



The inclusion of young people with disabilities in climate action: a summary study from Sierra Leone

January 2025



Government
of Ireland
International
Development
Programme



Sightsavers

Overview

Sightsavers recognises the effects of climate change on the communities we work with. We're also aware of the potential negative impact that our programmes may have on the environment. We continually monitor and limit our environmental impact while supporting the communities we work with, in order to increase their resilience and adaptability to the effects of climate change.

As part of Sightsavers' climate action goals, we are committed to producing, documenting, and disseminating evidence and learning from programming related to climate action. As part of Ireland's Civil Society Partnership (ICSP) for A Better World programme, which runs from 2023 to 2027, Sightsavers Ireland has integrated climate action into our eye health, inclusive education, and citizenship and political participation (CPP) programmes across West and Central Africa. The CPP portfolio specifically works to support the enhanced citizenship and political participation of young women and men with disabilities in Cameroon, Senegal and Sierra Leone.

To inform this work, we commissioned a participative study with young people with disabilities in Freetown, while simultaneously mapping climate action policy, and institutions and organisations working on climate change in Sierra Leone. This document presents a summary of our findings. We will work with partners to use the findings and recommendations to help inform and enhance the integration of climate action into our CPP work in Sierra Leone. Equally, we will share these findings and recommendations with key climate change and disability inclusion stakeholders in Sierra Leone and beyond, with the aim of strengthening youth with disabilities inclusion across their policies and programmes.

Introduction

Sierra Leone is highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, with increasing occurrences of climate-related events such as floods, droughts, and storms. The Notre Dame Global Adaptation Index has ranked Sierra Leone 177 out of 187 countries in terms of vulnerability to climate change. This climate context is further compounded by unregulated development, resulting in substantial environmental degradation, loss of habitat and biodiversity, as well as air and water pollution. Climate-related events have created detrimental consequences for the population, with significant impact for people with disabilities.

Young people are often marginalised from participating in critical political decisions that affect them, and this situation is especially exacerbated for young people with disabilities. Furthermore, young people with disabilities are disproportionately affected by the multiple climate change risks. Despite this, the participation of young people with disabilities in climate action in Sierra Leone is limited.

Moreover, our desk review indicated that disability inclusion in climate action policy in Sierra Leone is severely limited. Without the participation of people with disabilities, in particular youth with disabilities, in the development, implementation and monitoring of climate change policy and initiatives, they risk being left behind, thus heightening the risks to them. Disability

inclusion must be across all areas of climate action, including response, adaptation and mitigation, in all locations, at every step of the climate journey, so that no one is left behind.

Disability and climate risks

Young people with disabilities identified several risks related to climate events - including injuries and risk to life, health risks, barriers to participating in livelihoods, and the impact on mental health. Reduced capacity to evacuate during climate events, such as flooding and landslides, put people with disabilities at significant elevated risk. Health risks for people with disabilities are exacerbated by climate change. For example, flooding increases water-borne diseases and extreme heat can lead to increased seizures and severe skin damage, especially for people with albinism. Disability inclusion in climate action must address the specific impacts on people with different types of impairments. To promote inclusive climate action, young people with different impairments should meaningfully participate in risk analyses and adaptations to climate action policies, and programmes should be created according to their needs.

“When flooding and mudslides happened, many people with disabilities were left stranded... it was difficult for them to access basic services.”

National authorities study participant

Climate crisis can affect mental health and ability to function. However, in times of crisis people with disabilities are more likely to be cut off from family, community and social support systems. The consequences of climate change on people with disabilities takes place in an environment of existing stigma and discrimination, further adding to the impact on their well-being and heightening barriers to accessing services and support.

“Effective climate change action relies on approaches by the whole of society in order to be successful. Taking that approach means fully integrating human rights and disability into climate action.”

Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2020

These risks are compounded by limited disability inclusion in climate preparedness and response measures. This can include inaccessible public information systems, inaccessible evacuation routes, and barriers to accessing emergency assistance such as being required to wait in long queues to receive assistance, or limited transportation to support people with physical disabilities to evacuate to emergency shelters. Young women with disabilities face gendered climate risks, including possible violence and abuse in emergency shelters. Inclusive climate action must ensure the meaningful participation of women with disabilities at all levels, and in all processes.

Young people with disabilities face significant barriers to accessing essential services such as health services, emergency shelters, and livelihoods, due to climate events. The economic losses created by climate events affect all communities. However, young people

with disabilities who are more economically vulnerable can find it particularly difficult to protect their livelihoods or recover from losses. Access to services for people with disabilities is already limited in this context, such as lack of physical access, lack of information in accessible formats (for example, braille, audio, sign language), and limited disability inclusion awareness among service providers. Climate crisis exacerbates these barriers.

Inclusion in climate policy

The inclusion of people with disabilities in climate change policy, climate response and adaptation measures, is fundamental to ensuring that their specific vulnerabilities to climate change are addressed. The study analysed disability inclusion in climate change policy in Sierra Leone.

There is limited integration between overarching disability and climate change policies. The Persons with Disability Act 2011 is the national framework for the domestication of the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) - Sierra Leone ratified the UNCRP in 2010. The Act provides the framework for integrating disability inclusion across all ministries' policy and planning. However, there is no reference to integration into climate action policy, nor into the work of the Ministry of the Environment and Climate Change (MoECC) more broadly. Thus, revisions are required to align disability rights frameworks with current climate change policies.

In terms of international frameworks, Sierra Leone has ratified the Paris Agreement and includes people with disabilities in its nationally determined contributions. However, concrete measures to enhance resilience and adaptive capacity to support people with disabilities have not been reported. The Sierra Leone National Adaptation Plan (NAP) 2021 outlines disability inclusion as a cross-cutting priority and identifies the need to address the severely limited information on climate risks for people with disabilities as a vulnerable group.

The main climate change policy framework is the National Climate Change Policy 2021. Integrating issues affecting disadvantaged groups into all climate change strategies, plans and programmes has been identified as a priority of the policy. However, disability inclusion is mentioned neither generally nor in relation to specific measures. 'Vulnerable' people are often grouped together in national climate policy.

Limitations in inclusive climate change policy are related to the underrepresentation of people with disabilities in decision-making processes. Young people with disabilities have limited policy advocacy capacity generally, as well as knowledge of climate change policy frameworks. Combined together, these two factors significantly hamper their participation in climate-related decision-making. The limited disability inclusion capacity of key ministries, departments, and agencies responsible for climate action is, equally, a major barrier to inclusive climate policy frameworks.

Inclusion in climate action

Young people with disabilities who participated in the study were generally highly interested in engaging in climate action. However, their current engagement with climate initiatives, when compared to young people without disabilities, is minimal. Young people, with or

without disabilities, are more likely than other age groups to mobilise for climate activism, but are less likely to participate in climate decision-making forums.

“We want to sit at the drawing table where decisions are made, not just be informed about climate change policies and programmes.”

Person with disabilities study participant

Young people with disabilities felt they lack information on climate change policy and how to inform it. Equally, much of the available information and awareness on climate action is not accessible (for example, braille materials, accessible websites, and sign language interpreters). Inadequate information and awareness on climate change among young people is also a result of limited climate change education in schools. As young people with disabilities already face multiple barriers to fully accessing and participating in education, their exposure to climate change learning is even further reduced.

Participation in climate action initiatives was perceived by young people with disabilities as the area in which the least progress had been made. There have been some attempts from local organisations, such as the Federation of Urban and Rural Poor in Freetown, to ensure disability inclusion in their climate adaptation and response work. However, young people with disabilities are often not consulted on the design and implementation of climate action initiatives, nor included as active participants. Climate change programmes in Sierra Leone are less disability inclusive, in terms of both mainstreaming and specific interventions targeting people with disabilities.

