Inclusion and Climate Resilience for People with Disabilities in Africa: A Systematic Review of Challenges.

Uchizi Changala Munyenyembe, Onyinye Jane Asogwa

Governance & Regional Integration, Pan-African University Institute of Governance, Humanities, and Social Sciences (PAUGHSS)

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ABSTRACT

Individuals with disabilities in Africa and beyond are especially vulnerable to severe climatic events such as heat waves, floods, droughts, mudslides, and cyclones. Discrimination, whether intentional or unintentional, against people with disabilities occurs across both social and formal institutions. This has heightened the vulnerability of disabled communities to environmental conditions in Africa. As a result, current discussions have linked the idea of disability inclusion with climate resilience. Despite adopting the African Disability Protocol in 2018, implementing disability inclusion in Africa remains a significant challenge. This article is a systematic review that aims to identify the challenges of inclusion in climate resilience for individuals with disabilities in Africa. The study reviewed publications from Science Direct and Google Scholar databases. The reviewed publications include articles, reports, and grey literature between 2019 and 2025. Our findings indicate that challenges to disability inclusion include the lack of an intersectional approach in policies and programmes, exclusive education, the absence of progressive disability frameworks, and a lack of accurate data on persons with disabilities (PwD). Addressing these challenges can improve climate resilience for individuals with disabilities in Africa. We recommend cross-sector collaboration to enhance information sharing regarding disability inclusion in Africa.

Keywords: Disability Inclusion, People with disabilities, Climate resilience, Africa

INTRODUCTION

Climate change is anticipated to exacerbate extreme weather occurrences, elevate disease prevalence, and disrupt livelihoods (Jodoin et al., 2020). This is especially alarming for individuals with disabilities, as they are particularly susceptible to the detrimental impacts of climate change (Jodoin et al., 2020). One billion individuals worldwide experience some type of disability, constituting around 15% of the global population (Vanderschuren & Nnene, 2021). Some 80% of People with disabilities (PWDs) live in developing countries, while 60 – 80 billion live in Africa(Vanderschuren & Nnene, 2021). In North Africa, PwDs endure cultural stigma, insufficient awareness, and inaccessible environments, particularly in rural areas (Maaninou, 2020). They are susceptible to extreme climatic events such as heat waves and floods (Hotor, 2024). This being the case, they may experience some exclusion, such as restricted access to shelters due to the loss of mobility aids or rejection from insufficient equipment, such as appropriate beds or accessible restrooms (Jampel, 2018). However, PwDs are becoming agents of change in their communities, with a growing number in disaster risk reduction through inclusion. Calgaro (2021) observed that collaboration with the Deaf community led to inspirational individuals and organisations promoting greater inclusion.

Disability Inclusion in Africa became familiar with the adoption of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Africa (2018) and the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). The African Disability Protocol entered into force in June 2024 after 15 ratifications. The African Union encourages full and effective

participation and inclusion in society. Effective social inclusion enhances the lives of individuals and communities presently and can aid in fostering resistance to climate change (Larkins et al., 2020). Progress has been made in policy-making for disability inclusion in Africa, but more needs to be done (Lang et al., 2019). (Collins & Rose, 2024) cite some notable progress towards inclusion for PwDs facilitated by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) in Malawi, Nigeria, Kenya and Zambia. The Malawi Persons with Disabilities Act, enacted in April 2024, prohibits discrimination and promotes disability rights. Similarly, the NDI assisted in establishing a national forum in Kenya, which formulated legislation for disabled individuals. In Nigeria, NDI supported a network to mitigate the impact of fuel subsidies on disabled people. In Zambia, local partners made Constituency Development Funds more inclusive, resulting in seven women with disabilities being elected to committee boards (Collins & Rose, n.d.). Similarly, in the last two decades, North African nations have enacted disability legislation and strategies, emphasising climate change adaptation, sustainable development, and the rights of Persons with Disabilities (Maaninou, 2020). Nevertheless, policy-makers and development practitioners do not understand disability issues' importance in national and continental social and economic policies (Lang et al., 2019).

