EUROPEAN DISABILITY FORUM

# Disaster by Design

## The cost of inaccessible climate responses and why we urgently need disability-inclusive climate action

**Trigger warning:**
this briefing includes personal stories from people with disabilities who were affected by the lack of accessible support during climate-related emergencies.

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# Introduction

The European Disability Forum – the umbrella organisation of persons with disabilities that defends the interests of over 100 million persons with disabilities in Europe – calls for climate policies and initiatives to include persons with disabilities at every stage, from planning to implementation.

Persons with disabilities are disproportionately affected by climate change, according to the United Nations 'Disability and Development' report 2024. They are more likely to be left behind during climate-related disasters and emergencies. Their needs are also less likely to be included in initiatives and solutions to mitigate climate change.

The persistent lack of disability inclusion in national, European, and international climate legislation and initiatives shows the urgent need for action. Decision-makers in multilateral organisations such as the United Nations (UN), European institutions, national governments, and other relevant.

This briefing focuses on providing key recommendations for disability inclusive climate action. It includes:

- Our demands for meaningful involvement
- The specific example of the Directive on Energy Performance of Buildings Directive
- Illustrative examples

We call on public authorities, international organisations and climate advocates to:

- Closely consult and actively involve persons with disabilities and their representative organisations in disaster risk management and climate-related decision-making.
- Allocate funding to support these organisations' participation in climate policy consultations, and ensure all processes are accessible.
- Systematically include the rights of persons with disabilities in EU climate policies and initiatives, in line with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).
- Collect and analyse comprehensive data to design effective and inclusive climate responses. This must capture the diverse realities of persons with disabilities and consider intersectional factors such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, indigeneity, and migration status, thereby strengthening inclusive climate action and societal resilience.
- Support persons with disabilities in developing personal preparedness plans.

## Example – Directive on Energy Performance of Buildings

The Energy Performance of Buildings Directive aims to ensure that buildings in the European Union are gradually improved to achieve zero-emission building status by 2050.

Although the Directive is directly connected to disability, it presents an opportunity to ensure the **accessibility of buildings.**

The Directive includes some provisions that must be strengthened when adapting this EU law into national legislation. This includes:

- **Clarifying what 'addressing accessibility' in new and renovated buildings means.** Ideally, it should be included in planning, budget, choice of materials and all other steps – guided by European standards and national laws, standards and guidelines.
- Guaranteeing **that "One-stop shops"** providing information about compliance with the Directive offer accessible information for persons with disabilities.
- Ensuring that information and awareness-raising campaigns organised by Member States include specific information on the ways to develop accessible buildings. The campaigns should be distributed in accessible formats.
- **Making accessibility a compulsory section** in guidance and training for those implementing the Directive (national and regional authorities, city councils, etc.).
- **Meaningfully involve organisations of persons with disabilities** in consultations for National Building Renovation Plans.

## Illustrative stories

Why are accessible and energy-efficient buildings, personal preparedness plans, and the involvement of persons with disabilities in climate action important?

The following stories show what happens when persons with disabilities are not considered. From risking our lives in floodings and heatwaves, to having essential services cut, the human cost is real – and steep.

"SINZIG-GERMANY" by Sandra Miranda Gonzalez

## Dying in floodings – residential institutions in Germany

'Residents had little chances of survival'.

This was the summary when 12 persons with intellectual disabilities died in a residential institution during the floods of 2021.

The residential institution in Sinzig, Germany, was caught in the floods of July 2021. 12 residents sleeping in the ground floor died during the night. Other residents were stuck for hours in the first floor.

Source: Flooding in Sinzig: Twelve dead in Lebenshilfehaus, SWR (17 July 2021, retrieved 10 October 2025)

The story shows how the failure of authorities to consider all persons with disabilities – including those segregated in institutions – costs lives. It also shows the dire consequences of lack of support and independence.

Floods 16 July 2021, Belgium, Tilff by Régine Fabri

## Trapped in her house during flood - Belgium

France is a deaf and partially-sighted woman who uses a wheelchair. She lived through a nightmare during the floods of July 2021 in Belgium. On the morning of 15 July, she woke up to find her ground-floor apartment inundated.

In her own words:

> "I was sleeping when my cats came under my cover. I thought they were especially stressed because I was in the process of moving apartments.
>
> I open my eyes and I feel something is wrong: why is my water glass, which I normally leave on the ground, suddenly above ground? I stretch my arm out and – it's wet? Why are my socks floating?
>
> I get up in a rush and suddenly understand what is happening: my small ground-floor apartment is flooded."

