



People with disabilities and the green transition

SUMMARY

The green transition potentially offers many opportunities for people with disabilities if policies are implemented with the goal to leave no one behind. Possible benefits include improvements in health and well-being and new job opportunities in green industries. Nonetheless, there is also a risk that green transition policies may lead to new inequalities if the requirements and concerns of people with disabilities are not sufficiently considered.

This policy memo highlights some of the benefits and challenges that the green transition poses for people with disabilities. We also present several suggestions to policymakers on how to make the green transition disability-inclusive, for example by systematically employing universal design principles and an inclusiveness check.

KEY INSIGHTS

1. People with disabilities are vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.
2. People with disabilities see many opportunities with the green transition.
3. The green transition may perpetuate existing injustices if it is not achieved in a disability-inclusive way.
4. People with disabilities can face obstacles in choosing a greener lifestyle.
5. Organisations representing people with disabilities need to be actively engaged in the green transition.

Introduction

The United Nations has identified people with disabilities as one of the social groups who are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, such as heatwaves or flooding (Kosanovic et al., 2022). Such natural disasters can impair their access to health care services and medicine, safe housing, and sanitation (United Nations, 2020). This vulnerability is exacerbated by the exclusion of persons with disabilities from climate-related planning and decision-making processes (Jodoin et al., 2020). People with disabilities and their organisations are often not heard during the development and implementation of green transition initiatives or climate adaptation programmes. Such policies and plans may then not reflect the requirements and needs of people with disabilities and may even have unintended negative consequences for this group.

This policy memo aims to contribute to raising awareness of the role of persons with disabilities during the green transition. It highlights some of their concerns and expectations and presents some key messages to policymakers in the Nordic Region. The policy memo is based on a literature review and a focus group discussion with organisations representing people with disabilities (see Box 1).

Box 1: Sources behind this policy memo

1. Literature review about the impacts of climate mitigation policies on different social groups in the Nordic Region

- Conducted: Spring 2022
- Method: A systematic search of academic papers, legal documents and grey literature using a set of keywords

2. Focus group discussion on the green transition with civil society associations representing people with disabilities.

- Conducted: 30 May 2023
- Method: Discussion held in Reykjavik, Iceland (plus one representative from Denmark supplied input via an interview conducted on the digital meeting platform Microsoft Teams).
- Seven participants from Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Åland, the Faroe Islands, and Greenland

All direct quotes that are included in the following sections come from the focus group discussion.

People with disabilities in the Nordic Region

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Article 1) defines people with disabilities as those “who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others” (United Nations, 2006). Rich data on the number of people who have some type of disability as well as their living conditions are available in the Nordic Region, but the estimates vary depending on how disability is defined (Jokinen et al., 2021; Grönvik, 2007; European Disability Expertise, n.d.). Depending on the source, it is estimated that between 10% and 30% of the Nordic population have some form of disability (Myndigheten för Delaktighet, 2022; Fundación Once et al., 2023).

People with disabilities are a very diverse group. They differ in terms of their values, experiences, living conditions, networks, education, and interests just as any other population group. Their disability-related capacities and needs span a wide spectrum, ranging from impairments of hearing, vision, speech, or mobility to intellectual impairments, mental health, and autism spectrum conditions. Some people experience multiple disabilities and may simultaneously belong to other marginalised or vulnerable groups, such as the elderly, the poor, or ethnic minorities. Due to this diversity, green transition policies may affect people with disabilities in very different ways, and their role and engagement in the green transition may also differ.

The prevalence of disability increases with age, mostly due to biological processes related to ageing, such as eye degeneration and declining bone and muscle density.

Almost everyone will experience some kind of temporary or permanent disability during their lifetime (Schur et al., 2013). Since populations in Europe are ageing and older adults will form a larger part of our populations, it is expected that the number of people living with a disability will increase in the years to come (Fundación Once et al., 2023). If the green transition shall be based on broad societal support and empower everyone to contribute, people with disabilities must be included in green transition planning and implementation. Otherwise, there is a risk of leaving out a large and increasing share of the population.

Despite this, there is limited research and knowledge on how the green transition can be designed and implemented in a way that engages people with disabilities and respects their interests, needs, and rights. This policy memo aims to contribute by offering five insights about people with disabilities and the green transition in the Nordic Region.

INSIGHT #1: People with disabilities are vulnerable to the impacts of climate change

According to the United Nations (2023) climate change can have particularly severe effects on people with disabilities. For example, persons who experience challenges with mobility or impaired judgement due to intellectual disabilities may face bigger difficulties to evacuate in the event of sudden natural disasters such as floods, storms, or fires. Natural emergencies may also disrupt access to medication or medical services which may be vital for people with disabilities. If damage is done to infrastructure, it may be more difficult for people with disabilities to get access to transportation, emergency shelter, and housing suitable for their needs. People with disabilities may also be more vulnerable to slow onset effects of climate change such as the increase in average temperature. For example, people experiencing multiple sclerosis or cerebral palsy can have impaired thermoregulation and experience greater sensitivity to heat (Gaskin et al., 2017).

