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Children, Climate Change and Disasters

Disasters pose one of the greatest threats to future generations. Children now and in the future have the right to protection from disasters and the right to participate in decision-making and action to prevent disasters and adapt to climate change. This briefing uses case studies from two disaster-prone countries, the Philippines and El Salvador, to outline the right conditions for child-centred approaches at the community level across the world. In order to protect child welfare and support children to realise their capacity as active citizens, urgent action is also required at national and international levels.

Disaster risk reduction is one of the greatest contemporary challenges for development and poverty reduction. There is growing awareness of the need to put children at the heart of disaster risk reduction (DRR) work as part of efforts to adapt to climate change (adaptation). This acknowledges that:

- the impacts of extreme events are often most severe on children, and they have specific needs for protection during and after disasters;
- climate change and disasters will affect children's future livelihood opportunities;
- children have a right to participate in decisions affecting their lives; and
- children can play an active role in improving the effectiveness of actions to reduce disaster risks and adapt to a changing climate.

Experience of implementing *child-centred* approaches to DRR and related processes of adaptation to climate change is growing. This briefing presents results from IDS field research working in partnership with the NGO Plan International in the Philippines and El Salvador. By studying examples of children engaging in DRR in practice, we have developed ten key factors which are essential for ensuring a child-centred approach to resilience.

What is a child-centred approach to DRR and adaptation?

Efforts to link children, climate change and disasters have mainly focused on ensuring a child's basic right to survival and development. This has led NGOs and governments to focus their actions on disaster preparedness, ensuring sensitivity to child protection during relief and rehabilitation efforts.

However, climate change and disaster events also affect children's right to participate and for decisions to be made in their best interests. Child-centred approaches therefore recognise the role and rights of children themselves as citizens and agents of change.

Our research suggests that children can effectively play multiple roles before, during and after a disaster (see Case Studies 1 and 2). These roles reflect the agency of children, including through:

- conception, design and implementation of projects/actions;
- analysis of risks, opportunities and options for action; and
- communication, mobilisation and persuasion of others to take action.

Child-centred DRR and adaptation therefore covers both:

- 1. Child-sensitive policy and programming** which responds to the needs of children as recipients or beneficiaries. This may be achieved through measures such as school feeding programmes, social protection/cash transfer programmes for families to reduce existing vulnerabilities, structural strengthening of school buildings, contingency planning for education and service provision, or preparedness planning for disaster events that explicitly caters for child protection or psychological trauma.
- 2. Participatory policy and programming** where children are actively engaged in decision-making, planning and accountability processes for prevention, preparedness and response. This includes *child-led* DRR where children are supported to be lead agents of change in their spheres of influence – household, school, community and beyond.

“ The group structure provides opportunities for children to come together with a common purpose to plan and deliver action. ”

How can a child-centred approach to DRR and adaptation be achieved?

Our research identified ten factors that will help create the right conditions for child-centred adaptation and DRR at the local level:

1. Family support and permission

Adult views about child agency have the potential to foster or stifle child participation and contributions to DRR. Whilst families commonly value the potential of children as actors within the household, children are often not given individual agency or voice within the home. These values are often reflected in the community. Support from family and duty-bearers, and other adults in the community, is a key factor for child participation and agency.

2. Make children's groups visible

The visibility of children's activities was a crucial factor in fostering household and community buy-in. Many adults – and even parents of group members – were not aware of the children's group activities. Yet where adults had been exposed to or involved in the activities, they were more supportive, particularly in communities with more DRR experience. This experience also acts as an important catalyst for shifting cultural understandings to support child agency.

3. Foster dialogue with adults

When siblings, parents and other adults are excluded from the processes of awareness-raising, action and empowerment of children's groups, they may be less likely to support the activities of their household members. Household

support provides not only formal permissions for children to participate and engage in activities, but also confirmation to the children that their actions are valued within the community, empowering them to continue in their efforts and advocacy.

4. Facilitate groups

Children are capable actors, but they need stimuli and support. This may come from community-based sources such as schools, health centres or adult-led disaster groups, or through external interventions by NGOs. Facilitation helps children's groups to:

- draw on outside expertise for training and resources (to inform actions and enhance credibility);
- interact with policy processes, individuals and organisations outside the community; and
- work with adult groups who are acting on similar issues.

