



# After the cameras have gone

Children in disasters

Edited by **Amer Jabry**  
January 2003



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# Foreword

**Children are the most photographed and least listened to victims of disasters. As the tsunami relief effort moves from rescue to rebuilding and the global community is reflecting on what should happen 'after the cameras have gone', we are re-printing this report on the long-term effect of disasters on children.**

The report demonstrates that the protection of children and their right to participate in decisions made about their future will be overlooked if patterns of previous disasters are followed.

This research shows that during a disaster the physical survival needs of children including, safe water, food, shelter, clothing and primary health care are usually given a very high priority.

However, other needs and rights, which are also essential for children, like protection from abuse and harm, education, rest, privacy and the right to participate in matters that affect them are too often overlooked. Yet, as child traffickers try to profit from the tumult and whole communities are traumatised and in shock, children are at risk. The protection and psychological, as well as physical, recovery of children should be a leading feature of every stage of any disaster response.

Plan is not an emergency agency. We work long-term with children in poor communities. This enabled us to find out from children how they were affected long-term by the earthquakes in El Salvador, floods in Vietnam and the civil war in Sierra Leone.

After the 2001 earthquake, children in the El Cafetelon temporary shelter in El Salvador, for instance, suffered from lack of space and lack of security. This meant they could not play, had no normal routine, and family members were too stressed and shocked to care for them. They could not move safely around the shelters and told of cases of attempted abduction and sexual abuse.

In the aftermath of the tsunami disaster in 2005 in Asia we were able to apply this learning. In the displaced persons camps in Hambantota, Sri Lanka, security guards recorded all visitors; the women's and children's police officer visited regularly to check on child protection; and generators were provided to light up the camp at night as an additional security measure against assault and abduction.

In other affected areas such as Andhra Pradesh, India, children trafficking and prostitution have been on the increase since 1997 and the vulnerability of the children after the tsunami disaster is a symptom of a wider problem that many local organisations have now banded together to tackle.

Emergencies also highlight fundamental gaps in child protection. Despite the new Child Protection Act, Indonesian law still penalises child victims rather than traffickers or

paedophiles. Research Plan carried out in 2004 on commercial sexual exploitation of children with the organisation 'End Child Pornography, Prostitution and Trafficking' showed the need for reform of a criminal code, which contains no provisions relating to commercial sexual transactions with a child.

Research shows that listening to children is central to both identifying threats against their safety and helping their recovery, but adults are often too traumatised themselves to do this. Enabling children to express themselves in a safe place and re-establishing the routine of school is also vital, if they are to recover from trauma. A survey of 315 children showing signs of trauma (nightmares, flashbacks) in camps in Sierra Leone highlighted that after four weeks of attending school classes where they were encouraged to draw and tell stories, the symptoms had reduced in all but 30 children. That is why reopening the schools in affected communities and establishing a routine, is so important for children's recovery.

According to our research with children in El Salvador in 2001 and Vietnam in 1999, having a role to play in rebuilding their communities, helps children counteract the guilt and helplessness they feel when their homes and loved ones are swept away. It also gives insights into what is needed.

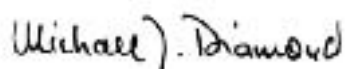
So, after the floods in Sri Lanka in 2003 washed away houses, Plan consulted not only community leaders, but also women and children on the design of their new homes. The men prioritised prestigious verandas, but the children and women pressed for good kitchens and latrines.

The tsunami-hit areas are prone to regular floods and natural disasters. Research in Vietnam showed how children affected by the floods now have a central role in disaster preparedness. Children are regularly on the outskirts of their villages, collecting wood, looking after animals or walking to school and they are often the first to see signs of a flood. Training the children of today in disaster mitigation ensures that next time there is a disaster the adults of tomorrow will be better prepared. This has proved so successful in the commune of Can Tuyen where children were trained to give early warning that no child has been killed by flash floods in recent years.

The one million tsunami children have elicited a huge public response. They are only part of the 75 million children every year who are affected by natural disasters or by conflicts.

As we use photographs of these vulnerable children to gain support for relief efforts, we also need to put them at the centre of the disaster response.

That is the message of this report.