In the quest for disability inclusion, charity and medical models view people with disabilities as victims of their circumstances and objects of pity, justifying a culture of care and protection. These models portray people with disabilities as "less than" others, leading to low societal expectations, loss of independence, and reinforcing needs-based social policy (Calgaro, 2021). In Zambia, people living with disabilities suffer due to the discord and legal dualism within Zambian legislation, which contradicts traditional practices and further impedes the successful realisation of social inclusion(Bikketi et al., 2024). This undermines the General Obligations of the ADP and the UNCRPD that can be applied to disability-inclusive climate resilience. The two frameworks adopt measures to abolish discriminatory laws, provide inclusive education, protect human rights, eliminate discrimination, promote universal design and accessible technology, and provide accessible information. This study, therefore, seeks to address the question: What are the challenges of inclusion for climate resilience for people living with disabilities in Africa?

It is essential to recognise resilience and the PwDs' capacity to withstand, adapt to, and recover from adverse events (Matlakala et al., 2024). PwDs have unique needs in extreme environmental conditions, particularly when social and architectural infrastructure is compromised. These needs must be addressed based on climate consequences to enhance their resilience (Saxton & Ghenis, 2018). This marginalised community often faces multiple vulnerabilities, including limited access to healthcare, inadequate infrastructure, and socio-economic disadvantages, which increase their exposure and sensitivity to extreme weather events (IPCC, 2012).

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Disability inclusion and climate resilience

Academic literature has debated the link between Disability inclusion and climate resilience. Saran et al. (2023) define social inclusion as enhancing social engagement, especially for disadvantaged individuals, by expanding opportunities, access to resources, representation, and respect for rights. On the other hand, climate resilience is the ability to anticipate, prepare for, and respond to hazardous events, trends, or disturbances related to climate (Fitzpatrick & West, 2022).

(Jodoin et al., 2020) Observed that heightened risks encountered by disabled individuals during natural disasters stem from the compounded vulnerabilities associated with poverty, the availability of information regarding risks and hazards, the configuration of the built environment, and societal attitudes towards disabled individuals. Addressing the varied needs of all vulnerable populations, including individuals with disabilities, can effectively boost climate resilience. This may guarantee that climatic effects do not disproportionately harm PwDs and that their rights and requirements are prioritised in climate adaptation initiatives (Tenzing & Conway, 2022). Social inclusion is a crucial determinant of well-being and empowerment for those with disabilities, facilitating their sense of belonging within the community. Inclusion empowers those with

disabilities, enhancing their self-esteem and self-confidence while altering conceptions of disability (Maaninou, 2020).

Disasters frequently marginalise individuals with disabilities due to physical and environmental obstacles, such as inadequate access to shelters, transportation, and early warning systems. They frequently encounter prejudice, harassment, and injury from fellow survivors. Moreover, their preparedness for disaster situations is diminished by insufficient knowledge, poor literacy rates, and restricted access to available information. Communication systems employed during disaster scenarios are frequently inadequate and inaccessible, hence worsening the circumstances around their resilience (Calgaro, 2021). Individuals with various disabilities in Africa encounter numerous problems, resulting in elevated poverty rates, as technologies entrenched views, such as perceiving a disabled infant as a misfortune or relegating a woman's role to domestic duties, exacerbate and sustain disparities, particularly within the agriculture sector (Bikketi et al., 2024). The freedom to live autonomously and participate in the community is frequently compromised after severe weather events, which will be intensified by climate change. During and following natural disasters, individuals with disabilities may encounter difficulties in accessing housing, transportation, needed medical services, employment, and vital communication channels, thereby compromising their right to live independently (Jodoin et al., 2020). Disability inclusion, therefore, serves to implement specific measures to remove barriers to participation in mainstream communities, including ramps, assistive devices, technologies, and services, enabling full participation for PwDs (Saxton & Ghenis, 2018).

METHODS

The study examined the literature on the challenges of inclusion in climate resilience for people with disabilities in Africa. This article is based on a systematic literature review. Therefore, we used two databases, Science Direct and Google Scholar. We searched for scholarly literature using the following search string: ["Disability inclusion" OR "Inclusion"] AND ["Climate resilience"] AND ["Africa") AND ["Disability" OR "Disabled persons] AND ["Challenges" OR "Barriers"]. The search was focused on publications from 2019 to 2025 because "Disability Inclusion" recently became more common in Africa with the adoption of the African Disability Protocol in 2018.

