

What is the connection between climate change and disability?

Climate change is a global challenge with devastating impacts, impacts which are likely to fall heaviest on the poorest and most marginalized. It requires the urgent implementation of both mitigation measures and adaptation strategies to avert a worst case scenario. One group particularly vulnerable to climate impacts is persons with disabilities. Yet, persons with disabilities are also one of the least likely groups to be considered and included in discussions about mitigation and adaptation.

The World Bank's report, "Shock Waves: Managing the Impacts of Climate Change on Poverty," highlights the impact of climate change on those living in poverty, including persons with disabilities: "Climate is involved in most of the shocks that keep or bring households into poverty—notably, natural disasters (such as floods that cause asset loss and disability); health shocks (such as malaria that results in health expenditures and lost labor income); and crop losses and food price shocks (due to drought or crop disease)."¹ Despite generating the least emissions, marginalized groups, for example, persons with disabilities,² are most exposed to the negative consequences of climate change, because they have fewer or more limited access to resources to avoid or reduce risks and impacts.³ Climate refugees, those displaced due to climate related issues, face grave challenges with regard to housing and transit camps. Persons with disabilities who are climate refugees are impacted further by the lack of disability considerations, not only in infrastructure design, but also in access to services and employment opportunities.

While persons with disabilities are at increased risk of environmental harm, finding solutions to mitigate those risks and impacts, as well as enable them to be able to fully participate in the community, can have positive impacts on society as a whole.⁴ Disability-inclusive development is built upon the principle of universal access, which can lead to more adaptive and resilient design. The principle of universal access is most relevant for adaptation, which specifically aims to reduce vulnerability to climate impacts. However, the benefits of universal access and inclusion also apply to mitigation projects, whether built or nature-based, since these involve changes to infrastructure as well as the environment. Because of the way disability and the environment intersect, it is imperative that moving forward climate resilience is coupled with inclusive design.

How are multilateral development banks addressing the connection between disability and the environment?

Multilateral development banks (MDBs) have a long, albeit spotty, track record of reckoning with and mitigating the environmental impacts of development. However, issues relating to the inclusion of persons with disabilities in project benefits and the mitigation of harm for these persons is still a relatively new undertaking for these institutions. The strategies and operations of MDBs related to climate change mitigation and adaptation, agriculture, and post-disaster reconstruction often fail to address specific issues facing persons with disabilities. Even worse, projects can put this group at risk, especially if they are not included in project design and implementation. MDBs have begun to recognize the importance of disability inclusion and have put in place some policies and guidance, but there is still a significant gap in understanding and addressing the ways in which disability inclusion

is linked to climate and other environmental risks. These gaps are emphasized below with specific examples of how MDB projects are not designing or implementing projects that look at how persons with disabilities might face barriers to project benefit or how disability-inclusive design is more resilient and beneficial to sustainability.

What are the policy related openings at the multilateral development banks⁵ to address the intersection between disability and environment?

WORLD BANK

The World Bank's Environmental and Social Framework (ESF) "supports green, resilient and inclusive development by strengthening protections for people and the environment" through management of social and environmental risks.⁶ Persons with disabilities are considered a "disadvantaged or vulnerable individual or group"⁷ in the ESF, and one of the stated objectives of Environmental and Social Standard (ESS) 1: Assessment and Management of Environmental and Social Risks and Impacts is to "adopt differentiated measures so that adverse impacts do not fall disproportionately on the disadvantaged or vulnerable, and they are not disadvantaged in sharing development benefits and opportunities resulting from the Project."^{8,9}

Despite the recognition that "adverse impacts" disproportionately affect persons with disabilities, the differentiated impacts are rarely assessed thoroughly and mitigation measures are seldom targeted specifically towards this group. ESS 4: Community Health and Safety does grapple with the intersection between communities and the environment, particularly climate change and environmental hazards. While this is a step in the right direction, the Guidance Notes on ESSs related to pollution and biodiversity should also be updated to address disability.

INTER-AMERICAN DEVELOPMENT BANK

In 2020, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) approved a new Environment and Social Policy Framework (ESPF).¹⁰ This new ESPF represents a significant step forward because of its "do good principle," going beyond "do no harm", in which the IDB commits to maximizing sustainable development benefits. The policy requires the Borrower to consider and report on how project design will enhance social and environmental good within the environmental and social assessment and also gives particular attention towards marginalized groups.