These different risks can be aggravated if public communication and information about natural hazards, evacuation procedures, and disaster response plans are not disability inclusive. It is therefore crucial that people with disabilities and their representing organisations are consulted in the planning of climate mitigation and adaptation approaches to ensure that they meet the needs of people with different types of disability.

INSIGHT #2: People with disabilities see many opportunities with the green transition

The green transition can have many benefits for people with disabilities, provided that policies and initiatives are disability inclusive. Several potential positive impacts stand out:

Improved health and well-being

The transition towards carbon-neutral economies and societies can create health benefits for people with disabilities as well as for other population groups (McCollum et al., 2013). For example, policies that aim at reducing fossil-fuel car traffic in cities can lead to cleaner air and less noise. A change towards more sustainable agricultural practices can contribute to cleaner water and more sustainable food production. An increase in green areas in cities can improve well-being and quality of life. These developments can benefit people with disabilities as well as other population groups.

New employment opportunities

People with disabilities are among the most disadvantaged groups in the Nordic labour markets, facing high levels of unemployment, low pay and low prospects for promotion, and other types of discrimination (Lindberg, 2021). The green transition offers various opportunities to improve the situation and enhance decent work options for people with disabilities. Research on the labour market impacts of the green transition overall conclude that some workers will be displaced during the green transition, in particular in so-called “brown sectors”, but new jobs will be created in green industries, for instance, in relation to green energy, sustainable transportation, or the circular economy. The green transition will also create opportunities for upskilling and reskilling. All of this creates new opportunities for employment, also for people with disabilities (Fundación Once et al., 2023).

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The labour market will look completely different, so we need to re-evaluate: what is a job, what is employment? And how can everyone be involved?

- Civil society representative

Better inclusion of people with disabilities in the Nordic labour markets would directly benefit this group, reduce their risk of poverty, and prevent social exclusion. In addition, it would yield important benefits for society at large by helping to address labour shortages in green industries and reverse the macroeconomic losses that are caused by the exclusion of people with disabilities. Improving their labour market inclusion can also help to undo misconceptions and prejudices about their capacities, which may contribute to better inclusion in other areas of public life.

Inclusive innovation

The green transition offers many opportunities for innovation and the design of new sustainable products, services, and infrastructure. This may include, for example, the development of electric vehicles and electric infrastructure, green city planning, or new digital apps and tools. Integrating universal design principles into the green transition (see Box 2) can contribute to making these new designs and innovations accessible and inclusive.

Box 2: Universal design

The Centre for Excellence in Universal Design (n.d.) defines universal design as a “fundamental condition of good design”. The concept refers to “the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their age, size, ability or disability.” Working with universal design principles implies that buildings, products, or services are designed in such a way that they meet the needs and requirements of various population groups, including people with different types of disability.

INSIGHT #3: The green transition may perpetuate existing injustices if it is not achieved in a disability-inclusive way

Many of the potential benefits described above will not materialise on their own. Deliberate efforts are needed to ensure that people with disabilities can benefit on equal terms from the opportunities offered by the green transition. If not done in an inclusive way, there is a risk that people with disabilities will be left behind. Some of the potential negative impacts of the green transition for people with disabilities include the following:

Inaccessible innovations

Innovations and new products or services often reach people with disabilities last. They may require adjustments so that people with disabilities can use them, and such adjustments may only become available with delay and/or at a higher cost. For example, electric vehicles can be made accessible for people with disabilities, but it generally requires expensive adjustments, and not all adaptations are technically feasible. Similarly, charging stations for electric vehicles may not be accessible for people with disabilities depending on their placement and how they have to be handled (BraunAbility, n.d.).

By consulting interest organisations who represent persons with disabilities during planning and development processes, the needs of all people can be considered from the beginning. Employing a universal design perspective during the development phase can also help to ensure that all groups in society can participate and make use of innovations.

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People with disabilities are entitled to subsidies to buy cars if they can't use public transport. Those grants are barely enough to buy a car, let alone electric cars.

- Civil society representative

Increasing prices

People with disabilities and their households, on average, have lower incomes than people without disabilities (Ivanova & Middlemiss, 2021). At the same time, living with a disability can entail higher costs. For example, some persons with disabilities need to keep their home at a specific temperature or use more electricity to power life-supporting medical equipment or store medication. Others may require a specific type of diet. If prices for energy, food, or other key commodities increase during the green transition, people with disabilities may face difficulties in meeting these extra costs, thereby increasing their risk of poverty.

