

Disability Justice Belongs at the Heart of Climate Philanthropy

Diving for fish is the only viable source of income for Indigenous communities in the Moskitia region of Honduras. Since they lack access to safe diving equipment, divers may reach the surface level much quicker than recommended. And they have to do this many times over to catch enough fish, as the fish stocks are depleting due to global warming and overfishing. As a result, many fishers are affected by Decompression Syndrome due to the physical strain and unsafe working conditions, which can cause irreversible neurological damage, significantly impacting their mobility and speech.



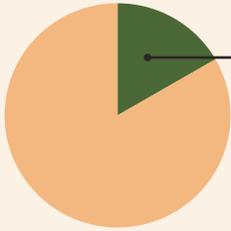
Image by Antonio Busiello
via Ford Foundation.

Our grassroots partner, the **Miskito Association of Disabled Divers of Honduras (AMHBLI)**, led by disabled divers, is uplifting disability and labor rights in the Moskitia region. As a result of AMHBLI's and its allies' work, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights held that the Honduran government was violating fundamental labor rights and ignoring existing legislation to compensate those disabled at work. The court also ordered reparations for the affected divers and their families, including a public acknowledgment of responsibility, an apology, and a commitment to non-repetition. This ruling demonstrates how disability-led organizing can secure enforceable policy change that strengthens both labor protections and environmental governance.

Researchers have asserted that community-led disability justice work strengthens equity, climate resilience, and innovation. Disability-led movements are often first responders to systemic breakdown, because disabled communities routinely navigate disrupted systems. Disability-informed grantmaking supports communities already living with disruption and constraint to adapt as climate change intensifies. Disabled movements have pioneered models of access, care, and mutual aid that strengthen collective survival and resilience. Funding these approaches ensures that frontline communities are resourced to advance systems change rooted in equity and interdependence, while staying prepared to respond to unexpected crises.

The intersection of disability justice and climate justice

Disability-sensitive climate action models what a just climate response can look like. For example, disabled communities have historically demonstrated leadership in mutual aid and community care during climate disasters. For example, across the globe, disabled communities took care of each other in the absence of state support during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was a mass disabling event. In other instances, our grassroots partners have established heatwave response networks and post-disaster humanitarian action networks in the Pacific and the Caribbean. For climate funders concerned with adaptation and resilience, disability-led infrastructure offers tested models of decentralized response capacity.



One in six people worldwide is disabled. Yet, only one penny of every ten grantmaking dollars goes to disability rights.

- **A majority of funding is directed towards medicalized models of disability** that are not aligned with movement priorities.
- **One in five women has a disability** and women with disabilities are three to four times more likely to experience domestic violence and sexual abuse than women without disabilities. Yet, only 1% of human rights funding for women and girls mentions disability.
- **Only 10% of U.S. funding for disability rights moves outside the US.**

The disability justice movement offers a framework deeply aligned with climate justice: both reject extractive systems, center interdependence, and build sustainable futures through care and community. Disabled people are disproportionately affected by floods, fires, and extreme heat because response processes (if even created) often exclude disabled people. Evacuation plans can ignore mobility needs, relief shelters may not be accessible, and communication systems may exclude deaf or hard-of-hearing people.



The Coalition Nationale des Personnes Handicapées (CONAPH) / National Coalition for Disabled People is integrating the perspectives of disabled peoples in local communities' natural disaster emergency response plans. Image by CONAPH.

When climate adaptation systems are inaccessible, they are not merely unjust, they are ineffective. Designing for the margins produces stronger systems for everyone. For example, the absence of tactile walking surface indicators (TWSI), color signage, ramps, and elevators means that those with disabilities do not have full travel accessibility. These everyday issues are amplified during climate disaster evacuation, when persons with disabilities may be unable to perceive any visual signals and cues as to where to go for refuge and evacuation, or are unable to utilize stairway evacuation facilities.

CLIMA Fund members resourced the **National Indigenous Disabled Women Association of Nepal**. The group works with disabled people living near a hydropower plant in Nepal, which was constructed without consulting the residents. The group is working with an international network of activists to hold consultations, compile data, and advocate on behalf of the residents. Resourcing infrastructure and policy advocacy for accessible climate resilience, such as accessible emergency planning, sustainable care systems, and inclusive evacuation systems, ensures that no one is left behind in case of an emergency. Integrating a disability justice lens thus strengthens the adaptive capacity and inclusivity of foundations' climate portfolios.

