In November 2021, world leaders gathered at the 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26) to discuss global climate policy and the urgent need to address harmful emissions that are accelerating global warming and extreme weather events devastating communities worldwide. Given the importance of this event and the need to hear from diverse voices, it was disappointing that the Israeli Energy Minister Karine Elharrar could not attend the first day of discussions because she uses a wheelchair and the meeting venue was not accessible (Franklin, 2021).

Climate change is accelerating with visible impacts around the world. Severe weather events such as heat waves, droughts, winter storms, floods, tornadoes, and other natural disasters are increasing in number and scale. Climate change can also cause increased disease and worsened physical, mental, and community health conditions (Clayton et al., 2021).

The 1 in 4 adults in the U.S. (approximately 61 million adults) with a disability and 15% of the world’s population (approximately 1 billion people) with a disability are disproportionately impacted by disasters (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019; United Nations, 2014). The United Nations (2014) estimates that people with disabilities are 2 to 4 times more likely to die due to disasters than people without disabilities. In addition to more frequent and severe storms, disabled people also face compounding factors such as “poverty and other barriers that may make them less likely to be evacuated safely, more prone to health risks, and less likely to have insurance that protects their assets and homes” (Randall, 2021).

Exacerbating the outsized impact of climate change factors on people with disabilities is the fact that actions being pursued by those in the environmental and environmental justice movements can be at odds with the needs of people with disabilities. This disparity was on display with the COP26 incident and also was highlighted during the push to ban plastic straws in 2018. Activists were moved by photos of turtles with plastic straws embedded in their nostrils and swiftly pushed governments and corporations to remove, ban, or outlaw plastic straws. Lost in the discussion were the people who rely on plastic straws for their daily nourishment and independence. Disability rights activists had to embark on an education campaign of their own to explain why plastic straws are important to people with disabilities and why alternatives are not always a viable option (Ho, 2018; Smith, 2018).
Furthermore, people with disabilities experience other environmental injustices such as living near environmental pollution sources (Chakraborty, 2020). There are clearly opportunities to join forces and demonstrate stronger, compelling support for climate solutions that builds equity if the environmental justice and disability rights movements more closely align efforts.

Many organizations are already working to expand the diversity of their members, outreach, and impact, but disability is often not included in these efforts (Fleischer & Zames, 2005). This lack of inclusion is detrimental to not only people with disabilities but also organizations as research has shown that outcomes desirable to most organizations tend to improve with increased diversity (Valerio & Sawyer, 2016). People with disabilities have a lifetime of experience solving unique and often complex problems—just the type of problem-solving that environmental justice movements need.

The exclusion of people with disabilities also extends to academic writing and research in the environmental field, which seems to be due to the historic segregation of people with disabilities that continues in many areas of society today. For example, while involvement of young people in environmental justice is growing, this trend is not true of young people with disabilities. One reason is that young people tend to do what their peer group is doing and people with disabilities are often not included in these peer groups (Salvatore & Wolbring, 2021). This concept likely extends to post-school and community involvement, which is why efforts to increase the involvement of people with disabilities in environmental justice work must be very intentional.

ecoAmerica and the Association of University Centers on Disabilities (AUCD) recently announced a partnership to further the work to support communities that historically have been excluded from climate conversations and decision-making tables in leading the way to equitable climate solutions. “We look forward to partnering to proactively work on these issues. People with disabilities need to be engaged at every level of climate justice. We must work with climate and health partners to foster connections, build trust, and create sustainable relationships,” stated John Tschida, executive director of AUCD. “The importance of partnership between the disability community and the work of building climate solutions is especially timely given the accessibility issues encountered during COP26. Those individuals who are most impacted by climate change should have the first seats at the table to plan solutions. We are excited about this new partnership and grateful to AUCD for their leadership,” commented Meighen Speiser, executive director of ecoAmerica.

Call to Action
Climate justice must be an inclusive effort by a diverse group of stakeholders; alliances can be formed among individuals or groups who are active in climate justice initiatives and the disability justice movement. Whether you are active in the disability community or work in environmental advocacy, public health, or another aspect of environmental health, the following guidance can be used to build disability inclusion into your work.

Step 1: Create Spaces and Materials That Are Accessible to All People
In this context, space includes physical space, mental space, emotional space, and time. If environmental justice activities are happening inside, the building must be accessible, including ramps, wide doorways, accessible parking spots, and accessible restrooms. Once participants are in the door, they may need space to process new information and unexpected emotions, as well as time to share their thoughts in different formats.

In this context, materials include written and recorded materials as well as spoken materials. These materials need to be cognitively accessible (avoid jargon and acronyms) and provided in alternative formats such as Braille or sign language. Making sure there are plain language and easy to read versions of materials means that people with limited literacy will have access to them. Disability representation should also be present in images and videos so that people with disabilities know they are seen and recognized as part of the community.

Resources for more information about these accessibility features can be found at https://adasoutheast.org and https://hdi.uky.edu, as well as through the AUCD webpage on plain language at www.aucd.org/template/page.cfm?id=1207. A guide to respectful communication and disability etiquette can be found at www.respectability.org/inclusion-toolkits/etiquette-interacting-with-people-with-disabilities.

Step 2: Invite People With Disabilities to Be Involved in Environmental Justice Work
Conduct outreach to the disability community for participation and leadership. For example, there are Centers for Independent Living (CILs)—organizations that support community living and independence for people with disabilities—in every U.S. state and territory. A list of CILs can be found at https://acl.gov/programs/centers-independent-living/list-cils-and-spills. AUCD is a network of approximately 140 university training and research centers on disability. There is at least one in every state and territory. To find your closest AUCD network member, go to www.aucd.org/template/index.cfm and click on the map. These invitations should also extend to community-based organizations.

If conducting research, consider the importance of adding people with disabilities to the research team. There are commonalities between the disability justice movement and the environmental justice movement that should be emphasized during outreach.

Step 3: Examine the Potential Disability-Related Impact of Any Policy Proposal or Advocacy Campaign With Disability Partners
Share your research about the issue with disability partners. Whenever possible, get input from multiple people with disabilities, multiple groups, and/or cross-disability organizations. Different disability groups have different needs, perspectives, and priorities, and might not be privy to those of other groups. As you and your partners build equitable climate solutions, continue to ask, “Is what I’m doing for all?”

Step 4: Avoid Eco-Ableism
As shown with the examples of plastic straw bans and zero-waste movements, some environmental actions can be difficult and inadvertently harmful for people with disabilities. For this reason, it is important that members of environmental justice groups do not engage in rhetoric that can shame people with disabilities for not being “good” environmentalists. It is also important to make sure that
Step 5: Advocate for Disability Inclusion More Broadly in the Community

Disability exclusion is an issue in most if not all areas of community involvement. When the lack of disability involvement is recognized, speak up and provide examples of how to increase inclusion. Promote people with disabilities in leadership positions. Provide outreach to the disability community.

Inclusive movement building benefits the whole community and advances health equity. As the disability justice and environmental justice movements come closer together, moving from allies to collaborators and partners, they can better achieve a shared goal of a healthy environment for all.

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References


