



Journal of Caribbean Environmental
Sciences and Renewable Energy

POLICY





Climate Change, Environment and Development: The Situation of Persons with Disabilities in the Anglophone Caribbean

Author: Senator Floyd Morris, PhD candidate

Centre for Disability Studies, University of the West Indies,
Mona Campus, Jamaica

The Journal of Caribbean Environmental Sciences and Renewable Energy
Vol. 2, Issue 1, (2019) doi.org/10.33277/cesare/002.001/03

ABSTRACT

The world has been experiencing significant development and as it develops, there are concerns as it relates to the impact on the environment. Research studies have shown major changes in climates around the world and they have major implications for vulnerable groups. One such vulnerable group is that of persons with disabilities (PWDs). Their vulnerability makes them susceptible to varied environmental hazards. However, these individuals are resilient by nature and are able to overcome challenges but non-disabled persons continue to place obstacles in their pathways, thus impacting on their resilience. It is within this context that a study on the situation in the Caribbean as it relates to PWDs and climate change was conducted. Issues of legislation, education, access to information and information communication technologies for PWDs were examined to bolster their resilience to withstand the vagaries of climate change. Two Caribbean countries, Jamaica and Guyana were selected for this analysis. Even though some progress has been made to provide services for PWDs in the region, significant work needs to be done to bolster the resilience of these individuals and bring the Caribbean to adequate preparation for PWDs to withstand the challenges of climate change.

Keywords: *Climate change, development, resilience, persons with disabilities, Jamaica and Guyana.*

INTRODUCTION

Since the new millennium, there has been a growing interest in issues relating to the environment. This burgeoning situation has emerged because of scientific evidence which points to global climate change and the possible implications it has for the survival of mankind. Evidence is showing more expansive natural disasters such as hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, volcanic eruption and other such natural and anthropogenic disasters that constitute an existential threat to countries and their citizens [1]. One group that is susceptible and vulnerable to these natural and manmade disasters is persons with disabilities (PWDs). Their susceptibility and vulnerability have come about due to the social, environmental and economic factors that confront them on a daily basis [2].

The problem is further exacerbated because PWDs are among the poorest in societies. Data from the World Health Organisation and World Bank 2011 report on PWDs has shown 85% of this population who are residing in developing countries, being poor [3].

This review article is an analysis of PWDs residing in two Caribbean countries, Jamaica and Guyana and their capacity to withstand the shocks of climate change. In conducting this analysis, various secondary sources were assessed, specifically the situation of legislation, education, access to information and information communication technologies. These are all



important issues that assist in building the resilience of PWDs and have been cited in the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Optional Protocol (CRPD) as unassailable rights for this vulnerable community [4]. The article is concluded with some recommendations for action to build resilience and hence capacity to respond to climate change.

Theoretical Framework

In conducting this analysis, the interrogation was anchored with the Theory of Resilience. The term resilience refers to an innate quality of hardiness, including the capacity to recover from difficulties over time. In the natural sciences, it is the ability of a substance or object to spring back into shape [5]. According to Unger (2008), resilience is a theory that can inform action [6]. It is a concept that changes our focus from the breakdown and disorder attributed to exposure to stressful environments, to the individual characteristics and social processes associated with either normal, or unexpectedly positive psycho-social development. Climate change threatens the existence of mankind since we are heavily dependent on the natural environment for survival. However, humans have the capacity to recover and overcome these problems caused by climate change over time. What is required are responses to mitigate these situations and include actions such as legislation, education, access to information and information communication technologies (ICTs) that are unassailable in a modern era to build resilience. In order to bolster their resilience among PWDs, greater efforts must be made to protect this vulnerable group through legislation, education, access to information and ICT.

Caribbean societies by their construct and socialisation are very unfriendly to PWDs. Educational facilities, public infrastructure, access to information and access to employment are very limited to these individuals [7]. It is therefore imperative for us to assess the situation of PWDs in the two countries being used as the points of departure to determine their resilience and capacity to respond to climate change.

Guyana

Guyana is the largest country in the Anglophone Caribbean and CARICOM. It is a country that possesses vast forest terrain, mountains and rivers. Their rivers particularly pose problems for citizens residing in the densely populated coastal areas because that section of the country tends to be below sea level [8]. From time to time, the country experiences significant flooding that impact negatively on its development. It has a population of approximately 780,000, and it is estimated that the population of PWDs living in Guyana is approximately 50,000 [9].