Michael Diamond  
Asia Regional Director



Marie Staunton  
National Director

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design@print solutions ltd  
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Email: info@d2ps.com  
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# Glossary: **Abbreviations and definitions**

<b>Child</b>	While population data categorise people aged 15 and above as adults, and many children around 14 or even younger, assume adult-type responsibilities, a child is defined in this report as someone under the age of 18. This is consistent with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and with Plan's definition within its sponsorship operations.	<b>Disaster</b>	A situation or event, which overwhelms local capacity, necessitating a request to national or international level for external assistance. In this report the word disaster, unless otherwise qualified, signifies natural disasters, armed conflict and complex humanitarian emergencies.
<b>CCDA</b>	Child Centred Community Development Approach (Plan International)	<b>ECD</b>	Early Childhood Development
<b>CFSC</b>	Committee for Flood and Storm Control (Vietnam)	<b>HIV/AIDS</b>	Human Immunodeficiency Virus / Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
<b>CHE</b>	Complex Humanitarian Emergencies. CHEs are disaster situations that involve multiple political, military, economic and / or natural factors. CHEs combine conflict with large scale displacement of people and economic social and political instability (Mandalakas 1999).	<b>ICT</b>	Information and Communication Technologies
<b>Conflict</b>	The use of armed force between the military forces of two or more governments, or of government and at least one organised armed group, resulting in battle-related deaths of at least 10 deaths or 100 affected in one year (IFRC 2001).	<b>IDP</b>	Internally Displaced Person
<b>CRC</b>	Convention on the Rights of the Child	<b>IFRC</b>	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
<b>CSP</b>	Country Strategic Plan (Plan International)	<b>ILO</b>	International Labour Office
<b>DEC</b>	Disasters Emergency Committee (UK)	<b>Natural Disasters</b>	Hydro-meteorological and geophysical. While they are called "natural", human factors often exacerbate the original natural causes.
		<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organisations
		<b>Plan</b>	Plan International
		<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
		<b>UNESCO</b>	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
		<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund
		<b>VDB</b>	Village Development Board (Vietnam)

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Amer Jabry  
London 2002  
E-merge Consulting Limited  
Tel: +44 (0)20 8569 6765  
Email: amer.jabry@btinternet.com  
35 James Street, Hounslow,  
Middlesex TW3 1SP  
United Kingdom

# Executive Summary

**An estimated 77 million children under 15, on average, had their lives severely disrupted by a natural disaster or an armed conflict, each year, between 1991 and 2000. Millions of children were made homeless, lost loved ones, received injuries, witnessed or experienced violence and suffered scarring psychological traumas. Over the same period, an estimated 115,000 children under 15 were killed each year by armed conflict and natural disasters. These numbers are conservative estimates, as children generally make up the largest segment of populations affected by disasters.**

Exposure to a disaster is a traumatic experience for any person, but particularly so for a child. During a disaster, the physical survival needs of children (safe water, food, shelter, clothing, primary health care) are usually given a very high priority. But observation indicates that other needs and rights, which are also essential for children, like being protected from abuse and harm, education, rest, leisure, privacy and the right to participate freely in matters which affect them are too often overlooked.

This is critical as childhood is a unique development period when an individual's main physical, mental, emotional and social development and growth take place. Damage at this stage often cannot be overcome later, further weakening vulnerable communities.



We therefore call on all parties involved in disaster relief and mitigation, and particularly the United Nations and member governments to:

- Safeguard all the rights of children throughout all types of disasters;
- Take account of the special needs and vulnerabilities of children, and also of their special capacities to be independent strong survivors capable of producing useful knowledge and actively contributing to disaster relief, recovery and preparedness efforts; and
- Adopt effective mechanisms to monitor and ensure the well-being of children in disasters.

This report presents three case studies which illustrate practical lessons from Plan's experience of working with children in disasters:

- The plight of children in the aftermath of the earthquakes in El Salvador in 2001 shows why **children's voices need to be heard in the aftermath of a disaster**;
- the results of a Rapid Education programme for internally displaced children, traumatised by the conflict in Sierra Leone clearly demonstrate why **children's education is an essential intervention in the disaster recovery process**; and



- the experiences of children in the floods in central Vietnam in 1999 show how **children's involvement in disaster preparedness is necessary to increase the long term resilience of their communities.**

The report ends with five sets of recommendations for organisations involved in disaster situations to help ensure children's rights are met during the emergency and beyond:

- The first set explains **the importance of children's participation in disaster preparedness, relief and recovery.** Such participation helps children deal with the trauma of the disaster, and releases their energy and knowledge to assist with the wider recovery process.
- The second set looks at **children, international law and disasters** and repeats the call to the United Nations and member governments to safeguard the rights of children in disasters and suggests four possible mechanisms to monitor and review the enforcement of child rights during disasters.
- The third set of recommendations explains the need to **raise public awareness about children in disasters** – the numbers of children killed or affected, their rights, particularly those of health and education, and the need for all parties, and especially governments to provide resources specifically aimed at

ensuring the long-term holistic development of children through a disaster situation.

