



Created using DALL-E3

Higher Education Institutions As Change Agents In Climate Actions For People With Disabilities



**BERGEN SUMMER
RESEARCH SCHOOL**
GLOBAL CHALLENGES

Makda Kifle Assefa, Cecy Balogun, Usha Dahal, Somayeh Bayat Esfandani, Arun Singh Jadaun, Leon Jank, Kwaku Agyemang Karikari, Abdul Rehman, Fulori Waqairagata

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This brief examines the intersection between climate related challenges of people with disabilities, Higher Education Institution (HEIs) research and policy action to address climate change. It highlights how research by HEIs can foster the inclusiveness of people with disabilities through research that identifies the specific climate-related needs, challenges and expectations of people with disabilities to inform climate policy actions targeted at people with disabilities.

Climate change disproportionately affects people with disabilities because they may not readily access resilience measures that are generally accessible by people without disabilities. This becomes even more difficult since disabilities differ and response measures do not necessarily target their specific needs.

Inclusive development in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that focus on reducing inequality and climate action will depend on elaborate research that identifies the specific needs, challenges and resilience expectations of the homogenous forms of disabilities. This will also require the co-production of this evidence by the HEIs and the people with disabilities to guide climate action policy directions for sustainable impacts.

The brief recommends that given that disabilities differ, with different climate change impacts, HEIs should engage in research that underscore the specificity of the needs, challenges and climate action expectations of people with disabilities to guide policy change.

INTRODUCTION

The policy brief examines the way higher education can foster research that highlights how climate action can address the challenges, needs and expectations

of people with disabilities for policy change. Anchoring on the Sustainable Development Goals that focus on climate action (SDG 13) and inequality (SDG 10), the brief suggests that higher educational institutions (HEIs) play an important role in providing evidence on how climate actions can reduce inequality in access to climate response measures for people with disabilities. This is because people with disabilities are disproportionately disadvantaged compared to people without disabilities in their access to resilient measures against the negative impacts of climate change.

Climate change, the result of long-term changes in weather and temperature patterns caused by a rise in greenhouse gas emissions from human activities, has a significant effect on society, the economy, and the environment (Leichenko and O'Brien, 2024). However, the effects of climate change on society are not uniform, with segments of society affected differently. People with disabilities are particularly more vulnerable to climate change given their disabilities which prevents them from exploring response measures that are consistent with their forms of disabilities.

While disability is multifaceted, with different forms of liabilities, identities and cultures, the impact of climate change and associated disasters also differ with the diverse forms of disabilities; including people with sensory, intellectual, mental health and psychiatric, neurodiversity, physical mobility, and learning disabilities. The complexities of these disabilities also intersect with and are complicated by race, class, gender, immigration, sexuality, welfare status, age and geographic location (Parry et al., 2019). Empirical evidence has shown that the complex interplay of

climate change and its direct and indirect effects on people with disabilities increases their vulnerability to poverty and unemployment, with lower educational outcomes (World Health Organization, 2011). Research also shows that people with disabilities are disproportionately affected by climate disasters, facing severe consequences before, within, and after disasters (Kosanic et al., 2022). The scarcity of inclusive planning, inaccessible information, inadequate early warning systems, limited transportation, and discriminatory attitudes within institutions and among individuals are some of the contributing factors to this severe situation (Stein et al., 2022).

To address these issues, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have a responsibility to carry out focused research aimed at providing evidence on how climate change affects specific groups of people with disabilities. HEIs play a pinnacle role in combating climate change (Leal et al 2023). They are in the vanguard of researching novel methods, training the current and next generation, and advocating for environmentally friendly activities. Furthermore, HEIs act as forums for public advocacy and awareness, influencing laws and practices in the direction of a more resilient and sustainable future. HEIs efforts are crucial to promote an informed and proactive international response to climate change (Parr, 2022).

Strengthening research areas that investigate how people with different kinds of disabilities are impacted by climate change is crucial. Understanding the needs, challenges and expectations of these groups will give insights to the specificity of the impacts of climate change and the specific climate action that policy makers can focus on for policy interventions for

or people with disabilities. However, while research by HEIs is important, this will require the inclusiveness of people with disabilities in the co-production of evidence and appropriate climate action to guide climate policy decisions for people with disabilities.

THE PROBLEM/CURRENT CHALLENGES

Globally, there are one billion people with disabilities (WHO 2023). They are limited in diverse socioeconomic opportunities with increased poverty outcomes compared to people without disabilities. Climate change severely impacts individuals with disabilities, emphasizing the need for inclusive education and initiatives in HEIs. Out of over one billion individuals with disabilities, around 80% live in low-income and middle-income countries (LMICs) and are disproportionately affected by the climate change crisis (UN Human Rights Council, 2019). Climate change introduces additional hurdles that are unique to individuals with disabilities and worsen the situation, both within nations and beyond regions, affecting low-income settings (National Council on Disability, 2022).