Additionally, all study designs for research articles were eligible. Therefore, our search in Science Direct found 1016 results. We started our exclusion process by eliminating all papers outside social science and environmental sciences and remaining with them. We further excluded publications that did not focus on environmental management and marginalised populations; we remained with 47 articles. We manually eliminated more articles that were not relevant and remained with four articles. Consequently, we repeated this process and got 960 results in Google Scholar. Due to the large volume of search results, we focused on the first 100 articles sorted by relevance to our search terms. From these 100, we selected and excluded the articles that did not mention inclusion and climate resilience in their titles and abstracts. We reduced our documents to 19 articles from Google Scholar. Therefore, a total of 23 papers were used for this review. This review included reports from institutes, peer and non-peer-reviewed articles, books and grey literature.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Barriers to Disability Inclusion for Climate Resilience in Africa

Absence of progressive disability frameworks

Establishing progressive, inclusive disability policies and guidelines is a step toward inclusion, although this does not guarantee implementation. In a study by Vanderschuren & Nnene (2021), we observed that Mobility impairments (MI) were not included in the transport policy. MI, including neurological and orthopaedic impairments, can also affect people with high blood pressure, obesity, and asthma. In Africa, seven out of 29 countries investigated do not include support for people with MI, including wheelchair users. However, Ghana, Kenya, and Malawi have reasonable inclusion of mobility aspects in their policy frameworks. This, though,

does not mean automatic reflection of implementation on the ground (Vanderschuren & Nnene, 2021). The study indicates Africa's progress in people-centric, inclusive transport planning, with many countries lacking conducive frameworks and not translating the rights of PWDs into transport-specific policies and legislation. Progressive transport planning can improve climate resilience for disabled people in Africa, where 75% of mobility is through walking (Cinderby et al., 2024). This is so because disasters often leave people with disabilities behind due to physical and environmental barriers, including inaccessible evacuation routes, shelters, transportation, and early warning systems. Overcrowding, inaccessibility, and inadequate facilities in emergency shelters further exacerbate these issues (Calgaro, 2021). Progressive transport policy is also beneficial in multiple ways, including improving the economic status associated with disability by supporting disabled people to attend school, work, and socialise just like everyone else.

Another study by Ebuenyi et al. (2018) on barriers to inclusion of persons with mental disabilities in East Africa exposed challenges of inclusion to be exclusion from primary education and unclear policy regulating eligibility for mental disability participation in a program.

Exclusive Education

We found that disabled refugees in Uganda, Zimbabwe and South Africa have experienced educational exclusion (Walton et al., 2020). In all three countries, the data of disabled refugees was uncertain. The Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) reported insufficient enrollment of children with disabilities and marginalised groups in Ugandan educational institutions, leading to higher absenteeism and poorer performance in refugee settlements, requiring the Refugee Education Response Plan for Uganda. In South Africa, discriminatory pressures faced by refugee and disabled students are similar, potentially worsening for disabled refugee students (Walton et al., 2020).

Additionally, the prevalence of disability among Malawian school-aged children ranges from 0.43% to 5.60%. Inclusive education in Malawi primarily involves resource classrooms and special schools, with 60 and 88 resource rooms at primary and secondary levels, respectively. Malawi's 2018 Population and Housing Census estimates show 330,000 children with disabilities. The country's Ministry of Education identified 196 and 791 students with special education needs, but it is unclear if others are still out of school. Research by Chirwa et al. (2021) indicates that the execution of inclusive education in the country has encountered obstacles, partly due to insufficient orientation and training for teachers responsible for converting mainstream classrooms into inclusive environments and partly due to a lack of resources. This is also the case in Zimbabwe, which faces challenges like inadequate teacher education, lack of specialist skills, and limited resources, hindering the effective implementation of inclusive education (Walton et al., 2020). In a study in Senegal, 75% of individuals with disabilities were illiterate, while 60% of those without disabilities were literate (Fassin, 1991). The study also indicated that children with disabilities had limited access to quality education, particularly in rural areas, as specialist institutions were primarily situated in or near Dakar.