- The fourth set contains detailed **good practices** for working with children in disasters which can be applied by organisations in the preparedness, relief and recovery phases of a disaster.
- The fifth set emphasises **the need for further research** into children, disasters and how best to safeguard their survival, protection, development and participation rights.

Plan is not a relief organisation but it has a mandate to always help its programme areas affected by disasters to recover. This report is motivated by the realisation that, given the extent of Plan's operations in 45 developing countries worldwide, disaster is likely to strike somewhere on a regular basis.

The report is also motivated by Plan's child focused community development approach to its programmes. Plan's experience of working with children throughout the developing world unequivocally indicates that children have much to offer – much more than adults expect. The quotes from children used throughout this report indicate how perceptive they are – they only need to be asked – and how much they can contribute to their own and their community's recovery.





# Chapter 1: Children in Disasters<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Floods, droughts, famines, earthquakes, hurricanes, war. Whatever the season there always appears to be a natural disaster or armed conflict somewhere in the world, disrupting the lives of thousands. Invariably, at some stage during the media coverage of the event, footage or pictures of affected children will be shown. Children with stick limbs and pot-bellies, weakened by hunger till they are unable to flick away the flies that converge on their tears. Children clambering over the rubble of houses destroyed by earthquakes trying to salvage something. Children screaming with terror at the sound of nearby gunshots. They are the most harrowing and heart-rending images of a disaster or armed conflict, and ones that stay in our mind long after a disaster is over. They are the images that relief agencies often use to solicit the public to donate funds to help. As such, they have become familiar images – “icons” of a disaster.

**“I don’t know why these people are handing us proposals on children right now. This is an emergency! We don’t have time to worry about children’s needs right now.”**

Senior bilateral aid official  
visiting earthquake area in  
El Salvador

The International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies states in the 2001 World Disaster Report that, on average, 242 million people were affected by natural disasters or armed conflict, **each year**, between 1991 and 2000. Of this number, at least 76.5 million were children under the age of 15<sup>2</sup>, the vast majority of whom, some 75 million, lived in developing countries.

**“Disaster:  
A situation or event, which  
overwhelms local capacity,  
necessitating a request to  
national or international  
level for external  
assistance.”**

ICRC, World Disaster Report  
2001

This number is probably a conservative estimate as it assumes that the affected population has the same distribution as the population in normal times – but this is generally not the case, and disasters and armed conflict tend to affect women and children disproportionately. There is little global data on the breakdown of affected populations by age, but a recent study by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR 2002) estimated that half of the population in refugee camps were children. This implies that children form one of the largest segments of populations affected by natural disasters or armed conflicts.

From the same sources, some 115,000 children on average were killed by armed conflict or natural disasters each year between 1991 and 2000. Again, the vast majority of them, some 113,000, lived in developing countries. Armed conflict was responsible for around 75% of the deaths, or around 85,000 children each year. Natural and man-made technical disasters were responsible for the deaths of 30,000 children each year.

<sup>1</sup> Amer Jabry is the editor of this report and the author of this chapter and the final chapter. He is a development consultant whose main areas of work are strategic planning for non-governmental organisations, child poverty issues and the application of information and communication technology in development. He was Plan’s Programme Policy Advisor from 1996 to 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Calculated using UNDP data for the percentage of population under 15, which generally varies between 20% and 40% depending on the country.

While armed conflict was responsible for more deaths than natural disasters, natural disasters affected almost seven times more people. From the World Disasters Report, of the 76.5 million children affected each year, some 10 million were affected by conflict, whereas around 66.5 million were affected by natural disasters.

With compelling images and such vast numbers of affected children, the assumption would be that children took priority in relief efforts and subsequent rehabilitation and recovery efforts – but this has not proven to be the case. Research, studies and good practices on how to address children’s particular vulnerabilities and capacities in times of disaster are very few in number when compared to the number of children affected.

This report looks into why this is the case, and the role of child rights during and after natural disasters and armed conflicts. The report provides examples of what can be done to address children’s capacities and vulnerabilities in three detailed case studies and ends with a series of recommendations.

## Crises, emergency responses and children

Exposure to a disaster is a traumatic experience for any person, but particularly so for a child. Childhood is a unique development period when an individual’s main physical, mental, emotional and social development and growth take place. Damage at this stage often cannot be overcome later. Children living under the threat of a disaster, whether an American child fearing further terror attacks or an El Salvadoran child fearing further earthquakes, or a child from Sierra Leone fearing further rebel attacks or a child from Vietnam fearing further floods, all experience harmful psychological and emotional impacts that often scar children for life. Therefore interventions to ensure the survival of children after a disaster are very necessary, **but not sufficient** to ensure that the disaster does not hinder their overall development.