This was the start of a horrible journey. France climbed into her wheelchair and noticed two things: the water was cold, which would worsen her symptoms, and it had already reached her belly. She switched her wheelchair to manual mode and tried to escape. She looked at the window, to an apocalyptic scenario, "like the scene in Jumanji where water is entering everywhere in the house". She tried to open the window to flee, but the blinds didn't work.

She then remembered the outside stairs leading to her neighbour's house. To reach them, she had to face the current outside. As she rolled on the flooded sidewalk, the wheelchair turned unexpectedly. She was afraid that the current, which transformed the sidewalk into a river, would carry her away. She held onto the mailboxes in front of the house, the only things preventing her from being swept away. Eventually, she reached the stairs.

> “I look up and suddenly, my neighbour is there. She kisses my head, relieved. I am heaving and almost vomiting. I realised that I will have to climb to the second floor, on my bottom, up the metallic stairs that will scrape me.”.

Once upstairs, the neighbour helped her sit on the couch, gave her a cover and called France’s mother. The traumatic experience continued into the next day. France was unable to rescue her cats, who had remained in the flooded apartment. Her father was only able to retrieve them the following day.

The experience left France traumatised. She still has nightmares. After 2 years, France says, “I am not the same as before – the experience changed me.”

Source: Translated from French from the 2023 post ‘Je suis handicapée et j’ai vécu les inondations du 15 juillet 2021’ on the ‘Disney Access blog’.

The aftermath of Hurricane Dana in Valencia, Spain, by danr13

## Flooding in Valencia – Hurricane Dana

Countless people with disabilities in Valencia were severely affected by Storm DANA.

The report from the Valencian delegation of the Spanish National Council of Persons with Disabilities summarises serious stories:

**Deaths:** At least 2 persons with disabilities passed away: 1 person with intellectual disabilities (reported by Plena Inclusion), and 1 blind/partially sighted person (reported by ONCE – the National Association for Blind and Partially sighted people).

**Trapped in their houses:** Members of ASPAYM Valencia (organisation representing people with spinal cord injuries), reported that, reported that at least 4 individuals had difficulties leaving or entering their homes during and after the storm due to broken lifts.

**Loss of essential devices:** There are no concrete estimates of the number of assistive devices and vehicles that were lost, destroyed or damaged during the flood. However, these items are essential and replacing them is – as stated in the report :

> "Urgent but faces multiple challenges, the biggest of which is the elevated cost as, in many cases, (these devices) require personalised adaptations to satisfy the needs of the persons. Furthermore, the channels to distribute and provide these were cut.".

As an example, the members of only one association lost:

- 2 vehicles adapted to the collective transport of persons with disabilities disappeared;
- 8 adapted cars;
- 4 adapted bicycles;
- 3 wheelchairs;
- 1 electric bed.

**Lack of access to essential medication:** the report states that:

> "DANA left (persons with disabilities) in a critical situation regarding access to essential medicine. Multiple people did not have access to their psychopharmacological medication due to inaccessibility of pharmacies, loss of prescriptions and difficulties accessing health centres.".

**Lack of access to therapeutic and rehabilitation services:** one association reported that 8 people with Traumatic Brain Injury had to miss daily services of rehabilitation. This interruption impacted their physical condition and worsened their symptoms, due to damaged buildings and lack of rehabilitation services or transport to get to them.

Source: 'Informe sobre Daños, Cuestiones Detectadas, Necesidades y Acciones de las Entidades del Tercer Sector de la Discapacidad ante la DANA en la Provincia de Valencia', CERMI-CV.

Elderly woman holding a fan, Spain 2022, by David Petrus Ibars

## Heatwaves in Spain

A 2023 report from Human Rights Watch analysed how persons with disabilities were left behind during the 2022 heatwave in Andalusia, Spain.

People with disabilities described how the heatwave worsened physical symptoms such as difficulty breathing, brain fog, sleep deprivation, infections and loss of consciousness.

The fact that persons with disabilities are more likely to experience poverty exacerbated the negative effects of the heatwave.