Current challenges include a lack of accessible climate change courses, limited and goal-oriented research, inadequate support services and involvement, and restricted policy frameworks. Additionally, the risk of mortality of people with disability is four times higher than non-disabled individuals (UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2020). For people with disabilities, access to climate-understandable information and appropriate response measures is hindered by their limited access to education, thereby making climate actions inaccessible and non-inclusive.

The vulnerability varies depending on the type of disability. For instance, individuals with mobility limitations may struggle with rapid relocation during disasters or face abandonment, as observed during Hurricane Katrina in the US (Engelman et al., 2022). People with disabilities often have limited access to information and resources needed to prepare for natural disasters. They may need to be made aware of potential hazards, and crucial information about these events, such as lacking captions or audible messages, may be inaccessible. This underscores the need for evidence on the climate needs of people with disabilities and climate actions that address specific disabilities rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.

Higher Education Institutions are crucial in driving research and providing evidence that portrays the narratives of the nexus of specificity of disabilities and climate action to ensure access to appropriate resilience measures for people with disabilities. However, studies on the impact of climate change and resilience have generally been generic, focusing on how climate change affects people with disabilities without considering that they are differently impacted; hence, resilience measures and other climate actions should be specifically targeted. Most such studies were reviews (Saxton and Ghenis, 2018), highlighting the limited empirical evidence that highlights studies and climate action approaches targeted at specific disability groups.

The absence of research to support climate policy actions for specific disability groups has consistently led to situations of insufficient preparation, training, and support for these groups (Engelman et al., 2022). As noted by Kosanic et al, 2022, “future agenda that

includes people with disabilities in climate and environmental change research” will be timely, given the dynamic impacts of climate change globally and the increasing number of people with disabilities who are vulnerable to climate change and its negative impacts. Given these nuances, research will provide an understanding of the climate-specific information needs of persons with disabilities to inform policies for climate action.

Apart from appropriate and streamlined research, policy actions for specific disability groups remain a major policy intervention gap in many countries. National Policy Briefs Reports (Jodoin et al., 2022) stated that only a few State Parties include people with disabilities in their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) – if so, it is “largely to indicate the vulnerability of persons with disabilities to climate change impacts or to signal the need for their inclusion, without providing concrete measures to protect their rights or enhance their resilience and adaptive capacity” (Jodoin et al., 2022). Excluding people with disabilities from climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts violates the Paris Agreement and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (Stein and Stein, 2022). Moreover, many of these rights are directly threatened by the impacts of climate change.

Therefore, while research by HEIs can contribute to providing evidence-based data on the impacts of climate change on people with different forms of disabilities and targeted mitigation measures, policy actions are also imperative. This indicates the intersectionality between HEIs and policy makers in driving policy actions for people with disabilities.

WHAT CAN BE DONE

Efforts that target the inclusiveness of people with disabilities in climate actions will require the increased role of higher educational institutions in providing research-based evidence that is specific to the needs of specific persons with disabilities. This will entail understanding the specific needs and challenges of persons with disabilities through research and influencing policy actions. While these measures are not exhaustive, the brief highlights some of the areas where higher institutions can focus on fostering the inclusiveness of people with disabilities in climate actions for better development outcomes. Here, we present some examples to illustrate that it is important to provide the opportunity for the community of persons with disabilities to exercise their agency. By meaningfully participating in the research process, HEIs can also empower persons with disabilities.

Two solutions for addressing the problems are proffered based on the preceding discourses.

• Participatory Action Research

Addressing the gaps in knowledge and action in the nexus between disabilities and the roles of HEIs to address the impact of climate change on the educational outcomes for people with disabilities will require participatory action research. This approach has been successfully used in some countries. For example, in Indonesia, where there is a wide gap in school attendance between persons without and with disabilities, an inclusive Participatory Action Research approach was used to address the gaps where people with disabilities were included throughout the process of development. The research process saw an impressive action from the students with disabilities.

