobilising to imagine alternative worlds that leave no one behind. Recognising this expertise, disabled people must be recognised and supported – through enabling political, social and environmental conditions – as 'agents of change' within collective climate action.

Main implications

The outcomes of climate action depend on the goals and values that underpin it. Efforts to climate proof current patterns of economic growth will not achieve global goals of wellbeing, justice, equity or poverty reduction.

To climate proof existing patterns of economic growth is to take for granted the myth that an extractive future is the only future. It is to accept certain people and places as 'expected' or 'acceptable' losses in the face of climate crisis. To climate proof existing patterns of economic growth is to forget that other futures are possible.

Disability scholars and activists show us that alternative futures are both possible and desirable. Through learning '*to value the humanity in all people*' (Heumann, 2021: 23), we can create societies that value abundance, not in monetary terms but in terms of community and kinship; creating support networks and showing up for each other.

Rather than promoting individual gain and widening inequalities, care-full climate action would celebrate human and nonhuman interconnection as essential for navigating the climate crisis, recognising and valuing care as central to the creation of inclusive, safe and fair societies.

Finding out more

For more information about this work, you can visit the Sensing Climate project website via: <https://sensing-climate.com/> The Sensing Climate project is based at the University of Exeter and funded by UK Research and Innovation under the UK government's Horizon Europe funding guarantee, and via a Philip Leverhulme Prize in Geography.

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