

Kohl: a Journal for Body and Gender Research
Vol. 6, No. 2 (Fall 2020)

Disability Inclusion in Climate Adaptation and Sustainable Development: A North African good practice

Nouha Maaninou

Environmental issues and disability rights go hand in hand. The disability community are the ones who need to be at the forefront of the movement. Climate justice is about people, and climate change is a human rights issue. Climate change impacts vulnerable communities the most. Opportunity and justice cannot be an afterthought. (Ghenis, 2016)

Climate change is arguably the largest challenge the world has ever faced, and people with disabilities are especially vulnerable to its many effects. In other words, the conversations on climate change and environmental issues is a general discussion that should include everyone, regardless of their race, class, gender identity, and disability. Yet, oftentimes, the disability community is left out of the conversation although they are particularly vulnerable to climate change's effects and one of the communities that are let down by and left out of systems of oppression, which makes this a disability justice issue. Therefore, where does the disability community fit into the adaptive climate justice? And how can its role be fundamental in stepping up efforts for climate action to build a sustainable future?

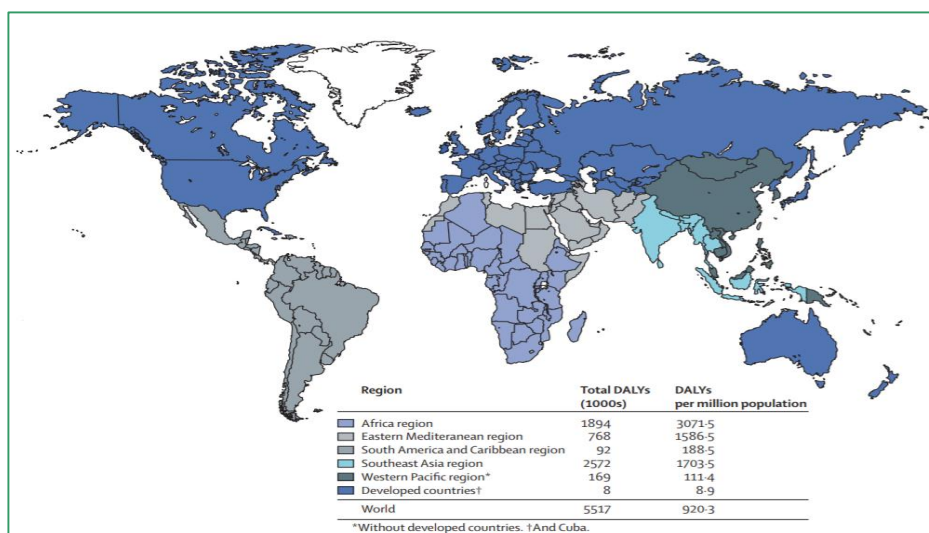
The disabled are the world's most underprivileged minority, and are considered the poorest of the poor, as poverty and disability are inextricably linked and form a vicious cycle (Elwan, 1999). Although persons with disabilities (PwDs) are diverse and not all equally disadvantaged, they still face multiple and intersectional discrimination and a high level of multidimensional poverty (Rohwerder, 2015), while their exclusion from the workforce compounds their marginalisation (Hosseinpour, et al., 2013). In the SDGs' 2030 Agenda for inclusive development, five factors are proposed as key to understanding who is being "left behind" and why: discrimination, place of residence, socio-economic status, governance, and vulnerability to shocks. Looking closely, all factors listed are constant barriers facing PwDs, and their participation in the development process, either as agents or beneficiaries, is either completely absent or tokenistic. The place of residence, for example, is referring to the existence of infrastructure gaps and isolation, like living in a residential institution or geographical isolation with lack of access to services such as in some rural or peripheral areas. Being left out of governance, on the other hand, is a disadvantage strongly linked to injustice and lack of accountability or lack of access to the decision-making processes.

In climate justice, just like in social justice, there are some groups that are historically marginalized and disproportionately left behind, still fighting for equal rights and for their inclusion in access to needed resources. In general, those marginalized groups¹ are vulnerable to higher risk of harm or wrongs depending on their age, health, gender, disability, as well as their capacities for resilience (Meek Lange, Rogers, & Dodds, 2013). Therefore, they are disproportionately impacted by environmental hazards (Hamilton, 2019), as they will be hit the hardest while being the least resourced, especially in "developing" countries and the global south.