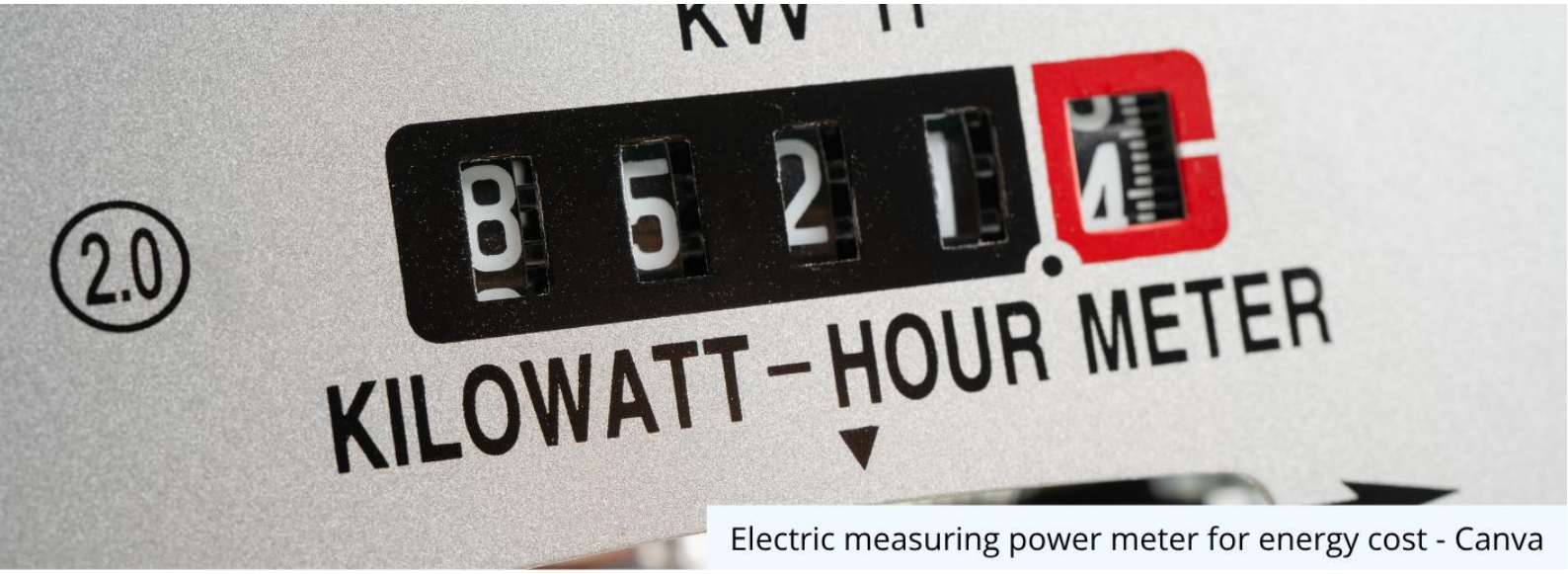
A woman with disability, Maria C., who struggles to pay her electricity bills, described her experience:

> "In that week, it was really bad. I didn't open the fridge because I did not want the fruit to go bad, I could not use ice to stay cool, and I could not use the bedroom fan."

Another testimony comes from Juan Manuel Ramírez Montesinos, 47, a man with a physical disability. He explained how the lack of preparedness and support by authorities caused him health issues:

> "My body changes a lot every 2 to 3 degrees, and high temperatures really affect me. Extreme heat makes me have low blood pressure. My main issue with heat is fluid retention, and my feet and legs swell, so I cannot go outside."

Source: 'Spain: Inadequate Response to Heatwaves - Support People with Disabilities at Risk to Climate Change' Human Rights Watch, 2023.



Electric measuring power meter for energy cost - Canva

## Losing access to services due to energy costs

In 2023, a Welsh family lost support services for their son with multiple disabilities. The reason? they could not afford to properly heat and light their home.

The story, reported by The Guardian, explains that Leah and Troy Van Keogh were told they needed to maintain a suitable working environment for nurses, meaning adequate heating and lighting, or risk losing nursing support services.

The Guardian reports that the "Van Keoghs said they could no longer afford to heat their home", due to the doubling of energy prices and bills. "It had become prohibitively expensive to do so for 24 hours a day as well as run the extensive array of electrical medical equipment needed to keep Marley alive.".

The story shows how increasing energy prices and lack of energy-efficient housing disproportionately affect persons with disabilities, and especially those who rely on electricity to power lifesaving devices.

Source: 'Disabled boy loses overnight NHS care because parents cannot afford heating', Patrick Butler, The Guardian, 2003.

# Document credits

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