

Social challenges and climate action #4:

Our society must include persons with disabilities in tackling climate change

By Kevin Li

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Since the CarbonCare InnoLab's Paris Watch Programme was launched, five community dialogues have been held so far. The first four were focused on the residents of subdivided housing, the welfare and the community health care sectors, and outdoor workers. This time we are focusing on the rights of the persons with disabilities who are facing the impacts of extreme weather. The participants in this community dialogue felt that their plight and hardship in the extreme weather were neglected by society. In fact, there is still much room for improvement in how to support them in addressing climate change, in addition to the current policies and supporting measures. Even in mitigating climate change, they can also make contributions like ordinary people. This article explores the daily difficulties people with disabilities face in extreme weather, what policies and measures can support them, and how to engage them in climate change mitigation and adaptation in their daily lives.

An important part of the CarbonCare InnoLab's Paris Watch programme is to, through community dialogues, promote a deeper understanding of all walks of life and enhance their ability to deal with the climate crisis. These dialogues put the concept of "just transition" at the core, and advocate that the interests of citizens who may be affected by unemployment, economic restructuring and rising prices must be taken into account during the transition. The principle of "just transition" also emphasizes the participatory and inclusive climate adaptation process. The participation and voices of various stakeholders, who are facing the impacts of climate change, must be guaranteed and respected.

Adhering to the principle of "just transition" throughout the first four community dialogues, CarbonCare InnoLab has held the fifth community dialogue with 10 participants of the persons of disabilities¹ on 17 February 2022. Participants talked about everything from how extreme weather has directly brought to them, to how government departments should support them in tackling climate change. This conversation has not only brought climate change issues into the everyday concerns of people with disabilities, it has also raised awareness in society about the impacts of climate change they face.

Persons with disabilities urgently need societal understanding and support in front of extreme weather

Whenever there is a storm or extremely hot weather, the persons of disabilities usually feel more deeply distressful than ordinary people. In addition, many of them are in poorer economic conditions and often lack sufficient social protection. In the face of unexpected weather conditions, they are prone to fall into trouble. Maybe they will find a way to soothe themselves when the situation allows, without bothering others, such as hiding in an air-conditioned place, or taking a bath or swimming. A hearing-impaired participant pointed out that he could not grasp the real-time traffic condition because he could not hear the broadcast. People with physical disabilities also complained about the embarrassment of crossing the road in a flash rainstorm, and even the unexpected risks that may arise.

Another situation where extreme weather can make people with disabilities get into trouble is the sudden inclement weather encountered on the way to the workplace. Employers often fail to recognise their difficulties. For example,

¹ For the full list of participants, please refer to the Annex at the end of the article.

people with physical disabilities that are using electric wheelchairs are afraid of missing work due to the possibilities of damaging parts in rainstorm.

In fact, for them, what they need is often subtle but very important support. For example, for some people who do not have smartphones, they hope to receive timely alerts of extreme weather through SMS on their lower grade mobile phones, especially during heavy rain, landslides and flood. Subsidising those with financial difficulties to use smartphones for communications is also an option that should be considered.

Participants expressed concern about how to respond in the event of a climate disaster, especially with regard to disaster preparedness to accommodate the needs of the disabled. Taking fire as an example, in terms of disaster preparedness, the hearing-impaired people hope that flashing lights will be installed in the venue to guide their escape routes. For those who need wheelchairs, specific escape routes and shelters should be set up for them to avoid disasters. The government can also use information technology to design Braille maps on paper and on mobile phones for the visually impaired, supplemented by voice navigation to guide evacuation.



Persons with disabilities eager to actively participate in climate change mitigation

Although persons with disabilities need support from the government and society in adapting to and responding to climate change, they are not only passive players, but also active ones in mitigating climate change. The participants all showed a certain level of awareness of environmental protection, for example, they knew that turning on the air conditioner would consume

energy, and the importance of recycling to reduce waste and greenhouse gas emissions. A visually impaired participant wanted to participate in waste recycling, but was annoyed that he could not distinguish the colours of the recycling bins. It would be better if the recycling bins could provide Braille identification.