Legislation

Guyana signed the United Nations CRPD in 2008 and ratified in September 2014 [10]. During the period of signing and ratifying the CRPD, the Government of Guyana drafted and enacted the "Guyana Persons with Disabilities Act 2010". This piece of legislation was passed unanimously in the National Assembly in December of 2009 and was subsequently assented on November 2nd, 2010 [11].



Although Guyana has a legal framework to promote and protect the rights of PWDs, limited progress has been made in improving the circumstances of PWDs. Lack of access to information; public buildings; opportunities for meaningful employment and education and access to proper health care, are just a few examples of the discrimination PWDs have to deal with on a regular basis in Guyana. There are no relevant policies guided by the contents of the Guyana PWD Act 2010 in any of the government ministries or agencies to facilitate the delivery of meaningful basic services to PWDs [12].

Education

Sub-parts to articles 14 to 19 of the Guyana PWD Act 2010 provide a detailed framework for the delivery of a meaningful education to children with disabilities by the Ministry of Education [11]. Unfortunately children with disabilities are still encountering challenges in acquiring a meaningful education. Presently there is no Special Education Needs (SEN) policy to guide the ministry's work in this area. Most of the work that is done in SEN is done at the central government level and not at the local government level, where the most impact will be felt. It is estimated that approximately six hundred (600) children with disabilities are registered to attend the few SEN schools and mainstream resource units in the public education system. This figure only represents children with disabilities in the political constituencies of Regions 4, 6 and 10. Children with disabilities in Regions 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 8 and 9 do not benefit from any SEN schools or resource units [12]. For PWDs in Guyana to become truly resilient and their capacity to respond to climate change be enhanced, education must be significantly improved for them. It is an unequivocal means of empowering any marginalised group, thus capacitating them to deal with challenges such as climate change.

Access to Information and Information Communications Technology

Access to information and ICTs is another action that is crucial to the building of resilience of PWDs. They must be given the opportunity to access information in user-friendly formats and also, they must be exposed to the Internet that is the major global hub for transmitting information. Those citizens who have access to information and ICTs are best able to respond to climate change as they will be able to put in place preventative measures to protect them against natural and anthropogenic disasters [1]. In Guyana, various initiatives have been put in place to provide PWDs with access to information and ICT. In the recently announced budget for 2019-2020 for example, the Government made allocations to digitize all public documents and these will be made accessible to PWDs. Furthermore, funds were allocated for the ICT for Persons Living with Disabilities Project [13]. A 2018 ranking of Guyana on the Digital Accessibility Rights Evaluation (DARE) Index has given low ratings for Guyana in terms of ICT accessibility for PWDs. The DARE Index Score is 21/100 [14]. The DARE index was established by the Global Initiative for the Inclusion of ICTs for PWDs (G3ICT) and seeks to assess and rank initiatives to include PWDs in the use of ICTs.

Jamaica

Jamaica is one of the most populated countries in the Anglophone Caribbean. It has a population of approximately 2.7 million individuals on the island [15]. Data from STATIN identified just over 560,000 PWDs in the 2011 Census. In order to strengthen the resilience of PWDs in Jamaica so that they can withstand challenges emanating from issues such as climate change, various actions, though limited, have been put in place by previous governments. These



range from legislation to public education on this vulnerable population.

Legislation

In 2014, the Government of Jamaica passed the Disabilities Act in the Parliament of Jamaica [16]. The legislation came within the context of the inability of the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities [17] to give the necessary support and protection for the members of this vulnerable group. The Disability Act 2014, among other things, seeks to protect persons with disabilities in Jamaica against all forms of discrimination and to allow for them to be included and participate in society on an equal basis with others. Such a legislation is paramount in strengthening the capacity of these vulnerable individuals to withstand some of the challenges associated with climate change. Issues such as access to public facilities, housing, public transportation, employment.