Education exclusion has implications for financial inclusion. PwDs may be excluded from employment as they may not be unqualified, resulting in financial exclusion. For instance, in the inclusion programme for individuals with mental disabilities, implementing the program was a challenge due to particular beneficiaries not meeting the minimal educational qualifications required (Ebuenyi et al., 2018). This type of exclusion can lead to adverse effects on climate resilience for PwDs. Financial inclusion is an essential element in fostering resilience at both community and household levels. These methods of financial inclusion can assist households in developing resilience to avert impoverishment and facilitate pathways out of poverty, even during crises (Diwakar et al., 2024).

Lack of Intersectional approach in policies and programmes

It is imperative to remember that PwDs are not homogeneous groups; therefore, intersectionality is necessary to achieve inclusivity for climate resilience. The amalgamation of individuals with disabilities and other vulnerable groups obscures the distinct requirements of each category in African policies. Without a clear

delineation of the specific requirements of distinct groups, the needs of all groups are unlikely to be adequately handled if addressed (Lang et al., 2019). They acknowledged that disability is a significant concern for the African Union and its Member States. Nevertheless, it lacks the necessary prominence to guarantee that the rights of those with disabilities are realised (Maaninou, 2020). For example, in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly elderly PwDs, encounter substantial obstacles in anticipating, responding to, and recuperating from climate-induced disasters because of their socio-economic capacity to prepare for climate shocks such as building resilient infrastructure (Matlakala et al., 2024). In Ghana, a programme that improved social ties and local knowledge to address climate-related risks was discovered to potentially hinder the inclusion of marginalised groups within the community, hypothetically exacerbating existing inequalities in climate resilience outcomes. Another case is in Uganda. There is no specific attention for refugees with disabilities, but rather, they fit into a mix of other categories. In Sierra Leone, Census boys and girls with disabilities were 7% points and 10% points less likely to be in school than their non-disabled peers (Jolley et al., 2018). This automatically states that we cannot use a common intervention to address the gap, and the same applies to climate resilience inclusion. A study conducted in North Africa revealed that individuals with disabilities (PwDs) exhibit diversity and varying degrees of disadvantage; however, they continue to encounter multiple and intersectional discrimination, as well as significant multidimensional poverty (Maaninou, 2020). Therefore, disability frameworks should address intersectionality; for example, a specific policy for mental disability participation should be implemented for inclusiveness (Hotor, 2024).

Absence of accurate data on PwDs

Accurate data is vital for progressive inclusion programmes. Without accurate data, important decisions can be made based on estimations, undermining climate resilience efforts' outcomes. For example, it was observed that there is a lack of definitive data on the lived experiences of persons with disabilities (PwDs) in North Africa (Maaninou, 2020). The author used existing evidence to conclude that PwDs represent one of the region's most marginalised and overlooked demographic groups. Similarly, accurate numbers of refugees and asylum seekers in South Africa are unavailable, with the UNHCR reporting a total of 586,000 refugees and asylum-seekers in the countries of South Africa, Lesotho, and Swaziland (Walton et al., 2020).

CONCLUSION

Disability inclusion has the potential to promote climate resilience. In Africa, PwDs are particularly susceptible to climate change-related risks and other hazards due to a combination of interrelated socio-cultural, economic, political, and physical barriers encountered in their everyday existence. In numerous societies, individuals with disabilities are deprived of their inclusion. Both AU and UN frameworks have acknowledged disability inclusion processes to develop various aspects of PwDs' lives. However, efforts towards disability inclusion continue to be challenged. The exclusion process commences with societal perceptions and valuations of individuals and their contributions to the community. This review identified four barriers to disability inclusion for climate resilience, including the lack of an Intersectional approach in policies and programmes, exclusive education, the absence of progressive disability frameworks, and the absence of accurate data on PwDs. We, therefore, recommend employing cross-sector collaborations to enhance disability inclusion. This promotes collaboration, knowledge sharing, and management, cultivating synergies among sectors.

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