### Common responses of children to disasters:

#### Toddlers

- Regression in behaviour
- Decreased appetite
- Nightmares
- Muteness
- Clinging
- Irritability
- Exaggerated startle response.

#### School age children

- Marked reactions of fear and anxiety
- Increased hostility with siblings
- Somatic complaints (e.g. stomach aches)
- Sleep disorders
- School problems
- Decreased interest in peers, hobbies
- Social withdrawal
- Apathy
- Re-enactment via play
- Post traumatic stress disorder

#### Adolescents

- Decreased interest in social activities peers, hobbies, school
- Inability to feel pleasure
- Decline in responsible behaviours
- Rebellion, behaviour problems
- Somatic complaints
- Eating disorders
- Change in physical activities (both increase and decrease)
- Confusion
- Lack of concentration
- Risk taking behaviours
- Post traumatic stress disorder

Source: Helping the Children – A Practical Handbook for Complex Humanitarian Emergencies. Edited by Anna Mandalakas, 1999



But while the physical survival needs of children (safe water, food, shelter, clothing, primary health care) and especially young children are usually given a very high priority during a disaster or armed conflict, there are few actual examples of disaster interventions that go beyond this to consider children **holistically** – as worthwhile actors, with special needs but also with special capacities to be independent strong survivors capable of producing useful knowledge and actively contributing to disaster relief and recovery efforts.

Why is this so? Heather MacLeod in a paper on the **Holistic Care of Children in Complex Humanitarian Emergencies** states that “Emergency responses to health crises and provision of relief food or household items have a long history. Many people are experienced in these disciplines – but when it comes to specialised assistance for children affected by war [or natural disasters] the pool of expertise is extremely small. Most staff learn on the spot. There is no diploma or degree that prepares people for addressing the holistic needs of children in conflict [or disaster] zones” (MacLeod 2000). Therefore, “it certainly is important that these needs are recognised and that adequate care and attention is paid to them, but to focus exclusively on physical requirements minimises equally important needs in other, less tangible areas” (MacLeod 2000). Similarly, in **Helping the Children – A practical Handbook for Complex Humanitarian Emergencies**, the authors state that “...well meaning [relief] workers often lack specific child health or child development expertise. They may be unaware that children move through many different development stages and therefore have rapidly changing needs...[and in particular that]... the brains of young children develop most rapidly in the first year of life and that most brain development is completed by age three” (Mandalakas 1999).

As a result, children in disasters are often the most affected segment of the population but also the most overlooked. A few examples:

A recent independent evaluation on the impact of the United Nation’s High Commission for Refugee’s (UNHCR) activities on meeting the rights and protection needs of children states: “UNHCR’s policies and guidelines on refugee children are strong and we found some good examples of work with refugee children. However, children, half of the Office’s population of concern, are often overlooked and considered ‘on-the-sidelines’ of core protection and assistance work” (UNHCR 2002).

The recent independent evaluation of the UK’s Disaster and Emergencies Committee (DEC) Gujarat earthquake appeal analyses the impact of the appeal by geographic area, by the caste and religion of those affected, by gender, on the elderly and on people with disabilities – **but not children**. In fact, the executive summary of the evaluation makes no mention of them at all (DEC 2001).

The Bangladesh Disaster Reports of 1998, 1999 and 2000 hardly mention children in their combined 680 pages, despite two of the reports showing children swimming in flood waters on the cover, and numerous pictures of children in disaster situations inside them (Bangladesh Disaster Reports 1998; 1999; 2000).

The **Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response (Sphere project)** manual, while containing excellent and detailed guidelines on the survival needs of children, and mentioning the Convention on the Rights of the Child as one of its guiding principles, makes only a perfunctory reference “that women, men and children are regularly consulted and involved in monitoring activities” but does not go beyond this into any detail (Sphere Project 2000).

These examples are typical of a disaster literature that confines children to three areas: they are subsumed within the studies on women in disasters; they are contained within the “medicalised” narrative of disaster which limits children to trauma, psychological and psychiatric studies and social work, all of which focus on how adults can return the children to “normal life”; and as soon as possible; and they are used in the media’s representation of disasters, where children, and the single child become “icons” of suffering and disaster – passive “victims” who need rescuing by outsiders (Marten 2001).