Increasing taxes on less sustainable products or services, intended to nudge people to reduce their consumption, can have the same effect. If people with disabilities are dependent on such products or services due to their special needs, they may not have the same options to change their consumption behaviours. The green transition may also have indirect price effects that disproportionately affect people with disabilities. For example, if prices for medication increase as a reaction to higher energy or transport costs, people with disabilities may have little choice but to shoulder the higher costs.

Digitalisation

In parallel to the green transition, a digitalisation process is changing our economies and societies. Digital tools play an increasingly larger role in our social and professional lives. An array of activities is now happening online, including doctor's appointments, meetings, and entertainment, and more and more information about services is no longer available in print but only in digital format.

For people with disabilities who can use digital tools, these developments offer great opportunities for inclusion and participation. Nonetheless, some persons with disabilities face challenges using digital tools or may even be unable to do so. For example, digital meetings with many participants who show up in small side-by-side screens on the computer monitor are very difficult to follow for people who lip-read. People with cognitive disabilities or those who experience impairments of vision can also face difficulties in joining digital meetings on popular platforms such as Teams or Zoom. Similarly, not all people with disabilities can use electronic ID solutions which may be important to obtain health care or bank information. It is important that alternative options are developed and offered to these groups so that they do not miss out on important information and opportunities.

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You cannot abolish all staff members in services, some people need direct support. Digital tools cannot replace everything.

- Civil society representative

Unintended consequences of green transition laws

Policies to reduce carbon emissions can have unintended negative consequences for people with disabilities if their needs and requirements are not considered during the design phase. For example, new rules in the European Union have banned the sale of single-use plastics such as cups, straws, or plastic plates from European markets (European Commission, n.d.). This new regulation has positive impacts in terms of reducing plastic waste. Nonetheless, it creates challenges for some people with disabilities who require plastic straws on a daily basis. People who experience limb paralysis and cannot use their hands and cutlery during meals need straws to eat independently. Straws made out of alternative materials are not always a viable alternative since they may be too costly, may not be flexible enough or may entail sanitation or injury risks (Jenks & Obringer, 2020). It is important to consider how new environmental regulations may affect the lives of people with disabilities and offer exceptions or viable alternatives to ensure that they are not put at a disadvantage.

INSIGHT #4: People with disabilities can face obstacles in choosing a greener lifestyle

During the last years, the Nordic Council of Ministers has worked towards 10 focus areas which form part of the goal to become the most sustainable and integrated region of the world by 2030. One of these focus areas has been to involve everyone in the Nordic Region in the green transition (Nordic Council of Ministers, n.d.). To achieve this goal, it is important to identify obstacles that hinder different groups from adopting a more sustainable lifestyle. People with disabilities encounter many such obstacles in their day-to-day lives which make it difficult to play an active role in the green transition:

Mobility

An important element of the green transition is to make transport systems and mobility patterns more sustainable. To reduce fuel consumption and greenhouse gas emissions, the Nordic countries promote public transport, cycling, and electric vehicles, amongst others (Mellin et al., 2021). Nonetheless, people with disabilities may face challenges in changing their mobility behaviours. For example, public transport may not be accessible for people with disabilities, or they may require extra support to use it. People in wheelchairs may need help to access a train or bus, and people with cognitive disabilities or vision impairments may need support to navigate train stations or bus stops. If such support is not available and personal assistants cannot join without extra costs, some groups of people may not be able to use public transport. During icy and snowy conditions, bus stops and other public transport stations may even be inaccessible for people in wheelchairs (Jodoin et al., 2020). Similarly, as described above, adapting electric vehicles to the needs of people with disabilities is costly and may be unaffordable to some. It can also be time consuming and riddled with technical challenges. Cycling is also not a viable alternative for people with some types of disability or requires customised cycling designs that are more expensive compared to standard bicycles. People with disabilities may therefore depend on fossil-fuel cars to move around and participate in society to a stronger extent than other groups.

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You want people to use more public transport but not everyone is able to use it. We are already struggling with assistants on commuter trains in Sweden. They are removing the assistants - train attendants.

- Civil society representative

City planners are increasingly trying to limit the access of fossil-fuel cars to city centres and are reclaiming parking spaces for pedestrians and cyclists. Such transformations are positive in that they reduce car traffic, leading to cleaner air, less noise, and more people-centred public spaces. Nonetheless, these initiatives may reduce the mobility options of people with disabilities who depend on their cars. It is important to consider the needs of different population groups and provide exceptions or viable alternatives for people with disabilities to ensure that they can continue to participate in society on equal terms (Mellin et al., 2021). Solutions that help people with disabilities can often also benefit other population groups. For example, improving access to public transport increases opportunities for parents with strollers or older adults who have difficulties walking.