5. Analyse and take joint action

The ability to transform knowledge into action is lost without the support of others with shared knowledge and motivation. Facilitation therefore needs to go beyond training, to support analysis, debate, prioritisation and action at the community level. The group structure provides opportunities for children to come together on a regular basis with a common purpose to plan and deliver action – this structure and accessible support and guidance are vital.

6. Create safe spaces

Creating safe spaces for engaging with authority figures is important for a child-sensitive approach. Children are often overwhelmed by authority, so bringing officials into spaces where children feel secure, such as facilitated

Case Study 1

Mobilisation during emergencies in El Ciprés, El Salvador

The youth group in El Ciprés, a community in southern El Salvador, has been active since 1998. The group tackles a wide range of issues, with DRR work integrated into its activities.

When Hurricane Stan devastated the region in 2005, the group's Youth Emergency Committee took the initiative to facilitate the evacuation of seven families whose houses were at risk of collapsing. They established and managed an emergency camp in the community's school building. They also grouped together to request support from the mayor's office and other institutions, constructing a support network for the affected families until they were donated safer and stronger houses several months later.

This action improved the community's recognition of youth leadership and the group's ability to confront complex situations such as emergencies. Now, supported by NGOs, with a new generation of children, the group continues to work on community projects. The Community Development Association, which legally represents the community to the mayor's office, has recognised the youth group's role and is looking to include them in the future.

Adapted from: Tanner *et al.* (2009)

“ Success is more likely where children’s groups link disaster prevention agendas to wider community development issues. ”

Case Study 2

Child-led mangrove restoration projects in the Camotes Islands, Philippines

Mangroves are a crucial resource for the municipality of Teguis on the Camotes Islands of the Philippines. The trees provide environmental and economic benefits including:

- livelihood gains by providing spawning grounds;
- biodiversity gains;
- disaster protection from typhoon winds and storm surges;
- adaptation to climate change impacts; and
- the removal of atmospheric greenhouse gases that cause climate change.

When the community’s mangrove ecosystem was damaged, children from the Teguis Children’s Association for Active Participation (TCAAP) worked alongside adult groups, including parents, to assemble teams to collect and replant saplings in sanctuaries behind protective barriers.

The children combined knowledge from a range of sources including school textbooks, the media, training sessions and discussion with parents, to identify the benefits of mangrove restoration. Although much knowledge is sourced from mainstream school activities, the participation of children in organised groups enables them to access additional training opportunities, primarily through their affiliation with a facilitating agency.

Strong links exist between Plan Philippines and the municipal governments in the Camotes Islands. As a result, municipal officials and councillors act as trainers and provide technical input to the NGO’s programmes, as well as supporting programme delivery.

Adapted from: Tanner et al. (2009)

workshops, should be a priority. Holding training events and meetings with a mix of adults and children also builds trust and recognition, and encourages common ownership of the DRR agenda.

7. Link to community priorities

Success is more likely where children’s groups link disaster prevention agendas to wider community development issues and nationwide campaigns. Programmes that link to existing priorities (such as

health and education) help both children and the wider community to see the multiple benefits of their actions, motivating them to achieve common goals. Focusing activities on nationwide campaigns builds links with the municipal and village councils who are responsible for delivering some of these services.

8. Identify champions

The most advanced and stable children’s groups worked with authority figures in

the community who were already trusted and respected by both children and adults. Often these were individuals whose roles directly related to child welfare, such as school directors or health workers. Whilst also providing a link with outside networks, authoritative champions gave a reference point for parents regarding the appropriateness of group activities.

9. Engage with wider networks

Wider support networks enable groups to have an influence beyond their own households and community members. These networks are often developed through schools, health workers, and NGOs. In addition, links with municipal government can provide opportunities for children to exchange ideas and experiences with peers, attend training, and secure resources to improve visibility in the community. The relationships also potentially provide access to higher-level policy spaces.

10. Promote group sustainability

By their nature, children’s groups are constantly changing, as children graduate and transition into adulthood. This means that knowledge and learning can be lost over time. To overcome this:

- children’s groups should be linked with formal structures (such as schools or village committees);
- more permanent adult champions can ensure that experience, understanding and leadership are replaced; and
- ongoing facilitation, investment and training are needed.

Where former children’s group leaders are now parents or in local positions of authority, research found a higher level of support for child participation.