## The rights of children during natural disasters and armed conflicts

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), established in 1990, and ratified by all but two countries, guarantees children inalienable rights in all circumstances. These rights are very wide ranging and the ones of particular relevance to children affected by disasters or armed conflict include:

- **Survival rights:** Children have a right to life, to survival and to attainable standards of health and living<sup>3</sup>.
- **Protection rights:** Children have a right to a name and nationality from birth, to an identity, and to not being separated from their families. They also have a right to be protected from abuse, from abduction and trafficking, from torture and unlawful imprisonment, from armed conflict and conscription, from sexual exploitation, from economic exploitation, from narcotics, and to be given special consideration when in conflict with the law. The Convention also makes special mention of the right to recovery and reintegration of children affected by armed conflict, and the rights to protect unaccompanied children, refugee children and the right of children with disabilities to special care<sup>4</sup>.
- **Development rights:** Children have a right to develop and to get an education directed towards the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential and for a respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. The Convention also emphasises the right of children to enjoy their own culture, religion and language. Children also have a right to rest, leisure and privacy<sup>5</sup>.
- **Participation rights:** Children have a right to participate in and express their views freely in all matters affecting them, in the media of their own choice, in accordance with their age and maturity.  
The Convention also assures them of the right of freedom of thought, conscience, association, peaceful assembly and access to suitable mass media<sup>6</sup>.

The CRC obliges States Parties to undertake all appropriate measures to implement the rights recognised in the Convention in a non-discriminatory way with the best interests of the child as a primary consideration<sup>7</sup>.

At times of disasters and armed conflicts, children are at their most vulnerable and therefore it is when not only their right to survival, but all their rights, and especially those listed above most need to be enforced by State and other parties dealing with the emergency in question.

<sup>3</sup> Articles 6, 24 and 27. <sup>4</sup> Articles 7, 8, 9, 19, 20, 22, 23, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39 and 40. <sup>5</sup> Articles 6, 16, 28, 29, 30, and 31.

<sup>6</sup> Articles 12, 13, 14, 15 and 17. <sup>7</sup> Articles 2, 3 and 4.



In reality, there has been “little improvement during the last 30 years in assessments and programmes related to the special needs of children in complex humanitarian emergencies” (Mandalakas 1999). There are a number of reasons for this, which apply to children generally, but are particularly relevant during times of natural disasters and armed conflict:

- “Many violations of children’s rights are only possible because of the invisibility of children. In general, children are less able to draw attention to violations of their rights because they are disenfranchised and may lack the verbal skills or necessary contacts to make their protests heard. In addition, many societies have not established accessible and effective channels of communication for children.” (Van Bueren 1998)
- Violations of children’s rights occur on other levels which sometimes prove more difficult to identify. A failure to perceive children as separate human beings has led to breaches of their rights where actions are purportedly taken in the genuine belief that they are in the best interests of the child.” (Van Bueren 1998)
- State resources in most developing countries are limited in normal times, and at times of natural disaster or armed conflict become even more scarce – severely hampering what the State can provide for affected children.

Nevertheless, the enforcement of children’s rights must be accorded the highest priority in times of disaster, not only because of the very large number of children affected, but also because through the long process of recovery and rehabilitation from a disaster, systematic attention to their rights is one of the most effective ways to ensure that the complex cycle of human related factors that helped precipitate the disaster is broken.

### **The roles of children in natural disasters and armed conflict – a summary of the report’s case studies**

The report’s three case studies illustrate examples of the application of child rights in three recent disasters: the earthquakes in El Salvador, the conflict in Sierra Leone and the floods in Vietnam. The lessons learnt from these case studies are:

- **Children’s voices need to be heard in the aftermath of a disaster** (El Salvador);
- **Children’s education is an essential intervention in the disaster recovery process** (Sierra Leone); and
- **Children’s involvement in disaster preparedness is necessary to increase the long term resilience of their communities** (Vietnam).