Recycling

The Nordic countries have ambitious goals to increase the rate of recycling and reuse of materials. Nonetheless, many people with disabilities find it difficult to take active part in this (Fagerholm et al., 2023). For example, recycling of household waste is challenging for people with visual impairments, and recycling stations are not always accessible for people in wheelchairs. If recycling stations are few and far apart, they may need to be accessed by car, creating challenges for people with disabilities who cannot drive or do not own a car.

Green products

Green products and services are often more expensive than conventional options and may require personal investments or bank loans. For example, electric vehicles tend to be more expensive than fossil-fuel cars and the installation of solar cells or heat pumps are costly. For people with disabilities, it may be difficult to choose such products since, on average, they have lower incomes than the rest of the population and are at a higher risk of experiencing poverty (Ivanova & Middlemiss, 2021). These groups may need financial support to be able to switch to greener solutions on equal terms.

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**I think the biggest challenges are related to affordability.
Poverty is always a barrier and good solutions cost money.**

- Civil society representative

INSIGHT #5: Organisations representing people with disabilities need to be actively engaged in the green transition

To ensure that people with disabilities can take part in the green transition and do not face unintended negative consequences, it is important to include their perspectives from the start (Fenney Salkeld, 2016). Civil society organisations representing people with disabilities stress the necessity of their active engagement in the planning, design, and implementation of green transition

policies and initiatives. This is also required under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which all Nordic countries have ratified (United Nations, 2018). Their involvement can contribute to identifying possible negative impacts of green transition policies and to developing solutions that are disability inclusive. The civil society representatives argue that they are too often excluded or heard too late, limiting their opportunities to contribute to the green transition with their ideas and expertise.



Organisations representing people with disabilities should be involved in decision-making. This is something we often remind politicians about.

- Civil society representative

The involvement of people with disabilities and their organisations can take various forms such as workshops, discussions, citizen panels, or expert hearings. Importantly, the impact of such participatory approaches needs to be clarified so that participants know how their input will contribute to the green transition. Participation needs to happen at an early stage of policy development, so that the input can still make a difference. Equally important is the accessibility of such meetings and gatherings, both in terms of time and location. Some participants may require the presence of a personal assistant to participate in meetings, while others need support with transport to meeting venues. Reasonable adjustments should be made to accommodate such needs and make meetings fully inclusive (European Commission, 2021).

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Suggestions from people with disabilities for a just green transition

Civil society organisations representing people with disabilities make the following suggestions to policymakers at national levels of governance to ensure the green transition is just:

1: Consider creating citizen panels to provide advice and feedback

The perspectives of people with disabilities need to be accounted for during the green transition already during the development phase of policies and initiatives. One idea to achieve this is to create a permanent citizen panel at national or Nordic level consisting of people with different types of disabilities who could provide input and advice on policy initiatives, infrastructure projects, and more. Consultations with the panel should happen at an early stage so that their input can still make a difference. A dedicated contact person should maintain contact with the panel. Panel members should be financially compensated for their time and efforts, especially if processes are time consuming.



Bring together a group of people with different types of disabilities - sensory, mobility, mental. Let them test and advise on innovations.

- Civil society representative

2: Implement an “inclusiveness check” for new policies and initiatives

At European level, the European Commission (2024) has made a commitment to conduct a “youth check” when designing new policies. It implies that the impact of a new policy on young people is systematically considered during the design phase. This includes youth consultations for initiatives flagged as particularly relevant for young people as well as impact assessments and policy dialogues between youth and commissioners. Policymakers should consider establishing similar routines in the form of an “inclusiveness check” to analyse how green transition policies affect people with different types of abilities. The guiding question should be whether there is a risk that they will be excluded or negatively affected, and what could be done to prevent this.

3: Promote a universal design perspective during the green transition

Universal design implies that developers ask whether places, products, or services can be utilised by all to the greatest extent possible (see Box 2). It entails identifying obstacles which may stand in the way when using or accessing a new product or environment. A universal design perspective can increase the opportunities for people with disabilities, but also other groups, to fully participate and benefit from the green transition. In urban planning, a universal design perspective can inform the development of housing, transport, public space, water and sanitation, as well as many other areas.

4: Offer financial support to people with disabilities to make sustainable investments

As argued in this memo, many green innovations are expensive and require access to personal savings or bank loans. People with disabilities, who on average receive lower incomes than other groups and are at higher risk of poverty, may not be able to afford such investments. Subsidies or targeted, affordable loan schemes could help people with disabilities to make green investments. This would promote the green transition in the Nordic societies and enable people with disabilities to participate and benefit on equal terms.

5: Invest in upskilling and reskilling for people with disabilities

A range of green jobs are likely to be created during the green transition. This offers new opportunities for people with disabilities. To ensure that they can take advantage of these new jobs, it is important to include them in training and reskilling programmes. Such programmes must be disability inclusive and should specifically target vulnerable groups in the Nordic labour markets, including people with disabilities, to reach out to their untapped potential (Fundación Once et al., 2023).