¹ Across countries, women and girls, people in rural areas, indigenous peoples, ethnic and linguistic minorities, people with disabilities, migrants, gender and sexual minorities, youth and older persons are all deprived in the basic dimensions of human development (UNDP, "Human Development Report 2016: Human Development for Everyone")

It is believed that the number of those with physical and mental disabilities in the world will increase with time. The spectrum of disability is already continuously expanding as we are faced with many factors, including malnutrition and disease, environmental hazards, traffic and industrial accidents, and civil conflict and war (African Studies Center, 2008). Although there isn't much research available around concrete numbers related to climate change's impact on the disability community, the impact of climate change can generally be looked at from a human health perspective as the "disability-adjusted life years" (DALYs) indicator.² This indicator shows that lower quality of health is impacting the severity of disabilities and reducing quality of life. For instance, by causing increased injuries, heat waves augment the likelihood of heat exhaustion and heart-stroke, crop shortages, malnutrition, and the spread of invasive diseases due to great vulnerability and fragile health, in addition to climate-related conflicts. Extreme weather change and other climate-driven related disasters can damage economies, lower farming and livestock production, and intensify inequality among social groups (Devon, 2019). The African continent has so far the largest number of DALYs lost per 1000s inhabitants as a result of climate change (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Estimated effects of Climate change in 2000, by WHO.



Without mitigation and adaptation, the poorest and weakest groups, such as elderly people, women, persons with disabilities, children, and minorities would be the most exposed to climate change consequences (Olsson, et al., 2014),³ as these groups have traditionally been more excluded from adequate housing and health systems. Climate change tends to increase the inequalities in society, and its greatest effect will be on those who have the least access to the world's resources and who have contributed least to its cause (Costello, et al., 2009). PwDs can be considered the most vulnerable to the effects of climate change because of already-existing health factors, personal and medical needs, in

² The disability-adjusted life year (DALY) is a measure of overall disease burden, expressed as the number of years lost due to ill-health, disability or early death. It was developed in the 1990s as a way of comparing the overall health and life expectancy of different countries.

³ In the Fifth Assessment Report, Working Group II notes that socially and geographically disadvantaged people, including those facing discrimination based on gender, age, race, class, caste, ethnicity and disability, are particularly affected by climate hazards (Olsson and others, 2014, p. 796).

addition to frequent marginalization (Ghenis, 2017) sometimes aggravated by the presence of “overlapping categories” of vulnerability such as gender and disability.

After working with disability rights movements in North African countries, and as an ally to disabled communities, I realized that people with disabilities’ access to resources and justice is hindered on many levels, which makes community building challenging and scarce. From a general perspective, it is hard to address the future of people of disabilities in this region or elsewhere without assessing their level of inclusion at the decision-making level. In order to address this issue, it’s crucial to understand that people with disabilities are not given the key qualifications and skills that would make their social and economic participation possible. This is the result of their frequent exclusion from the educational system, as well as limited access to information and training programs that are entirely able-bodied and inaccessible. While there is no clear or reliable data on the lived realities of PwDs in North Africa, available evidence suggests that they constitute one of the most neglected and excluded population groups in the region, suffering from cultural stigma and lack of awareness, to inaccessible environments (services and workplaces) especially in rural areas, in addition to a general lack of comprehensive protection and enforcement of their rights (Rohwerder, 2018).

In the last two decades, most North African countries have adopted overarching disability laws, and several have developed disability strategies and action plans. The intersection between climate change adaptation, the need for sustainable development, and disability seems to be drawing new frontiers for the rights of PwDs in the region. The general situation of PwDs is very similar in North African countries, being mainly characterized by poverty, limited access to formal schooling, high level of unemployment, significant accessibility barriers to mainstream services and opportunities, in addition to the persistence of negative or charitable attitudes.⁴ Even more, public policies and programs targeting PwDs suffer from a lack of coherence and coordination between the different actors from the national to the local level. Therefore, they are not often based on a clear identification of the existing needs. So far, the means made available in terms of educational, professional, and social inclusion remain insufficient to enable PwDs to have a dignified life within their communities.