Education

Previous papers have cited the indispensability of education to the empowerment and transformation of PWDs [18], [19]. Without education, PWDs will be unable to grasp the opportunities that are available in a society. Neither will they be able to effectively compete on an equal basis with others. The Disabilities Act has recognised this fact and made provisions for educational services to be provided for members of this vulnerable community at every level. Conspicuously, the Jamaican Education System has been making some efforts to include PWDs. PWDs can be found at every level of the education system. However, it is not extensive and consistent throughout to create the transformative and empowering effect on members of this vulnerable community. Measures are being implemented towards the creation of an inclusive

education where PWDs are educated within the same educational institution as the non-disabled. In May 2018 for example, the GOJ commenced an initiative that was spearheaded by this author in the Senate of Jamaica to make one primary and one high school in each constituency across the island, to be accessible to wheel-chair users [20].

Data from a 2015 socio-economic study of 1,014 persons with disabilities revealed that approximately 76% of the respondents did not have any academic certification. Less than 1% of the respondents indicated that they had a degree [16]. If the resilience of PWDs is to be strengthened, radical adjustments will have to be made to these disturbing situations. For vulnerable individuals like PWDs, education is a necessary tool to deal with the daily challenges of a society. Poor or lack of this vital ingredient can only weaken their capacity to respond to various environmental challenges such as earthquakes, floods, hurricanes and anthropogenic catastrophes [21].

Access to Information and Information Communication Technologies

Evidently, we are living in a digital and an information age. It is those citizens who have easy access to information who will be best able to respond to the daily challenges of life. Data from the 2015 socio-economic study shows only a meagre 10% of respondents are using a computer on a consistent basis [16]. Notwithstanding this level of access among PWDs to ICTs, Jamaica is highly ranked among countries in the world in the context of access to ICT for PWDs. Data from the G3ICTs make interesting reading. On the G3ICTs DARE Index, Jamaica has received a score of 61/100 [14]. Access to information is one of the indispensable needs of persons with disabilities [4]. However, this need is being stymied by the high cost of modern technologies to the members of this vulnerable



community (Morris & Henderson, 2015). In addition to the hardware, they have to purchase assistive software to make the equipment accessible. Most persons with disabilities in Jamaica are unemployed with data showing over 91% in this category [16]. It is imperative therefore, that measures be put in place to assist these individuals in securing the requisite technology that would allow them to access greater levels of information which for example, will allow greater responses to challenges relating to climate change.

Thankfully, through the Universal Service Fund (USF), resources have been allocated to fund initiatives that would allow PWDs in Jamaica to secure their own computer and software. One such initiative is to be found at the UWI Centre for Disability Studies where laptops and software are being provided to PWDs who are studying at the tertiary level. The initiative is also available to PWDs who are employed.

Recommendations

PWDs in Guyana and Jamaica have demonstrated natural traits of resilience. However, for this resilience to be strengthened, certain things must be done to ensure their participation, inclusion and access to services and facilities within the Anglophone Caribbean if they are to withstand the vagaries of climate change [1]. Within this context, the following are some recommendations for action.

1. Governments must move to ensure that education systems are more accessible and inclusive of PWDs and consequently, facilities such as ramps, accessible bathrooms, modern technologies and specially trained teachers are in place to cater to the needs of these vulnerable individuals.
2. Governments must move to implement the provisions of the CRPD and the different

legislations that have been approved by their parliaments to protect the rights and dignity of PWDs.

3. PWDs must be placed on Disaster Risk Management (DRM) Committees at the national, regional and local levels.
4. Governments must establish legislation with the appropriate regulations, to make it mandatory for information to be made accessible and in the appropriate format for PWDs within the region.
5. Consistent and sustained public education must be implemented to eradicate the negative attitudes and stigma relating to PWDs in the communities.

Conclusion

There is burgeoning evidence to demonstrate that the world is experiencing climate change. The changes being experienced are manifested in global warming that is contributing to various natural disasters and anthropogenic factors have also been contributing to climate change [1]. Whilst the world is experiencing these changes, it poses existential risk to economies, properties and populace. Countries therefore have to concentrate on building or strengthening their capacity to withstand these shocks attributed to climate change. One group that is at serious risk from climate change is PWDs [2], but human beings however; have put in place impediments that have served to stymie the capacity of these vulnerable individuals both indirectly and directly. Efforts must therefore be made to capacitate these individuals because the current situation as seen in these jurisdictions is inadequate to build and strengthen the capacity of PWDs and to enable them to deal with the vagaries of climate change.



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