#### How can children help in reconstruction processes?

- By being dedicated, working hard, removing loose stones and walls, helping to clean up refuse and rubble, planting trees and plants
- Expressing what we feel, helping to build our houses, asking others to collaborate in rebuilding our communities, encouraging those who feel sad
- Helping each other, encouraging our parents, not being worried, not being afraid, helping other kids who feel scared
- Bringing water and food or whatever to those who are rebuilding
- Organizing clean-up campaigns, dynamics to make us happier, starting recreational groups
- Welcoming the institutions that are helping us reconstruct and not wasting what they give to us
- Holding educational meetings, learning to draw, color, read, write and express our opinions
- Helping other communities
- Caring for our little brothers and sisters while our parents are working
- Organizing ourselves to rebuild our school

Children from 10 shelters and communities in El Salvador soon after the 2001 earthquakes

What follows is a brief summary of each case study:

#### 1) Coping in the aftermath of calamity – the earthquakes of El Salvador

Experience has shown that the most important factor in successful recovery from a disaster, whether natural or manmade, is to seek out and **rely** on the capacities and resources of local communities, even in the immediate aftermath of a disaster. Andersen in **Rising from the Ashes** states: “The basic rule for an NGO beginning an emergency response is: assume there are some important local capacities and set into motion a process of finding out what these are” (Andersen 1998).

As mentioned above, children tend to make up a large proportion of a population affected by a disaster. In some developing countries, this proportion is greater than 50%. Thus overlooking children potentially ignores a large part of local **capacity** at a time of disaster when it is most needed.

Overlooking children also prevents relief efforts from properly identifying the specific vulnerabilities and the need for protection of a substantial portion of the affected population.

Children are not a homogeneous group, and their **vulnerabilities** will be a function of many factors like: their age; whether they are girls or boys; whether they live in urban or rural settings; their ethnicity or tribe; whether they are earning or non-earning; etc. It will also depend on the traditional role of children in the society, and whether that role and position has become worse (e.g. more suppressed) or better as a result of the disaster.

In addition, some children are more vulnerable than others in a disaster or conflict. In particular, those showing signs of trauma; those at risk of abandonment or separation; those living alone or in a child headed household; those with disabilities, particularly if they were in centres or with more vulnerable families; those who were placed in foster families, street children and children in conflict with the law (MacLeod 2000).

Such oversight reduces the efficacy of relief efforts. Therefore by ensuring that **children’s voices are heard in the aftermath of a disaster** better account can be taken of their specific capacities and vulnerabilities.

**Chapter Two** of this report describes the findings of consultations with 185 children in shelters and communities shortly after the earthquakes which hit **El Salvador** in January and February 2001. They illustrate how perceptive and articulate children can be about their situation when asked, and how they envisage they can help in disaster relief and recovery efforts. The findings also illustrate how consulting children helps identify problems unanticipated by the adults, and as a result, helps to protect children and ensure their rights to survive, develop and participate are met in the aftermath of a disaster.

## 2) The importance of education in disaster rehabilitation – The Rapid Education Programme in Sierra Leone

It is now widely accepted that disaster situations cause psychological trauma in children. Man-made disasters like armed conflicts and complex humanitarian emergencies are associated with a higher incidence of psychological dysfunction than natural disasters, as in the latter, children are more likely to find caring adults and assistance. The experience of psychological trauma varies depending on the age and nature of the child. While the earliest signs of trauma begin during and immediately after a disaster, it may take decades for children to process the experience. In some cases, the children may never completely recover. This results in populations that are less productive and less capable of dealing with the same issues that triggered disasters in the first place. Until this loop is interrupted, it will be difficult to prevent further calamities (Mandalakas 1999).

UNESCO (2000) makes a compelling case, which Plan put into practice in Sierra Leone that **children's education is an essential intervention in the disaster recovery process**. UNESCO argues that education is one of the most effective – and cost effective – ways of providing disaster affected children with a semblance of normality and daily routine as well as, in the best cases, providing them with the knowledge they need to help them cope with the disaster.

**Chapter Three** describes a response to the civil war in **Sierra Leone**, where Plan built upon spontaneous efforts in internally displaced people's camps to educate their children by initiating a programme of educational assistance that was specifically developed for the displaced and traumatised children in the camps. In conjunction with Sierra Leone's Ministry of Education and with the Federation of African Women Educationalists (FAWE), Plan implemented a rapid education programme as an emergency intervention for war-affected children at a critical early stage in educational reconstruction. Drawing upon the experiences of earlier prototype programmes implemented by UNESCO in Somalia and Rwanda, the rapid education programme comprises a curriculum of basic literacy and numeracy, 'peace education', and measures aimed at reducing the psycho-social trauma which many children have experienced through their exposure to armed conflict. The case study describes the process of implementing the programme and some of the key dilemmas it faced.

