Plan International’s long-term community development work and disaster response has highlighted **gaps in disaster management practice regarding the role of children in disasters**. While humanitarian principles and human rights conventions ensure that, increasingly, children are given special protection in emergency situations; children’s right to participation remains largely unrecognised. Children continue to be perceived as mere victims of disasters rather than active agents of change who can make a real difference. Plan has found that **children have much to contribute to disaster management efforts**, in helping to reduce risks that are a direct threat to themselves as well as the wider population, and in taking direct action that can prevent disasters.

**Children and youth have a right to participate in efforts to protect them from hazards and vulnerabilities, particularly through their participation in decisions and efforts to address disaster management and risk reduction.** This is in line with the international legal framework set under the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, which upholds children’s rights to protection (article 6) as well as participation (articles 12, 13).

The link between disasters, vulnerability and failed development is well known, and as a child-centred agency, Plan is acutely aware of the particular impact of disasters on children, who often form the largest populations in developing countries, and thus the largest victims in emergencies situations.

Disasters around the world disrupt the lives of millions of children, and can force many into armed conflicts, prostitution, drugs trafficking and other dangerous survival activities leading to violation of their rights. During and immediately after emergency crisis, children’s vulnerabilities increase, faced with greater threats of abuse, exploitation, harm and lack of care and a supportive environment. Furthermore, the long term adverse effects of disasters can affect children the most, whose lives are severely disrupted through separation or loss of family members, through disruption to education, loss of household economic security and through the breakdown of communities.

In the years to come, children’s vulnerability due to disasters is expected to increase. The impact of global warming is expected to result in up to **175 million children every year being affected by disasters brought about by climate change**. Greater occurrence of climate induced hazards resulting from global warming will in turn contribute to an increase in political disruptions and social unrest. These threats will contribute to making an even greater number of children vulnerable to abuse and neglect resulting from conflict and population displacement. By 2010, estimates suggest there will be 50 million environmentally displaced people, most of whom will be women and children.

Given that the need to prioritise the most vulnerable and ensure their participation in disaster management and mitigation is now a widely accepted principal; the humanitarian sector can no longer **restrict children’s role in disasters to that of beneficiaries or passive victims**. By providing them the opportunity to be directly involved in disaster risk reduction activities, young people can develop skills to be better prepared for potential threats, and participate in efforts to protect their safety and wellbeing. Plan urges stakeholders who uphold a rights-based approach to humanitarian work – promoting greater participation, ownership and accountability of the most vulnerable in disaster management – to ensure this also includes children’s rights to participation.

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1. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is an international human rights treaty that grants all children and young people (aged 17 and under) a comprehensive set of rights. It is presently the most widely ratified international human rights instrument. All UN member states except for the United States and Somalia have ratified the convention. It is the only international human rights treaty to include civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, and sets legally protected standards to ensure children’s adequate development and what every child needs to have a safe, happy and fulfilled childhood.


3. IFRC World Disasters Report 2006
Plan International is engaged in a five-year multi-country programme of action research, testing and sharing new ways of working that emphasise child-centred DRR. This programme is managed in line with Hyogo Framework of Action (HFA), bringing into focus the situation and role of children in implementing the HFA's aims.

1. Ensure that disaster risk reduction is a national and a local priority with a strong institutional basis for implementation – *promoting and supporting children’s rights*

2. *Involve children and young people* to identify, assess and monitor disaster risks and enhance early warning.

3. Use knowledge, innovation and education to build a culture of safety and resilience at all levels, *because children are our future*

4. *Involve children and young people* to Reduce the underlying risk factors.

5. Strengthen disaster preparedness for effective response at all levels, *particularly at community level, concentrating on children and young people.*

6. In their approach to disaster risk reduction, States, regional and international organizations and other actors concerned should take into consideration the key activities listed under each of these five priorities and should implement them, as appropriate, to their own circumstances and capacities.

We believe building community’s resilience to disasters is a long-term development activity which is not simply an extension of humanitarian and relief interventions. Building resilience must address deep rooted and longer-term problems that can be proactively reduced and even prevented when appropriate measures are taken.
WHY CHILDREN?  THE VALUE OF CHILD PARTICIPATION

Children and youth are vital for effective Disaster Risk Reduction and they have the right to participate in DRR efforts:

- Young people act as informants within informal communication networks in their communities, and thus have an important role for disaster management information dissemination.