The low level of participation of young people with disabilities in climate action initiatives is directly related to them being marginalised from political participation and civic engagement more broadly. Civil society can be a strong platform for engagement in climate action, with a growing number of organisations working on climate action in Sierra Leone. There are also organisations making significant advances for young people with disabilities to participate, such as the African Youth with Disabilities Network Sierra Leone.

“Climate change means a lot to me because when it floods it makes it more difficult to access places.”

Young woman with disabilities study participant

Greater effort is needed by civil society organisations to engage with and support the membership of young people with disabilities (including organisations or people with disabilities, youth associations, and civil society organisations working on climate action). It is fundamental that organisations working on climate action should address barriers to inclusion and actively engage with young people with disabilities.

Josephine's story



Josephine is a young woman student and a young people with disabilities advocate. Josephine participated in the Sightsavers Climate, Citizenship and Political Participation workshop in Makeni, Bombali district, Sierra Leone. The workshop engaged 46 young people with disabilities to build capacity on being an active citizen, as well as educate them on the drivers of climate change and the impact it is having, especially on people with disabilities. After attending the workshop, Josephine gained the confidence to run for Deputy Head Girl at her school.

Josephine told us how climate change will impact people with albinism especially – with extreme heat and bright sunlight affecting their skin and eyesight:

“The way in which the climate is affecting us is really not easy because the sun is affecting us people with albinism...Under this climate, deforestation; cutting down of trees. it is really not easy.”

Josephine is keen to become a lawyer or politician so she can advocate for the rights of other young people with disabilities and speaks passionately about how they can be tomorrow's leaders if they can build the courage.

Key recommendations

Participation and inclusion

- Undertake specific actions that will facilitate the active citizenship of people with disabilities in general, as well as greater engagement in organisations of people with disabilities (OPDs), youth movements, and decision-making forums. The limited

participation and inclusion of young people with disabilities in climate action reflects the limited engagement of young people with disabilities in political processes more broadly.

- Strengthen coordination between disability and climate change centred ministries, agencies, and departments. By so doing, the spaces for participation and inclusion of young people with disabilities can be strengthened through existing mechanisms.
- Support young with disabilities, OPDs and the relevant ministries, departments and agencies engaged in climate action to review and reform, where necessary, existing policies and planning. It is equally critical that young people with disabilities monitor and feed into reporting on existing policy commitments.

Capacity building

- Provide climate change awareness, information, and education, to young people with disabilities - including their specific climate risks and response needs, as well as the mechanisms through which they can become involved in climate action. Accessible formats should be developed that consider the communication needs of people with different impairments.
- OPDs, especially those engaging young people, should strengthen their knowledge of climate action and build their advocacy capacity to influence the development of inclusive policies and programmes.
- Capacity building on disability inclusion should be provided to ministries, departments and agencies working on climate action. They should actively engage with OPDs for learning and knowledge exchange.

Funding and programming

- Donors and partners should actively seek the views of young people with disabilities to help inform climate action funding and programming. They should be consulted in programme design and engaged throughout the programme cycle, including in monitoring.
- A twin-track approach is required - one track being disability inclusion into all climate action funding and programming, and the other being targeted disability-focused interventions where necessary. There is significant potential for funding young people with disabilities-led climate crises and adaptation projects – which would further enhance their participation.
- Targeted resourcing and capacity support should be provided to organisations which are taking action to enhance disability inclusion in their climate action work. Equally, good practices of disability inclusion in climate action programmes should be widely shared to help inspire and inform others.
- The mechanism for overseeing the implementation of the Persons with Disabilities Act (the National Commission for People with Disabilities) should collaborate with their counterparts to influence disability inclusion in climate change planning and budgets.
- Climate action programming should generate and be informed by disability inclusive data; with climate change ministries/agencies actively seeking this data for informed decision-making.

We work with partners in low and middle income countries to eliminate avoidable blindness and promote equal opportunities for people with disabilities.

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Registered charity numbers 207544 and SC038110



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