

## Seeking a disability lens within climate change migration discourses, policies and practices

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### Abstract

Around 15% of the global population is estimated to live with disability. With the Millennium Development Goals failing to recognise disability issues, the Sustainable Development Goals seek to promote a stronger focus on the alleviation of poverty and inequality amongst disabled people. Since then, the vulnerability of disabled people has been highlighted within international climate change agreements. Yet, a critical disability lens is largely lacking from broader aspects of climate change adaptation planning. Focusing primarily on examples from the Asia-Pacific region (a region including low-lying coastal areas and islands that are frequently highlighted as exemplars of communities on the front line of climate change), this paper discusses the need to integrate critical insights from disability studies into current understandings of climate change adaptation and mobility if we are to facilitate more inclusive, democratic and equitable adaptation in the face of climate change.

**Key words:** disability, climate change, small island developing states, climate migration, ableism, social justice.

### Introduction

The unequivocal, potentially irreversible impacts of anthropogenic climate change currently threaten 50 years of gains in public health (Watts et al., 2018). Undermining both social and environmental determinants of health, climate change is widening global health inequalities, to the extent that a comprehensive response to climate change has been flagged as “the greatest global health opportunity of the 21st Century” (Watts et al., 2018: 581).

Climate change poses direct and indirect risks to human health and livelihoods via its impacts on the frequency and severity of extreme weather events and slower onset ecosystem degradation. In compromising place habitability, climate change generates and escalates the likelihood of human mobility (McNamara et al., 2018), particularly among communities within low-lying islands and coastal deltas that are increasingly forced to look beyond *in situ* adaptation options. These shifts have prompted calls for ‘transformative mobilities’; mobilities that advance human rights and socio-political equity in both origin and destination sites by contributing to both climate change adaptation *and* human development (Farbotko et al., 2018).

With the Millennium Development Goals failing to recognise disability issues (Banks et al., 2017), the Sustainable Development Goals seek to promote a stronger focus on the alleviation of poverty and inequality amongst disabled people. Since then, the vulnerability of disabled people has been highlighted within international climate change agreements,

including the 2010 Cancun Agreements, the 2013 Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage, and the preamble to the 2015 Paris Agreement on Climate Change. Indeed, studies have identified higher mortality rates among disabled people than others during natural disasters and extreme weather events (Gaskin et al., 2017). Consistent with biomedical models of disability, this vulnerability is often perceived as an inevitable or 'natural' consequence of life with impairment, as a problem lodged in individual bodies rather than an outcome of exclusionary social structures and physical environments (Görgens and Ziervogel, 2019).

A disability lens, rooted in social relational models of disability (Burns, 2017), offers opportunities to challenge such perceptions and address the vulnerable *situations* that are unnecessarily created and perpetuated by ableist societies (Wolbring, 2009). The failure to engage with disabled people in contemporary climate adaptation planning, disaster relief and recovery efforts overlooks their potential as knowledgeable and powerful agents of change (Abbott and Porter, 2013). There is an urgent need for more inclusive climate change discourses that recognise impairment as an ordinary – not 'specialist' or exceptional – dimension of human experience; this is important if we are to minimise the risk of exacerbating health inequalities with exclusionary political responses to these global scale environmental shifts.

This piece therefore calls for greater efforts to understand and raise the profile of impairment and disability within climate change adaptation discourses, policies and practices. To do so, we bring dominant narratives on climate change and adaptive migration into dialogue with insights from disability studies, and reflect on the potential to encourage more transformative mobilities with a disability studies lens. We focus primarily on examples from the Asia-Pacific region; a region including many low-lying coastal areas and islands that are frequently highlighted as exemplars of communities on the front line of climate change (Farbotko, 2010). These areas often share similar livelihood, development and sustainability challenges, including high degrees of ecological dependence (in material, cultural and spiritual terms), acute sensitivity to environmental change, and complex patterns and histories of mobility (Murphy, 2015).

### **Migration as a form of agentic climate adaptation?**

The perceived vulnerability of communities within small island developing states and mainland coastal deltas has initiated controversial discussions concerning climate change as a catalyst for large-scale migration. Many islands within the Asia-Pacific region have a long history of temporary migration due to natural disasters, localised environmental degradation and seasonal labour opportunities. However, the risks of displacement with more permanent migration of entire national populations remain contentious (Smith and McNamara, 2015).