Children, Climate Change and Disasters

Policy Implications

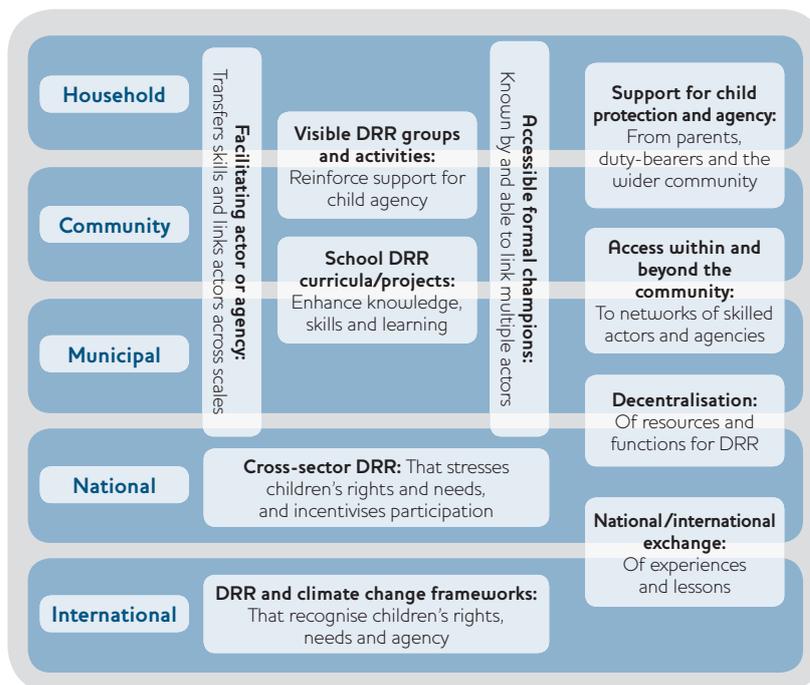
To create the right conditions for child-centred DRR at a community level, action is required across different scales (see Figure 1). Knowledge, understanding and political buy-in must be ensured, from the international level, right down to the communities that are impacted by disasters. In most countries, national politicians are responsible for DRR and official legal structures are in place. But the reality on the ground is that greater coordination is required to tackle climate change and disasters.

Achieving these conditions requires political sensitisation to develop cultural shifts that recognise children's capacities and right to be engaged in decisions that affect their current and future wellbeing. This applies not just in DRR but across different sectors (such as healthcare and education) and different scales.

Key actions to achieve this include:

- National DRR frameworks should train and resource those working in other sectors (such as health, education, etc.) with the skills to effectively engage with communities, including children, in risk assessment activities and DRR planning and programmes.
- National and regional DRR officials should be given access to specialist technical and scientific knowledge to enhance programmes and plans for DRR.
- Municipal DRR officials should identify child-centred champions who operate at community level but who are part of formal institutions. These individuals will act as bridges between children and local government structures.
- National and regional education ministries must empower schools to act as a central catalyst for DRR action, going beyond simply teaching and raising awareness. Outreach and knowledge exchange programmes through local students in their communities can increase the reach of DRR learning and encourage child-centred community-level action.
- Decentralised DRR training should avoid selective processes and be delivered at the point closest to the community, bringing

Figure 1: A model of child-centred disaster risk reduction across different scales



children and adults together in co-learning and knowledge-sharing spaces.

- Where possible, children's groups should be integrated or developed as 'branches' of existing institutions rather than developed outside those spaces.
- The entry points for child-centred DRR should relate to the priorities of the specific community and are likely to originate in 'alternative' policy arenas, such as health.
- Children who are supported to come together need to be visible as capable agents early on in the process, to build trust in their activities, shift perceptions and ensure children are valued as active agents.

Further Reading

- Seballos, F. and Tanner, T.M.** (2011) 'Enabling Child-Centred Agency in Disaster Risk Reduction', background paper, UNISDR Global Assessment Report (GAR) 2011, Geneva: UNISDR, <http://tinyurl.com/GARchildren>
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- Tanner, T.M.** (2009) 'Children Communicating Climate and Disaster Risks', *In Focus Policy Briefing* 13.3, Brighton: IDS www.ids.ac.uk/go/infocus13
- Seballos, F.** (2009) 'Rights, Needs and Capacities of Children in a Changing Climate', *In Focus Policy Briefing* 13.1, Brighton: IDS, www.ids.ac.uk/go/infocus13
- For more research on children, climate change and disasters, visit www.childreninachangingclimate.org/research

Credits

This *In Focus Policy Briefing* was written by **Thomas Tanner** and **Fran Seballos**, researchers in the Climate Change team at the Institute of Development Studies. The research was funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council and Plan UK.

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