While poor school attendance may be due to several reasons, those connected to climate change, participatory research can throw light on the intersection between low school attendance and climate change. HEIs can significantly contribute to explaining how climate change disproportionately

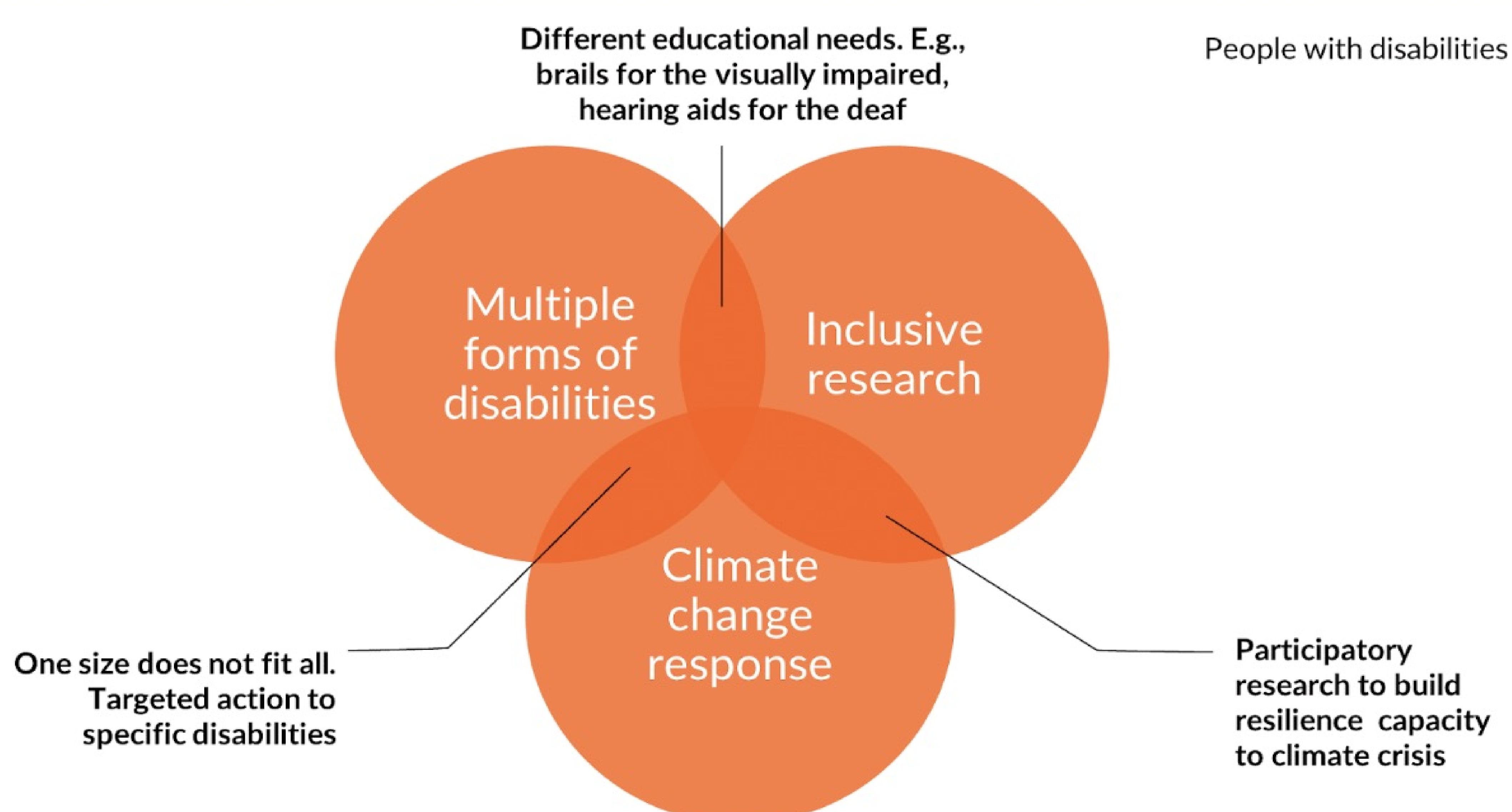


Figure 1: Intersectional relation of people with disabilities with research and climate change response (Authors' illustration)

affects people with diverse forms of disabilities. This will not only provide evidence of the intersection between climate change and disabilities but also highlight specific vulnerabilities and needs, given that different forms of disabilities will require different climate actions and responses. This addresses the need for a new agenda within HEIs in terms of interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity. Generated data from those research processes will provide evidence of the prevalence, seriousness and necessary actions. This evidence will be based on concerns of people with disabilities rather than a generic approach of one-size-fits-all, which may not be inclusive.

- **Inclusive policy development**

While research is important in informing policies for persons with disabilities, stakeholder involvement, and climate action, stakeholder involvement is also key to appropriate policy development and implementation. This implies the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the development of these policies to identify their challenges, needs, and expectations regarding the specific needs for sustainable climate policy action. Higher institutions are important in determining policy directions given the rich academic and research perspectives that can inform policies.

Hence, connecting the dots to climate action for persons with disabilities will require integrated climate policy actions that target resilience measures for specific disability groups rather than generic approaches. In this regard, adequate support services and resources are key to connecting these dots for specific disability needs. Such support services could include increased access to braille and large prints for the visually impaired, sign language interpreters and

captioned videos for the deaf and hearing impaired, counseling services for emotional and psychological adjustments to climate change impacts for people with disabilities, use of technological advancements in providing required aids to mitigate and adapt to climate change impacts.