Disability: the social model

Meet Nursiah, an Indigenous woman from Indonesia. Nursiah has hearing and speech disabilities. She makes and sells brooms from palm fronds that she collects from the customary forest in her area. The plants she needs for her work are freely available in the forest, but require her to climb about 16 feet using a bamboo ladder. She needs to travel to reach the forest, which includes steep terrain and poses health risks in both the hot and cold seasons. As the changing climate affects local weather, climate shocks disrupt the quality and quantity of the harvest she needs. When it rains, which it now does more intensely and for longer, Nursiah is forced to stay home and cannot earn any money. There are few employment opportunities for Indigenous women in the region, many of whom do not own any land, which could provide raw materials for their businesses. Limited access to capital for Indigenous women hinders their livelihoods and reduces opportunities to start new enterprises.

Indigenous communities like Nursiah's experience high rates of disability due to high levels of poverty, increased exposure to environmental harm, and a heightened risk of violence and reprisals. When asked, Nursiah shared that she wants to have access to trainings and capital to strengthen and sustain her work. However, she remains largely excluded from formal decision-making despite her readiness to participate. Disability justice movements prioritize the social model of disability, in which removing barriers and addressing root causes would promote equality of opportunity for Nursiah and many others like her.



Woman making traditional brooms made from enau/palm fronds. Image by PT Coco Nusa Kelapa.

Despite its importance to effective climate action, disability is still viewed primarily through a medical or inclusion lens, not as a systemic justice issue. Moreover, climate funds rarely support accessibility measures or inclusive design, which are essential to community resilience. Movement actors share that a lack of internet access and language skills can be significant barriers to applying for funding. This underinvestment doesn't just marginalize disabled people, it undermines the durability and effectiveness of climate investments. Inclusive systems are stronger and more resilient as they reduce harm and improve community outcomes during crises.

Cross-border movement networks allow actors to co-create strategies and respond collectively without duplicating effort. **AMHBLI**, the organization supporting disabled divers, is working with movements across the border in Nicaragua to uplift Indigenous, labor, and livelihood rights. The movements work together to ensure the health of disabled peoples and the ocean. Funding cross-movement organizing, such as disability-led climate networks, ensures that communities can share resources and knowledge.

Recommendations

- 1. Invest directly in disabled-led organizations.** Allocating funding to organizations led by disabled people working on climate justice, resilience, or care infrastructure taps into leadership with lived experience and expertise.
- 2. Expand climate giving criteria.** When funders insist on disability-inclusion across program areas, it signals a commitment to intersectional resilience and equity. Funders can embed disability in funding criteria alongside other social inclusion requirements when funding climate work. This normalizes disability as a core climate variable rather than an add-on.
- 3. Recognize care networks as climate infrastructure.** Care networks that include services such as accessible shelters and inclusive evacuation plans are foundational to climate resilience. Ensuring climate resilience requires investments in human systems of interdependence and care.
- 4. Embed access across the grant cycle.** We can resource accessibility in project design, grant applications, and reporting. Accessibility could mean different application and reporting formats, inclusive evaluation methods to accommodate different needs, and budgeting for accessibility costs.
- 5. Co-design with frontline communities.** As funders we can engage disabled leaders and communities at every stage of the strategy and grantmaking process. Co-designing with frontline communities builds programs that reflect the realities of those most impacted and yields more innovative and responsive solutions.
- 6. Measure impact holistically.** As the climate crisis and human rights protections worsen, the philanthropic sector can prioritize tracking outcomes across community resilience, access, and equity.

Conclusion

Disability-led movements uplift tested models of adaptive design, mutual aid, and crisis response developed under conditions of chronic disruption. These movements do not merely advocate for inclusion; they reimagine governance, infrastructure, and care in ways that increase collective wellbeing. Investing in disability justice enhances resilience planning; improves policy design; and ensures that climate adaptation systems function for the entire community, not just the most mobile or resourced.

To learn more about funding at the intersections of disability and climate justice, get in touch with us at community@climasolutions.org.