Consequently, the North African countries are in clear need of specific measures and initiatives targeting the social, economic, and political inclusion of PwDs. Social inclusion,⁵ for example, is an essential factor for the feeling of well-being and empowerment of people with disabilities, allowing them to gain the sentiment of belonging to their community. This can be measured by their level of participation in collective activities, while empowerment can come in a lot of different ways: from having their basic needs met, to being gainfully employed or feeling valued at work, feeling independent or self-reliant, and having people see them for who they are and for their potential. Inclusion helps PwDs feel empowered and builds their self-esteem and self-confidence, while also changing perceptions of disability.

⁴ Attitudes of society as a whole towards disability are often characterised by pity and charity, rather than viewing PwDs as citizens with equal rights and the potential to contribute to society, including to economic growth. (Handicap International)

⁵ In the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), Social inclusion is described simultaneously as a general principle applied to the whole of society (Art. 3), an obligation of the States Parties (Art. 4) and a right for people with disabilities (Art. 19, 29 and 30).

One of the main practices that are being promoted and implemented around the world is about bringing disability issues to the light through the power of community. Local stakeholders are being informed and trained on the rights and potential of PwDs, while ensuring their inclusion in climate adaptation initiatives, for example through specific activities to improve their access to professional training, and hiring opportunities with local employers.

Since the revolution of January 2011, the Tunisian society is at the crossroads of new political and social dynamics, where Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), previously largely controlled by the former regime, are flourishing all over the country following the adoption of a new legal framework providing freedoms of association and assembly to citizens (Baker, 2015). The Tunisian civil society now plays a larger role in the transitional democracy the country is undergoing, mainly through defending and promoting human rights and civil liberties. According to the NGO Humanity and Inclusion (formerly Handicap International – HI), within the numerous efforts and changes that are taking place at the national and local levels, many are being led by Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs), who are demanding to participate directly in the decisions that might concern their represented population (Bakhshi, Gall, Lopez, & Trani, 2014).

This dynamic can be seen at the level of the Gabès Governorate⁶ where, in the face of economic, health and environmental challenges,⁷ and in order to preserve its ecosystems, civil society actors (CSOs and DPOs) have been trying to mobilise different local actors, through an innovative and participatory approach, to bring out solutions adapted to the realities of the territory.

Following a pilot step in 2016, the Tunisian DPO, Union of Aid to the Mentally Disabled (UTAIM) of Gabès, and the Tunisian Agency for Employment and Independent Work (ANETI) implemented a two-year long project supported by the European Union (EU) and coordinated by HI, in partnership with the private sector and CSOs active in the Governorate. The initiative mainly aimed to promote "green jobs"⁸ as a new opportunity for social inclusion of vulnerable populations and the promotion of sustainable development in the Governorate of Gabès. Based on a multi-stakeholder approach, this local initiative aimed to support inclusive local development dynamics and to improve the access of PwDs to environmental governance, through their social and professional contribution to the sustainable development of their territory.

The project idea was mainly targeting the creation of a consultation dynamic between public, associative, and private actors involved in the economic development and environmental protection of the Governorate, with the purpose of stimulating the social and economic integration of vulnerable populations, particularly through creating working opportunities in green professions: from creating a

⁶ One of the 24 governorates of Tunisia, situated in the south-eastern coast of the country.

⁷ Known for its rich biodiversity, the region is however considered a "pollution hotspots" in the Mediterranean, suffering from the effects of severe industrial pollution for decades. The intense industrial activity of the region, in addition to other environmental factors are threatening the existence of the region's oases and ecosystems, affecting the state of fauna and flora, and degrading the health and well-being of local populations. (Expertise France)

⁸ Jobs in businesses that produce goods or provide services that benefit the environment or conserve natural resources. Jobs in which workers' duties involve making their establishment's production processes more environmentally friendly or use fewer natural resources (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, March 2013).

network of actors involved in local economic, social, and environmental governance, to identifying with them the needs and opportunities for the integration of vulnerable groups, mainly PwDs, in local economic development actions that will protect the local ecosystem. The initiative concluded in the development of a regional action plan for the development of a sustainable and social economy that is inclusive of PwDs as actors and beneficiaries.

The initiative was also successful in emphasizing the role of DPOs by making them more actively involved in the promotion of local environmental governance, through the implementation of actions in line with the principles of sustainable development. This has ensured the participation of PwDs, through a concerted response based on their rights, their needs, and the expression of their collective and individual choice.