The process of identifying individuals, groups, and communities that may be directly and disproportionately affected by the project requires the Borrower to consider diverse groups historically marginalized, including persons with disabilities, as outlined in Environmental and Social Performance Standard (ESPS) 1: Assessment and Management of Environmental and Social Risks and Impacts. When groups are identified as "disadvantaged," the Borrower must propose and implement differentiated measures to avoid adverse impacts falling disproportionately on them. Also, the ESPF adds a new provision requiring the Borrower to carry out a more detailed risk assessment and to make adjustments that prevent injury and ill health when there are specific environmental risks that could result in adverse effects on the health, safety, and well-being of persons with disability, as stated in ESPS 4: Community Health, Safety, and Security.

As the ESPF implementation rolls out, it is important that the relationship between disability and the environment is further strengthened through the Diversity Action plan and Guidance Notes.

AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT BANK

The African Development Bank (AfDB) is finishing its update of their Integrated Safeguards System (ISS). The 2013 ISS only mentions disability in Operating Standard 5 (OS): Labour conditions, health and

safety. However, the 2019 “Evaluation of the AfDB’s Integrated Safeguards System”¹¹ identified areas for improvement in the ISS that included a focus on “emerging issues,” such as disability. The draft Updated Integrated Safeguards System,¹² released for public consultation in March 2022, would be an improvement of the 2013 policy if it is approved. The draft includes “the disabled” as “disadvantaged or vulnerable,” which require assessments that look at the specific impacts of projects pertaining to persons with disabilities in order for adverse impacts to not disproportionately harm this group.

The draft OS 4: Community Health, Safety and Security goes farther than the WB’s ESS 4 in addressing the intersection between disability and the environment, as well as requiring a health and safety management plan. This plan requires the Borrower to look at risks, impacts, and mitigation strategies for those who are “vulnerable,” as well as ways to address emergency preparedness. While this is promising, it is important that the link between disability and the environment in OS 4 is further strengthened through guidance and extended to other safeguards.

ASIAN DEVELOPMENT BANK

The ongoing Asian Development Bank’s (ADB) safeguards review is an opportunity to look at development through an intersectional lens by addressing issues of disability and environment together. A stated priority of the ADB safeguards is preventing and mitigating harm to people and the environment. The current safeguards, however, fail to address the way in which persons with disabilities, or other marginalized groups, face disproportionate environmental risks and impacts. The updated safeguards should pay special attention to the environmental impact on persons with disabilities. In a region that is the most disaster-prone in the world, the safeguards must comprehensively address the ways in which climate-induced natural disasters will impact on the most marginalized.

What lessons can be learned from project implementation?

GUATEMALA

The World Bank ‘Modern and Resilient Agri-food Value Chains’ project aims to promote an agro-industrialization strategy that reduces food losses, increases the adoption of climate-resilient technologies, and supports the COVID-19 emergency response for “beneficiaries” in select value chains. Support for smallholder farmers and benefits for “vulnerable groups” is welcome. It does not appear, however, that the Bank is using this project as an opportunity to promote a climate-resilient recovery that is more inclusive of persons with disabilities, as evidenced by the fact that project documents do not mention persons with disabilities as a “vulnerable group” or as project beneficiaries.

As the project focuses on post-harvest processing in the value chains, it is likely marginalized groups, including Indigenous Peoples, women, and persons with disabilities, will not be included or even directly benefit from the project. Small-scale producers and farm holders (a common type of employment among marginalized groups in the country) produce raw materials, but lack the technology and capacity to be able to work effectively in the post-harvest transformation phase. The project does not include skill development opportunities and on-the-job training for persons with disabilities, which is a missed opportunity to include them in the post-harvest process. A vertically integrated approach, addressing the full value chain, would promote increased inclusion of marginalized groups while prioritizing an environmentally friendly and climate-resilient approach.

HONDURAS

The World Bank-funded “Honduras Tropical Cyclones Eta and Iota Emergency Recovery Emergency” project aims to support Honduras’ response and recovery needs, as well as strengthen institutional capacity to manage a resilient, inclusive recovery and reconstruction. The Bank lists this project as among those with adaptation co-benefits. Project implementation has been slow, and according to the

World Bank team, construction work started in October/November 2022. Project documents highlight that principles of universal design will be followed in all rehabilitation and reconstruction works and that all construction work will be designed to be resilient to floods, storm surges, and landslides, helping communities adapt to a changing climate. It is critical that project components that involve rebuilding and repairing public infrastructure, such as schools and health centers, are implemented in ways that are both truly accessible to persons with disabilities and built to withstand climate induced natural disasters. We hope to see that there is a genuine shift to a more green, resilient, and accessible infrastructure in project sites, in our upcoming field visits.