Therefore, policymakers need to critically engage HEIs to ensure that climate action responses are driven by evidence generated through a participatory approach that is inclusive of people with disabilities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are proffered:

- HEIs should champion evidence-based research that identifies how climate change impacts different disability groups, their challenges, resilience needs and expectations. This will help to identify the climate related challenges specific to the blind, hearing and speech impaired, lame amongst others. This should explore an inclusive process where the people with disabilities are co-producers of the knowledge. An inclusive process will also help to identify their resilience expectations based on their specific disabilities. This will capture the concerns of people with disabilities rather than an approach that puts all categories of persons with disabilities in one bracket and may not represent the actual needs of such persons. Recognizing the voices of those being researched will greatly contribute to planning appropriate policy actions that address their resilience expectations. This is because participatory research to build a resilience capacity to the climate crisis requires the input of persons

with disabilities themselves.

- Policymakers should ensure that policy directions that target climate action for people with disabilities should be disaggregated based on specific disability groups. This will ensure that resilience interventions are not generic but focused on particular disabilities.
- Also, support services must be intentionally formulated to suit the needs of the different categories of persons with disabilities. Policymakers must ensure increased access to braille and large prints for the visually impaired, sign language interpreters and captioned videos for the deaf and hard of hearing and counseling services for emotional and psychological adjustments to climate change impacts for people with disabilities.

REFERENCES

- Kosanic, A., Petzold, J., Martín-López, B., Razanajatovo, M. (2022). An inclusive future: disabled populations in the context of climate and Environmental Change, *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, Volume 55, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2022.101159>.
- Engelman, A., Craig, L., & Iles, A. (2022). Global Disability Justice In Climate Disasters: Mobilizing People With Disabilities As Change Agents: Analysis describes disability justice in climate emergencies and disasters, mobilizing people with disabilities as change agents. *Health Affairs*, 41(10), 1496-1504.
- Leal Filho, W., Weissenberger, S., Luetz, J. M., Sierra, J., Simon Rampasso, I., Sharifi, A., Kovaleva, M. (2023). Towards a greater engagement of universities in addressing climate change challenges. *Scientific Reports*, 13(1), 19030.
- Leichenko, R., & O'Brien, K. (2024). *Climate and society: Transforming the future*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Mume, A. A., Turyasingura, B., Abdi, E., Umer, Y., Amanzi, L. N., Uwimbabazi, A., ... & Chavula, P. (2024). Impact of Climate Change on the Environment: A Synthesis Study. *Asian Journal of Research in Agriculture and Forestry*, 10(2), 86-96.
- National Council on Disability. (2022). Disparate treatment of Puerto Rico residents with disabilities in federal programs and benefits. Retrieved March 8, 2024, from <https://www.ncd.gov/assets/uploads/docs/ncd-puerto-rico-report-508.pdf>
- Parry, L., Radcliff, C., Adamo, S. B., Clark, N., Counterman, M., Flores-Yeffal, N., ... & Vargo, J. (2019). The (in) visible health risks of climate change. *Social Science & Medicine*, 241, 112448.
- UNESCO, U. (2018). Education and disability: Analysis of data from 49 countries. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.
- Parr, A. (2022). Knowledge-driven actions: transforming higher education for global sustainability (pp. 1-100). UNESCO.
- Saxton, M. L., & Ghenis, A. (2018). Disability inclusion in climate change: impacts and intersections. *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Equality and Diversity*, 4(1).
- Stein, P. J., & Stein, M. A. (2022). Disability, human rights, and climate justice. *Human Rights Quarterly*, 44(1), 81-110.
- Jodoin, S., Lofts, K., Bowie-Edwards, A., Leblanc, L., Rourke, C. (2022). Disability Rights in National Climate Policies: Status Report Centre for Human Rights & Legal Pluralism & International Disability Alliance.
- Stein, P. J., & Stein, M. A. (2022). Climate change and the right to health of people with disabilities. *The Lancet Global Health*, 10(1).
- UN Human Rights Council. (2019). Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council 41/21 (UN Doc. A/HRC/Res/41/21). Retrieved March 8, 2024, from <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/41/21>.
- UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2020). Analytical study on the promotion and protection of the rights of persons with disabilities in the context of climate change (UN Doc. A/HRC/44/30). Retrieved March 8, 2024, from <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/44/30>.
- UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) (2018). Education and disability: analysis of data from 49 countries. Information Paper No. 49.
- WHO (2023). Disability. <https://www.who.int/health-topics/disability>