The participants finally expressed their wish to the Hong Kong SAR Government, especially to the Commissioner for Rehabilitation of the Labour and Welfare Bureau, who is in charge of policies related to the disabled, that they are also stakeholders in measures to combat climate change and are eager to participate in the formulation of relevant policies. And their needs must also be taken into account. As Mr. Chong Chan Yau, the CEO of CarbonCare Innolab, pointed out, the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) provides a guiding framework for climate actions related to persons with disabilities, including establishing a set of climate change response measures that take into account the needs of vulnerable groups, while the guiding principles of the [Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction \(2015-2030\)](#), which is promoted by the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), also propose to incorporate their needs into all policies and implementation modalities for accessible disaster prevention and mitigation strategies. In addition, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights proposed [a series of key principles](#) for addressing climate change by taking into account the human rights of persons with disabilities.

Involving people with disabilities in climate change adaptation policy

However, from the climate disaster response plan set out in the "[Hong Kong Climate Action Plan 2050](#)" released by the Hong Kong SAR government last year, to the recently announced budget allocation to improve the resilience of low-lying areas in the "[Budget 2022-23](#)" by the Financial Secretary, the needs for climate adaptation, disaster preparedness and resilience of the disabled are absent. Disabled people's groups hope that the Hong Kong SAR government will make reference to the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and the guiding principles put forward by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, so that they can participate in the formulation of climate adaptation, disaster preparedness, relief and recovery policies that take into account their needs.

In addition, the Labour Department and the Fire Services Department are responsible for educating and supporting employers and disabled employees on how to jointly cope with climate disasters, providing them with disaster preparedness training and related guidance, distributing information in a timely

manner, and teaching how to receive disaster alerts, how to use tools for emergency help, and etc. All disaster drills should take into account their needs, and the government should educate the public not only to take care of their own safety, but also to help the disabled evacuate safely. The Hospital Authority can also set up sign language interpreters in the emergency rooms of hospitals and train relevant staff to assist the hearing-impaired.

More and more listed and private companies are focusing on environmental, social and governance information disclosure, and it is hoped that relevant companies will strengthen linkages between the environment and social components. We also need to educate employers about the difficulties the disabled face in extreme weather, by improving operating guidelines, including work arrangements that take into account the disability situation in extreme weather. Similarly, this community dialogue also made the participating NGOs aware of the seriousness of climate change, and express their plans to hold training activities and seminars within their own organizations. They also hope to carry out public education activities to make citizens aware of climate change impacts on disabled persons.

Project Team (in no specific order)

Dialogue Designer and Chief Facilitator: Thierry Leung (Senior Social Worker, Programme Manager)

Deputy Facilitator: Blaire Ho (Programme Officer), Alissa Tung (Programme Director)

Facilitation Advisor: Lilian Wang

Project Advisor: Chong Chan Yau (Co-founder & CEO)

Author's Profile

Mr. Kevin Li is the Researcher for CarbonCare InnoLab.

Annex

CarbonCare InnoLab invited different groups and experts in Hong Kong to participate in the fifth community dialogue (in no specific order):

- Hong Kong Joint Council for People with Disabilities
- Hong Kong Federation of Handicapped Youth

- Hong Kong Blind Union
- Hong Kong Society for the Deaf
- Dialogue in the Dark
- Hong Kong Red Cross

Links

1. [Social challenges and climate action #1: Empowering residents of subdivided houses in Hong Kong](#)
2. [Social challenges and climate action #2: Extreme weather hit hard welfare and health care workers and the vulnerable people](#)
3. [Social challenges and climate action #3: Legislation is the only way to relieve outdoor workers' suffering from extreme weather](#)