Terms, such as 'environmental refugee' or 'climate migrant', which are commonly used to describe people engaged in climate-led forms of mobility, have been critiqued as analytically flawed, informed by monocausal understandings of human migration (Bettini et al., 2017). These labels have been denounced as disempowering, reflecting a "migrant-as-victim" thesis (Baldwin, 2013: 1475), whereby the agency of those in transition is lost amidst provocative images of widespread and unplanned mass movements of individuals reliant on host societies (Bettini, 2013).

The predominant framing of disabled people within contemporary climate change discourses largely sits within this migrant-as-victim thesis, and often goes further by equating disability with immobility. Examining climate change-induced displacement in

Bangladesh, for example, Islam and Shamsuddoha (2017: 293) highlight disabled people as “stuck” in comparison to other individuals with the resources to engage in planned migration. Although it is essential to understand these precarious situations, there has been limited effort to work with disabled people as “active agents of change with valuable knowledge and adaptive capacity” (Albert et al., 2018: 2262). As noted by Abbott and Porter (2013), the skills of anticipating, assessing and improvising in the face of risk are a daily reality for many disabled people, even without the added stresses imposed by climate change. Rather than marginalisation, such problem-solving skills should be *central* to climate change adaptation planning (Görgens and Ziervogel, 2019).

Looking beyond immobility or unplanned mass mobility, there has also been growing interest in the role of international labour migration as an adaptive strategy, as foregrounded in the ‘Migration with Dignity’ strategy developed by former President of Kiribati, Anote Tong (Klepp and Herbeck, 2016). Yet, for disabled people, this approach risks new forms of inequality. Globally, immigration policy tends to adopt exclusively biomedical – rather than social-relational – approaches to disability. While affected individuals technically have the right to international mobility under Article 18 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (UNCRPD), gaining access to countries is often denied on the grounds of health, with disability viewed as a “burden” to the state rather than a source of knowledge or social enrichment (Burns, 2017).

In practice (with the exception of smaller island states), international migration will account for a relatively small proportion of climate mobility, with most climate-related migration anticipated *within* national borders (Farbotko and Lazrus, 2012). Recognising this, Fiji has become the first country globally to pro-actively develop a climate change relocation plan (Klepp and Herbeck, 2016), identifying 830 climate vulnerable communities requiring relocation, including 48 relocations classified as urgent. Despite growing interest in these relocation processes, however, the role of disabled community members in shaping such decisions remains unexplored. In particular, there has been little consideration of relocation impacts on people’s adaptive capacities, including the balance of supportive and disabling relational configurations that constitute people’s day-to-day routines, mobilities, livelihoods and socialities.

### **Concluding Remarks: Enabling transformative mobilities?**

The preamble to the UNCRPD highlights the “importance of mainstreaming disability issues as an integral part of relevant strategies of sustainable development” (United Nations, 2006: 1), and advocates for disabled people to be “actively involved in decision-making processes about policies and programmes, including those directly concerning them” (2006: 2). Whilst the perceived vulnerabilities of disabled people have garnered increasing attention within disaster risk management policies and programmes (Gaskin et al., 2017), a critical disability lens is largely lacking from broader aspects of climate change adaptation planning. In this paper, we have discussed the need to better integrate insights from disability studies into current understandings of climate mobility and adaptation if we are to facilitate more inclusive, democratic and equitable adaptation in the face of climate change. We have argued for a focus on the ableist dynamics that perpetuate vulnerable *situations*, rather than framing vulnerability as an inevitable consequence of impairment, and have challenged dominant “disabled migrant as victim” or “biomedical burden” discourses. In doing so, we seek to reinforce and extend recent calls to explore how adaptive migration in its various forms can be “a viable adaptation option for people, *anyone*, in the context of climate change” (Baldwin and Fornalé, 2017: 323, emphasis added), disabled or otherwise.

By foregrounding the rights and knowledge of disabled people within global climate change discourses, we suggest that a critical disability lens could foster climate adaptation strategies that promote dignity and respect for embodied diversity, recognising people's capacities and skills rather than broadening existing health inequalities. Engaging with everyday experiences of climate risk and adaptation amongst disabled people could highlight a productive way forward for the promotion of *inclusive* transformative mobilities, both within the Asia-Pacific Region and beyond. This is important if we are to challenge the predominant disabled migrant-as-victim thesis with narratives that recognise and empower disabled people as valued agents of change within contemporary and future responses to climate change.

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