## 3) Disaster preparedness and Safe Villages in central Vietnam

After a disaster, local people, including the children and youths, start rebuilding their lives immediately, and therefore it is their capacities that play the key role in disaster recovery and subsequent disaster preparedness, and not the external aid that comes in. The capacities of the children are often essential for families in the aftermath of a disaster – but are usually overlooked, or can often be abused as children are compelled to enter forms of hazardous labour to ensure their survival and the survival of their families. In Sierra Leone boys were often forced to become conscripts, and girls forced to become



**“Resilience: a universal capacity which allows a person, group or community to prevent, minimise or overcome the damaging effects of adversity.”**

The International Resilience Project

“wives”. In recent interviews with refugee Afghan boys and girls, Plan discovered that all of them were working as labourers or market sellers to provide income for their families, often at the expense of their schooling.

Therefore disaster responses need to acknowledge these contributions, and work with the communities, families and children to ensure that they do not involve hazardous labour.

One key way of doing this is to work with all parties to formally channel children’s contributions into disaster preparedness plans and interventions as is illustrated in the case study on floods in Vietnam in Chapter Four. This makes sense, simply on the basis that the children playing in the rubble today will have to sustain disaster mitigation efforts in the near future. But also, acknowledging children’s ability to be providers of useful information and actors in the development and recovery of their environment is therapeutic, and not just for the children. Activities that focus on helping children are usually an excellent way to bring diverse interests, communities and constituencies together (USAID 2000). Therefore **Children’s involvement in disaster preparedness is necessary to increase the long term resilience of their communities.**

**Chapter Four** describes how, two years after the great floods of 1999 in Central **Vietnam**, Plan is working with all sections of village communities, and particularly children, to capture local knowledge and practices on how best to cope with floods as a basis for creating village level disaster preparedness plans. The case study describes how capacities and vulnerabilities at village level play a key role in how local inhabitants, and particularly children cope with natural disasters, and how Plan’s “Safe Village” model intends to help them to prepare for the next one.

Heeding these three messages is an important step towards ensuring the rights of children in disasters are met. Not only the rights to survive and be protected, but also the rights to continue to develop through access to education and the right to participate, in accordance with their evolving capacity in decision making processes at local and national levels (Annan 2001).

## Plan and disasters

Plan, established in 1937, is an international humanitarian, child-focused development organisation without religious, political or governmental affiliation. Plan works with children, sponsors, communities, partner organisations, donors and governments in 60 countries on all continents to realise its Vision of “...a world in which all children realise their full potential in societies which respect people’s rights and dignities”.

Plan’s Mission is to strive to achieve lasting improvements in the quality of life of deprived children in developing countries through a process that unites people across cultures and adds meaning and value to their lives by:

- enabling deprived children, their families and their communities to meet their basic needs and to increase their ability to participate in and benefit from their societies;
- fostering relationships to increase understanding and unity among people of different cultures and countries; and
- promoting the rights and interests of the world’s children.



Resources raised through the affiliation of approximately one million families worldwide in Plan’s child sponsorship programme, together with grants from donors, enable Plan to work with local communities and support government activities and local NGOs in 45 developing countries, and millions of children benefit from the approximately US\$300 million Plan invests each year for programmes in health, education, habitat, livelihood and building relationships.

Plan is not a relief organisation but it has a mandate to always help programme areas affected by disasters to recover. This report is motivated by the realisation that, given the extent of Plan’s operations, disaster is likely to strike somewhere in the Plan world on a regular basis.

**The report is also motivated by Plan’s child focused community development approach to its programmes. Plan’s experience of working with children throughout the developing world unequivocally indicates that children have much to offer – much more than adults expect. The quotes from children used throughout this report indicate how perceptive they are – they only need to be asked. Therefore, fundamental to this approach is that poor children and their families are central participants in all the development processes which affect them, including processes of disaster relief, recovery and preparedness.**

## Plan countries which are prone to or affected by disasters

### Plan International

<b>Hydro-meteorological</b> (floods, cyclones, hurricanes, etc)	<b>Geophysical</b> (earthquakes, volcanoes, etc)	<b>Conflict</b> (war, severe civil unrest, refugees, internally displaced people etc)	<b>Drought / Famine</b> (weather related but man-exacerbated)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● China</li> <li>● Vietnam</li> <li>● Philippines</li> <li>● Honduras</li> <li>● India</li> <li>● Bangladesh</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Honduras</li> <li>● El Salvador</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Guinea</li> <li>● East Timor</li> <li>● Sierra Leone</li> <li>● Zimbabwe</li> <li>● Nepal</li> <li>● Pakistan</li> <li>● Sri Lanka</li> <li>● Indonesia</li> <li>● Haiti</li> <li>● Colombia</li> <li>● Guinea Bissau</li> <li>● Sudan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Zimbabwe</li> <li>● Zambia</li> <li>● Malawi</li> <li>● Ethiopia</li> <li>● Sudan</li> </ul>