- In communities with high poverty indices (where parents are illiterate, do not have the time to attend training/meetings, share a strong sense of apathy, fatalism or subordination, or do not have access to information sources e.g. media/ICT), children and youth already play a major role as interpreters and relayers of messages to their households and communities.

- Children are able to convey messages with a meaning shared by their families and friends; and are, for the most, able to be trusted by recipients. As most children are embedded within the family structure, this relationship means risk information and mitigation actions may be continually reaffirmed, whereas external messages rely on small windows of opportunity to convey information and influence action. Children living in difficult circumstances (including orphans, street children and other high risk groups), also have a role to play in strengthening coping mechanisms and identifying strategies for greater resilience.

- Risks mapping carried out with youth groups show that children understand and very often can respond constructively and communicate effectively about the risks they recognise. These demonstrate that children tend to have a clear and uncluttered view about risks. They recognise environmental hazards alongside social and economic threats, and are able to understand both the logical linear links between cause and effect and the more complex interplays between hazard and vulnerability.

- Children recognise the wider dimensions and complexity of risk reduction, for example, how seemingly unrelated external factors such as abuse and lack of love can greatly influence their vulnerability. Their view reinforces the need for a holistic approach to Disaster Risk Reduction – addressing vulnerabilities related to health, environment, education, religion, household economic security and other sectors, which together impact on a community and individual’s well being and resilience.

- Children can offer immense creativity and the will to reduce risk. When given the resources, encouragement and the opportunity to take action, children can become catalysts of simple yet significant strategies to make their communities safer.

- Children have proven to be enthusiastic about DRR, taking their own initiative to move beyond efforts for disaster preparedness and emergency planning, and initiating action in risk reduction and even disaster prevention work. This includes taking charge of their risk environment, acting to control it, and through their actions obliging not only their parents and peers to take notice, but also promoting changes in local government policies. Eg: youth groups who have carried out environmental protection campaigns to reduce landslide threats; regular clearing of drains in their neighbourhoods to prevent localised flooding and reduce public health threats; and reforestation and water source protection projects.

- Working with children through schools, youth groups and community committees provides informal forums for mobilisation which offer powerful spheres of influence whereby the influence of political or other means of bias can be minimized. The value of local level action with youth and children can be expanded through tactical networking, scaling up to new national and international commitments. Smart and articulate young people can hardly be ignored.
CHILD RIGHTS AND VOICE IN DRR

Plan international’s DRR programme places children and young people at the centre of DRR. The programme focus is on empowering youth through awareness raising; creating opportunities for youth to express their concerns and understanding of the wide range of social, economic and environmental risks they face; and to take action in mitigating their vulnerabilities. This includes:

- Working with youth groups and schools to build awareness about risks and capacities through vulnerability capability assessments, risk mapping; development of DM school curricula; improving early warning systems including forecasting, dissemination of warnings, preparedness measures and reaction capacities.
- Creating opportunities for youth to express their concerns and understanding – through peer-to-peer exchanges, using various fora and media (theatre, songs, radio) to promote young people’s perspectives to decision makers, local authorities and young people.
- Sharing information about youth priorities and capacities with local and national authorities, promoting better communication between rights bearers and young citizens.
- Tackling the root causes of disasters and helping reduce risks now and into the future, by supporting youth-led environmental management and mitigation efforts through seed grants for projects such as: campaigns to stop quarrying increasing flood threats; addressing pollution of environment, water; relocation of schools at risk of landslides, among others.
- Supporting research and learning on the impact of man-made disasters on youth and their role in building resilience towards man-made hazards for greater prevention and mitigation (including research on youth and conflict in West Africa).