INDONESIA

The objective of the ADB's Private Sector Operations Cimory Inclusive Dairy Value Chain Project is to promote increased production of affordable, nutritious dairy products in Indonesia. The financing to PT Cisarua Mountain Dairy Tbk aims to support the livelihoods of stakeholders across the dairy value chain, support rural livelihoods, sustain gender inclusion, and contribute to food security. BIC's partners have found that available project documents have no reference to persons with disabilities, nor were there any specific considerations of persons with disabilities in project design or assessment.

The ADB has apparently conducted an Environment and Social Management audit, as well as a gender audit in which they assert that gaps were identified and recommendations to address these gaps were made. However, none of these documents have been disclosed. One concern our partners raised associated with this project is agricultural run-off. As a result of the ADB's failure to publicly disclose the Environment and Social Management audit, it is unknown how the project will manage agricultural run-off and avoid contamination of the nearby water bodies, ground water or soil, for example. From a disability perspective, this is concerning because persons with disabilities are more likely to experience the harmful effects of a loss of access to clean, safe water.¹³ The lack of transparency makes it very difficult to assess how the project is approaching or considering the intersection between disability and environment, or whether project benefits are designed in such a way as to enable persons with disabilities to take advantage of them.

What is impeding addressing persons with disabilities in the context of environmental risks at the MDBs and how can this be overcome?

Our research and monitoring of MDB financed projects has demonstrated that there is a lack of capacity at the MDBs to develop cross-cutting solutions to environmental and social issues. While policies are changing, disability is not currently included in the safeguard policies across all the MDBs. Without specific reference to persons with disabilities in the policy, there is no incentive to develop expertise within an institution. Additionally, the identification of who is and is not marginalized will be done in an ad hoc manner. In our experience, this has meant that projects have not properly assessed the needs of persons with disabilities, especially in the scope of environmental impacts, which is the case in the ADB Cimory Inclusive Dairy Value Chain Project that is highlighted below.

Project documents highlight social risks in one section, environment risks in another section, but we have yet to see project documents address the interplay between social and environmental risks and accompanying mitigation measures within agriculture projects or post-disaster reconstruction projects. In COVID-19 projects, such as the Additional Financing El Salvador COVID-19 Emergency Response Project, the intersection between community health and safety, pollution prevention, and the environment are highlighted. However, there is no specific reference to how these might affect persons with disabilities. Moreover, the support structures in place for projects do not promote the intersection of inclusion and sustainability. We have found that environmental and social safeguards specialists, some of whom might not have sufficient training on disability inclusion, often work in silos which can make them ill equipped to address environmental or climate change impacts on persons

with disabilities; similarly, disability experts may be unaware of the full range of climate impacts and mitigation or adaptation alternatives that feature divergent implications for persons with disabilities.

The MDBs have begun to consider the intersection between gender and climate in their projects, programs, and strategies,¹⁴ and this may provide a model for how MDBs can better address persons with disabilities in connection with climate mitigation and adaptation. The Bank has also recognized the importance of a bottom-up, socially inclusive approach to address discriminatory barriers in rural development,¹⁵ but this has not translated into addressing the intersection between disability and climate change. For example, AfDB's Climate Change and Green Growth Strategic Framework highlights "Gender, youth, and social inclusion" as an area of special emphasis and makes the case for why gender and climate are linked, but persons with disabilities are merely mentioned as a "vulnerable group."¹⁶ It is imperative that MDB strategies and policies go beyond simply referencing persons with disabilities as poor or the "vulnerable," or worse, failing to even mention them as a marginalized or excluded group. Instead, the MDBs need to move towards specific climate, environment, and disaster management strategies (or frameworks) that reference and address the specific needs and risks that persons with disabilities face in these types of projects, as well as highlight the ways in which inclusive projects are also more sustainable.¹⁷ This starts with policies and strategies with non-discrimination as a core tenant that enable persons with disabilities to meaningfully engage in consultations on these topics. The strategies also need to adhere to the principle of universal design and account for disproportionate impacts of climate change on persons with disabilities, including by collecting data disaggregated on disability. Beyond this, such strategies could incorporate sectoral training and other programs specifically designed for persons with disabilities, to integrate them into climate-related activities.

