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Why are we still designing systems — from schools to cities to algorithms — that work for only a narrow slice of the population when we know how to design for everyone across all phases of life?

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Abstract

Our world is built on systems that often exclude large segments of society, especially persons with disabilities. From my own experiences growing up with a disability to the broader fight against climate change, I have seen how schools, cities, and even high-tech algorithms routinely overlook those of us who don't fit the "normal" mold. This article explores why, despite having the knowledge and tools to design inclusively, we continue to create environments and policies that serve only a privileged few. Drawing on my journey founding Green Disability, I discuss how the disability community is too often left out of climate conversations and design processes – and why true climate justice cannot happen without accessibility. I also highlight a path forward, rooted in accountability, radical collaboration, grassroots leadership, and hope, to ensure our systems work for everyone across all phases of life.

Keywords

Accessibility, Inclusive Design, Climate Justice, Disability Rights, Grassroots Leadership, Collaboration

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Introduction

I grew up keenly aware that the world around me was not designed with everyone in mind. In the crowded streets and public schools of Delhi, my stammer and coordination difficulties were constant reminders that our systems – from education to infrastructure – often cater to a narrow definition of “normal.” As a child with dyslexia and dyspraxia, simply getting to school or understanding classroom materials felt like navigating an obstacle course built for someone else. Every staircase without a ramp, every teacher untrained in inclusive education sent a clear message: if you don’t fit the mold, you’re on your own.

Exclusion by Design: A Personal Journey

My journey to advocacy began with personal roots. During the quiet of the 2020 lockdown, I reflected on the struggles my family and I faced. I saw clearly that climate change wasn’t a distant threat – it was at our doorstep, magnifying every existing challenge. And yet, when I looked at climate action plans and community meetings, I saw hardly any mention of people like us. It felt as if disability had been erased from a story that included us.

That realization spurred me to start Green Disability, a community initiative born from both frustration and hope. I was frustrated that policymakers still acted as if one-size-fits-all solutions could work. But I also had hope that by sharing our lived experiences, we could spark change. Through Green Disability, I connected with others who

felt invisible in the systems that govern our lives. Different stories, same theme: exclusion by design. I heard from blind students fighting for accessible study materials, wheelchair users navigating flooded streets without support, and neurodiverse techies baffled by biased algorithms. Each story reinforced the urgent need to redesign our world for all.

The Climate Crisis: No Justice Without Inclusion

Climate change has been called a great equalizer, but in truth it isn't – it discriminates. Environmental disasters and extreme weather hit vulnerable communities first and worst, and that includes people with disabilities. Time and again, people with disabilities have been left behind in evacuations, in shelters, in relief aid – not due to chance, but due to systemic neglect. Emergency plans that ignore accessibility – like warning systems without visual or audio options – send the message that our lives matter less.

This exclusion is especially frustrating because we know how to do better: principles of universal design could save lives and serve everybody. For instance, an accessible warning system with both visual and audio signals helps everyone, not just those who are deaf or blind. A wheelchair ramp at a flood shelter benefits a parent with a stroller or an elderly person with a walker. Designing for the most vulnerable makes systems more resilient for all. Yet too often, accessibility is treated as an afterthought. Climate movements often cater to a "typical" activist – someone able to march all day, climb a stage, hear every speech, and evacuate quickly. Those outside that narrow image are unintentionally left out.

I saw this when a deaf activist friend attended a climate rally and found no sign language interpreter; she left feeling inspired by the cause but alienated by the experience. Moments like that underline why I insist: there is no climate justice without disability justice.

Accountability and Hope: Designing for Everyone

Addressing these challenges requires both accountability and hope. Accountability is critical: governments and institutions must be held responsible for inclusion. New schools shouldn't open unless they accommodate students of all abilities; city plans must account for the elderly and the disabled; tech products must be tested with diverse users (including those with disabilities) and have accessibility built in from the start. Accommodating differences is not a luxury – it's a non-negotiable part of ethical design.

Equally important is what we at the grassroots can do. This is where hope and radical collaboration come in. I have seen unlikely allies join forces and spark change. For example, disability advocates teamed up with environmental groups to build community gardens with wheelchair-friendly paths and Braille signage so everyone can participate. Similarly, youth climate organizers now bring sign language interpreters and sensory-friendly spaces to rallies, making these events accessible to all and broadening their impact.

These examples give me hope. They show that when grassroots leaders include diverse voices, solutions become more innovative and inclusive – often because those most affected have the clearest insight into how to solve the problem. Inclusion isn't a burden; it's an opportunity to improve our shared world for everyone.

Conclusion

My journey from feeling unwelcome in school to advocating on the global stage has taught me that change is possible – but only if we demand it. I pose this question not just out of frustration but as a call to action – a reminder to everyone from architects to policymakers to tech CEOs that we have the power to change things.

Designing for everyone, across all phases of life, is not a lofty ideal – it's a practical, proven approach. We already have the tools and knowledge; what we need now is the will. Those in power must be accountable, and those of us at the grassroots must continue to push courageously.

I hold onto hope that accessible design will soon become routine – ramps at entrances, captions on videos, sign language at public meetings, and accessibility built into every climate project. I believe in the power of radical collaboration and in letting marginalized voices guide us toward a better future. When we design for everyone, we all win. It's time to move from awareness to action and ensure that no one is left behind in our schools, our cities, our technologies, or our fight against climate change.