In such initiatives, the CSOs and DPOs are mobilized around multi-stakeholder partnership dynamics that strengthen their capacities to implement innovative, endogenous, and environmentally friendly local economic initiatives that enable the socio-economic integration of vulnerable populations – in particular women, youth, and people with disabilities. Within such conceptualisations, more attention is given to the interaction between PwDs and their environment, in which they live, learn, and work. As such, there has been an increased attention to the rights of PwDs to be fully included in their communities and to the importance of self-determination and participation to ensure a decent quality of life.

Local initiatives such as this one should to be scaled up to the national level and spread across the region through the duplication of multi-stakeholder partnership dynamics, creating new bridges of collaboration with innovative means and solutions to ensure the inclusion and leadership of the most marginalized in the local development strategies. More precisely, this will help in reinforcing the access to justice of PwDs and address the challenges of their unemployment, all while promoting green jobs for environmental sustainability.

References

- African Studies Center. (2008). *Disability in Africa*. Retrieved November 8, 2020, from Africa Renewal Magazine: <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/december-2018-march-2019/double-challenge-disabled>
- Baker, V. (2015). *The Role of Civil Society in the Tunisian Democratic Transition*. University of Colorado Boulder.
- Bakhshi, P., Gall, F., Lopez, D., & Trani, J.-F. (2014). *Le handicap dans les politiques publiques tunisiennes face au creusement des inégalités et à l'appauvrissement des familles avec des ayants droit en situation de handicap*. Handicap International – Programme Maghreb; Tunisian Organisation for the Defense of the Rights of PwD.
- Costello, A., Abbas, M., Allen, A., Ball, S., Bell, S., Bellamy, R., et al. (2009, May 16). Managing the Health Effects of Climate Change. (L. a. Commission, Ed.) *The Lancet Commissions*, 373, 1693-1733.
- Devon, R. (2019, June 12). *Stanford-led study investigates how much climate change affects the risk of armed conflict*. Retrieved November 8, 2020, from Stanford News: <https://stanford.io/3psXDqg>
- Elwan, A. (1999). *Poverty and Disability: A Survey of the Literature*. Washington: World Bank, Social Protection Unit, Human Development Network.
- Ghenis, A. (2016, April). *Presentation of the World Institute on Disability (WID) 2015 Report – The intersection of Climate Change and Disability*. (N. E. Project, Interviewer)
- Ghenis, A. (2017, April). *Climat adaptation, adaptative climate justice and people with disabilities*. Retrieved November 8, 2020, from Union of concerned scientists: <https://blog.ucsusa.org/guest-commentary/climate-adaptation-adaptive-climate-justice-and-people-with-disabilities>
- Hamilton, J. (2019, April). *Poor and marginalised bear the brunt of climate change*. Retrieved May 11, 2020, from Red Pepper Magazine: <https://www.redpepper.org.uk/poor-and-marginalised-people-bear-the-brunt-of-climate-change/>
- Hosseinpour, A. R., Stewart Williams, J. A., Gautam, J., Posarac, A., Officer, A., Verdes, E., et al. (2013). Socioeconomic Inequality in Disability Among Adults: A Multicountry Study Using the World Health Survey. *American Journal of Public Health*, 103(7), 1278-1286.
- Meek Lange, M., Rogers, W., & Dodds, S. (2013). Vulnerability in Research Ethics: a Way Forward. *Bioethics*, 27(6), 333-340.
- Olsson, L., Opondo, M., Tschakert, P., A, Agrawal, A., Eriksen, S. H., et al. (2014). Livelihoods and poverty in Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. *Part A: Global and Sectoral Aspects. Contribution of Working Group II to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Rohwerder, B. (2015). *Disability inclusion: Topic guide*. Birmingham, UK: GSDRC, University of Birmingham.
- Rohwerder, B. (2018). *Disability in North Africa*. Institute of Development Studies, K4D Helpdesk Report, Brighton, UK.
- Schulte, C., & Gazendam, I. (2019, July 15). *UN Climate Resolution Emphasizes Protection of Disability Rights – People with Disabilities should be included in climate action*. Retrieved November 8, 2020, from Human Rights Watch: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/15/un-climate-resolution-emphasizes-protection-disability-rights>
- WHO. (2011). *World Report on Disability*. World Health Organisation and World Bank.

WHO. (2018). *Disability and health*. World Health Organization.