Conclusion

There has been a disconnect between how climate change, natural disasters, and pollution, among other environmental risks, impact persons with disabilities and how multilateral development banks have prioritized the inclusion of persons with disabilities in their projects. The World Bank recently released a report highlighting the connection between mental health and pollution in Bangladesh.¹⁸ In fact, when discussing the report, Wameq Azfar Raza, a World Bank Health Specialist and the lead author of the report, stated: "The health sector needs to be well prepared to deal with the imminent health crisis arising from air pollution and climate change."¹⁹ Although this report is a step in the right direction for addressing the intersection of disability and environment, it must be reinforced with binding policy addressing these connections. Additionally, guidance is needed for MDB staff regarding how to effectively design projects and programs that comprehensively address this intersection. It is imperative that civil society organizations, including environmental groups and disability advocates, are meaningfully consulted at all stages of project design and implementation. A higher priority needs to be placed on cross sector analysis and moving social and environmental issues outside of their individual silos so that MDBs can take a holistic approach to reducing negative impacts from their projects and increasing access to project benefits.

Endnotes

1 Hallegatte, Stephane, Mook Bangalore, Laura Bonzanigo, Marianne Fay, Tamaro Kane, Ulf Narloch, Julie Rozenberg, David Treguer, and Adrien Vogt-Schilb. 2016. Shock Waves: Managing the Impacts of Climate Change on Poverty. Climate Change and Development Series. Washington, DC: World Bank. doi:10.1596/978-1-4648-0673-5. License: Creative Commons Attribution CC BY 3.0 IGO. Available: <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/22787/9781464806735.pdf>.

2 Light for the World, "Rights-Based Climate Action: Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities," <https://www.licht-fuer-die-welt.at/> (Light for the World, June 2020), https://www.licht-fuer-die-welt.at/app/uploads/sites/8/2021/09/climatechange_en_0.pdf

3 Oxfam International, "EXTREME CARBON INEQUALITY: Why the Paris Climate Deal Must Put the Poorest, Lowest Emitting and Most Vulnerable People First," www.Oxfam.Org (Oxfam International, December 2015),

https://www-cdn.oxfam.org/s3fs-public/file_attachments/mb-extreme-carbon-inequality-021215-en.pdf.

4 While we focus here on climate, the principles of universal design, accessibility, etc. can also benefit other areas of environmental action, such as biodiversity conservation, pollution prevention and remediation, and the [built environment](#).

5 BIC's work currently prioritizes advocacy with the World Bank Group, IDB, ADB, and AfDB because of current openings and ability to influence the institution. When the IFC begins its expected performance standards review, we will expect to advocate for addressing the intersection of environment and disability in the revised standards.

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8 2016. "World Bank Environmental and Social Framework." World Bank, Washington, DC.

9 IFC has similar language to ESS1 in its Performance Standard (PS) 1: Assessment and Management of Environmental and Social Risks and Impacts around the intersection of disability and environment specifically related to adverse impacts and persons with disabilities.

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12 African Development Bank, "Draft Updated Integrated Safeguards System – Public Consultations," www.Afdb.Org (African Development Bank, n.d.), https://consultations.afdb.org/sites/default/files/documents/2022-03/Updated%20ISS_Cleared%20by%20CODE_FOR%20EXTERNAL%20CONSULTATIONS.pdf.

13 United Nations Human Rights Council, "Analytical Study on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in the Context of Climate Change," www.un.org (United Nations, April 22, 2020), <https://www.undocs.org/en/A/HRC/44/30>.

14 At the World Bank, attention to climate and gender dates to at least 2011. See World Bank. 2011. [Gender and Climate Change : Three Things You Should Know](#). More recent examples are [To close the gap on climate action, first close the gender gap](#) (World Bank blogs, 2022) and Canpolat, Ezgi; Shakirova, Meerim; McElhinny, Vince; Westerman, Kame; Cruz, Alli; Buppert, Theresa, 2022: [Fostering Gender-Transformative Change in Sustainable Forest Management: The Case of the Dedicated Grant Mechanism \(DGM\)](#). Washington, DC: World Bank.

15 See [How rural development and agriculture can support social inclusion in developing countries - A Sub-Saharan approach](#), Nov. 2022.

16 "[Climate and Green Growth Strategic Framework: Projecting Africa's Voice](#)", African Development Bank, Policy, October 2021

17 Jemilehin Funmilayo et al., "How Rural Development and Agriculture Can Support Social Inclusion in Developing Countries - A Sub-Saharan Approach," World Bank Blogs, November 14, 2022, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/youth-transforming-africa/how-rural-development-and-agriculture-can-support-social-inclusion>.

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19 WorldBankGroup, "HighAirPollutionLevelIsCreatingPhysicalandMentalHealthHazardsinBangladesh;," World Bank, December 4, 2022, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/12/03/high-air-pollution-level-is-creating-physical-and-mental-health-hazards-in-bangladesh-world-bank>

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