Plan is working in collaboration with many other Development and Humanitarian Agencies, academic and media partners. Internationally, we are currently working with the Climate Change and Disasters Unit at the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex University; the Centre for Disaster Preparedness in the Philippines, and the IFRC regional office of the Americas, considering what opportunities exist for the voices of youth to be heard within disaster management policy arenas. With other NGOs (ActionAid, Tearfund, British Red Cross, ChristianAid and Practical Action), we are seeking to turn Hyogo promises into action, developing indicators for effective community based disaster risk reduction to address the questions of “what is a resilient community, and what must governments do to support and sustain this resilience?”. During 2007 we will be producing a series of TV documentaries for BBC World TV about children and disasters. These documentaries will highlight to a wider audience the importance of ensuring greater participation of children in disaster risk reduction. Plan International is also actively engaged in the UNISDR/UNESCO Platform and campaign on education and disasters, and is an active member of INEE.
CASE STUDIES

Plan’s experiences with community risk mapping and mitigation activities with youth disaster groups in the Philippines and El Salvador has shown that children and young people’s capacity to participate in DRR is much greater than most realise, and can be invaluable in effective disaster preparedness, response and mitigation.

Philippines: The power of Children’s Voice in DRR: School Relocation - Santa Paz

The Mines and Geosciences Bureau (MGB) conducted a risk assessment of landslides in Southern Leyte in 2006, determining that eight barangays were at high risk within the Municipality of San Francisco. These included Santa Paz Sur and Santa Paz Norte, with recommendations to relocate affected houses. These two barangays were home to a high school and an elementary school, both of which were considered to be extremely exposed.

Following debates about whether and how to relocate the school, the headmaster opened the decision to a community-wide referendum to include a vote each for the children of the school. Broadly the children were in favour of the relocation and their parents against it, because the parents were concerned about their children having to travel to school in a different community and the loss of livelihoods associated with the relocation of a school (e.g. loss of lunch business for local shops). In addition, different political affiliations of the leadership in the two barangays led to confusion over the exact risk communications of the MGB. The children’s organisations in the school (Supreme Student Council and Student Government Organisation) embarked on an education campaign about the physical processes of landslides and a great many students wrote to the School Division Superintendent expressing their desire to relocate. The student’s proposal won the vote by 101 to 49. Due to concern from the Provincial authorities, a more protracted timetable for relocation was shortened to just 2 days following heavy rains. The tent school was erected over one weekend with children and parents helping to put up the tents and children digging drainage channels due to the temporary school’s location close to a paddy field (see fig 2). The tents, water supply and toilets were provided by Plan Philippines, along with a scholarship programme helping poorer students to afford uniforms and schools supplies. The children reported feelings of excitement about the whole process and did not express any regret about the decision to move. They did report difficult conditions in the temporary school, particularly the heat in the tents, though the children helped to line the tents with banana leaves to cool them. The new school is now being constructed in Pasanon, a safer location a few hundred meters from the temporary school, with co-financing from Plan. The school will include earthquake mitigation measures such as steel ties on the roof. Toilets are also being built in each classroom in preparation for its use as an evacuation shelter.

Students of Santa Paz National High School in their temporary school, awaiting their safer school to be built
**El Salvador: Children in Action for Prevention and Mitigation of Hazards**

The River Sumpul forms the border between the community of Petapa in El Salvador and Honduras, generating large flows during the wet season with the power to cause significant scouring and riverbank erosion.

The children of the Petapa Emergency Committee identified the unregulated extraction of rocks and stones from the river as a major risk, leading to increased erosion and vulnerability to flooding of houses near the river. Signs prohibiting extraction for personal use have since been erected with the agreement of the local leaders.

Children recounted the story of the arrival of a lorry from outside the community to load stones from the river. Acting on the strength of their convictions and buoyed by their previous activities, a number of children went to the river to protest at this activity, sitting on top of the lorry until it agreed to leave. Although for personal use, this collection had apparently been sanctioned by local authorities, revealing power relations central to the challenge of risk reduction.

Empowerment of children’s voices is likely to lead in future to children’s groups directly challenging vested interests and power relations that adversely affect vulnerability. These challenges, including direct action as seen in Petapa, while laudable in their convictions, may inadvertently put children in positions of potential danger. Such possibilities need to be carefully monitored by Plan, which is in a strong position to mediate in such situations and ensure that action does not put children themselves at risk unacceptably.

**Resources:**

Disaster Risk Reduction Begins in Schools  
http://www.eird.org/herramientas/eng/index.html

http://www.plan-international.org/pdfs/int-children-tsunami

After the Cameras are Gone: Children in Disasters (Plan 2002)  
http://www.plan-uk.org/newsroom/publications/childrenindisasters/

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