

Reading Seminar #2: Disability and Adaptation Planning, with Lisa Dale
Monday, March 26, 2018, 10:00am - 11:30am

(1) Disability and Climate Resilience, A Literature Review (pages 6-22, Exec Summary and Intro)
<http://adaptation.ei.columbia.edu/files/2018/02/Disability-and-Climate-Resilience-Lit-review-.pdf>

This literature review summarizes a body of literature that looks at the link between climate change adaptation (CCA), disaster risk reduction (DRR) and disability. The review is based on 50 published papers and 80 pieces of grey literature. The results show that there is limited evidence on how the resiliency of people with disabilities has been enhanced through development practices. There are few tools or frameworks to identify areas of intersectionality, or indeed measure – and address – the impact.

People with disabilities constitute 15% of the world’s population. However, they are often amongst the poorer in a society and there is little to no information on how they are impacted by climate change. We must also take into account the heterogeneity of disability. The available data reviewed shows heightened vulnerability for disabled people, demonstrating more severe impacts and a lower resilience capacity than the general population. The experiences from disability-inclusive DRR and evidence from managing other vulnerable groups are used to draw applicable lessons for building climate resilience, as well as proposes approaches to include them. The review grouped examples into twelve areas of good practice.

(2) Weibgen, Adrien (2015), The Right to Be Rescued: Disability Justice in an Age of Disaster (pages 2408-14, Intro and Section I): <http://adaptation.ei.columbia.edu/files/2018/02/Weibgen-disability-article.pdf>

This article explores the legal responsibilities of local governments toward marginalized communities in a time of crisis and argues that people with disabilities (PWDs) have a “right to be rescued”, which means a legal right to have their unique needs accounted for and addressed in emergency planning. It takes the case of a class action lawsuit where the court found that the City of New York failed to ensure that PWDs have meaningful access to the City’s emergency services. This shows that adequate planning for the needs of PWDs during disasters is not merely morally correct; it is legally required, and it is critical that local governments include them in their plans.

Extreme weather events and other emergencies do not impact all populations equally, and PWDs are at particular risks during times of disaster. Despite this reality and legal protections for PWDs, many programs, services, public facilities, and private establishments remain inaccessible and are not planned with their needs in mind. This failure may be rooted in the rationale that emergencies require us to prioritize the needs of some at the expense of others. If the presumption is that it is impossible to meet the needs of everyone in the event of an emergency, then the drive might be to prioritize the needs of the non-disabled, the healthy, and those most able to survive without any assistance, inviting discrimination against PWDs and other vulnerable groups. However, emergencies do not require to accept this presumption. Rather than accept as inevitable that some people will be left behind, we must significantly increase our overall level of commitment to managing emergency events.

Discussion Notes

Lisa Dale is part of UN A2R, a climate adaptation initiative housed at the UN, which function as a clearinghouse for all the systems working on climate resilience. It is an organizing focal point, with a focus on developing countries (114 countries). One interesting piece that the group has been looking at is how to integrate the needs of the disability community into their humanitarian work. About 15% of the global population has some sort of disability. 3% are considered severely disabled. The challenges they face are pervasive in their daily life, long before adding climate challenges.

The UN group is trying to engage people with disabilities (PWDs) in the research. In developing countries, PWDs are even more isolated and there's less legal recourse for them. Physical access is a huge part of this. PWDs can't always communicate what they are going through at the time. PWDs are often hidden, and are underrepresented in policy circles and decision-making bodies. Including their voices on the planning end will be important. Active advocacy and communications efforts can be powerful steps, and raise awareness.

What is legal accommodation for the disabled? What are some parameters that are flexible for different communities with disabilities? Even in the U.S., where there is a legal framework (Americans with Disabilities Act), there is not enforcement in a lot of places, some older buildings are grandfathered in. Even if you win the law suit, it's hard to do implementation. Different countries have different political systems, have different implementation mechanisms that are both formal and informal. It is also difficult to get access to records, data, etc.

The population itself is becoming more vulnerable – as we have aging populations, more people with obesity. Coastal disasters are becoming more costly, partially because more people are moving to the coast. Or more people building within the way of tornadoes, for example. There is no clear index for social vulnerability when it comes to disasters. Perhaps we can look to similar vulnerable populations like people with cognitive impairments, those at senior homes, etc. – in that the response/recommendation may be similar. The discussion of evacuating or shelter in place is relevant. One option is to say that you can't zone a hospital or senior center in a flood zone, or require an evacuation plan.

Grassroots efforts are important, and including PWDs in the planning is key. Especially in many developing countries, the links between people/communities are strong, and these connections can be powerful tools in developing frameworks or recommendations.

The UN only has so much reach. They can recommend measures, but can't fund or implement. How might academia meaningfully contribute to this work currently launching through UN channels? How can we access funding streams in the human rights sectors?

The potential role of academia:

- Develop best practices from case study examples around the world (best practices for climate adaptation and PWDs do not exist).
- Define a cross section between the hazard (flooding, precipitation, snow, etc.) and the vulnerability of PWDs. We can facilitate the mapping of the dimension of the hazard.
- Academia can help make disability a parameter as part of the normal course of action for these discussions.
- Incorporating peer groups – having peers for the location/community will be important.

- Post-disaster studies, highlighting this particular dimension of PWDs. Documenting and understanding what happens to a particular part of society is important. This can help highlight the issue and increase awareness and understanding. Framing what we care about and looking at where we see common problems. Include examples of where things went wrong, and where things went right.
- Incorporate social scientists in the work.
- Develop metrics/indicators to use as a framework. This is particularly hard in developing countries, where the challenges are so vastly different. Indicators for whether PWDs have been incorporated in planning/disaster response. Choose multiple indicators that should indicate similar things, since the data may not be there. Soft measures, like making sure there is someone who is accountable for PWDs, are important.

Potential collaborators:

- 100 Resilient Cities initiative, which has cities all over the world, of different sizes
- Data Sciences Institute
- Private companies like IBM, Microsoft, etc. could be potential research partners or funders. They have divisions specifically to address the needs of the disabled.
- NOAA often funds community-centered work