# Chapter 2: Coping in the Aftermath of Calamity

## The earthquakes of El Salvador<sup>8</sup>

**“My experience was really bad. We’d gone to cut firewood. We were taking a break on the grass, and I said – ‘Hey! It’s almost lunchtime!’ We were with my mom. As we started walking downhill, single file, the earthquake started. My brother Daniel was behind me. I was thinking of carrying him up on my shoulders. He was a little ways up above me on the hill. I heard him shout ‘Mama! Mama! Mama!’ A big rock fell on top of him and he died suffocated under it. Now we are just praying that we can keep going. We are cleaning everything up. We just keep working. At night the earth trembles and it scares me.”**

Story by a 12 year old boy in the Guadalupe 2 Community, La Libertad, El Salvador



The destruction in El Salvador caused by the January 13, 2001 earthquake, which measured 7.9 on the Richter scale, and the follow-up quake of 6.9 that hit the already devastated country exactly one month later on February 13, 2001 left more than 1000 dead and several thousands injured. An estimated 1.5 million people (25% of the population) were affected, more than 185,000 homes (11% of total houses) were destroyed while another 149,000 suffered structural damage. Jobs were lost, roads left inaccessible, and schools, hospitals, health centres and churches ruined. Hundreds of poor communities were left without basic services. The total loss to the nation was put at US\$1.66 billion, about 10% of GDP. And as the earth continued to shake for days that turned into weeks and into months, the power of the earth’s movement left an entire people traumatised.

The Department of La Libertad, where Plan works, is a mountainous zone, but housing design and placement did not take account of the seismology of the area. The January 13th earthquake caused a death toll of 549, with 1,354 injured; 14,087 destroyed homes, and 687 buried homes. Health units, schools, Early Childhood Care and Development Centres, latrines and water systems were rendered useless after the event. Many streets were inaccessible and the income levels of the population were drastically reduced.

Although everyone suffered, the population most affected by the earthquakes and their consequent destruction was that of the children and the youth. Generally neglected, their situation took a critical turn for the worse after the earthquakes as a result of widespread adherence to the idea that the country was in an emergency state and therefore, specialised work with children was not necessary. This made the children invisible, and contributed to the perception that the children, who make up half the entire population, do not form part of that same earthquake-affected population.

<sup>8</sup> Linda Raftree, former Sponsorship and Grants Manager in Plan El Salvador, Simba Machingaidze, former Country Director of Plan El Salvador, Laura del Valle former Programme Unit Manager for Plan La Libertad, El Salvador and Fritz Foster, the Country Director of Plan Guinea are the principal contributors to Chapter 2.



## A closer look at the situation of children and young people

In the earthquake-affected communities and inside the shelters that were set up as a result of the first earthquake on January 13, children and young people were not a priority. Most communities in La Libertad had local community organisations; however, the emergency and crisis situation brought to light the poor management capacity of these organisations in the face of a disaster. The needs and realities of children and young people were not contemplated or considered important. Children's voices were not heard in the broader sense as there was no opportunity for them to be listened to, nor an environment in which they could feel comfortable expressing themselves in front of the authorities of the shelters or within their families.

Instead, children's needs were put off to a future moment when stability would permit children and their well-being to be a priority. Unfortunately, history tells us that in El Salvador, stability is a very distant dream; and therefore, waiting for a calm moment to make children's well being a primary focus may mean that it never happens.

In the majority of the shelters, families were placed on open dusty fields in tents or temporary houses made of tin and heavy black plastic that increased the intense heat – a situation that was extremely difficult for children. Children complained amongst themselves<sup>9</sup> about the food, its taste, and having to stand in long lines under the hot sun to get their lunch.

Only after several weeks were permanent recreation activities for children begun in the shelters – this was not a priority at the beginning for the Municipal Emergency Committees who were administering the shelters with the support of other institutions and organisations. These activities were generated for children under 12 years old and at the initiative of civil society institutions such as Plan, which asked: What about the youth? What was offered to them? In what areas would they have liked to participate? How could their energy have been harnessed to the greater good of all?

<sup>9</sup> Youth participants in a children's radio programme from the distant community of Guarjila, Chalatenango, visited the Agua Fría Shelter on February 24, 2001, to interview children affected by the earthquakes.

Lack of space in the shelters, whether for recreation or education, was a constant limitation as was the lack of proper security that would have allowed children to move safely around the shelters without fearing violence or abuse. The risks present in the urban shelters included contact with drugs, prostitution, rape and abduction<sup>10</sup>. The population seemed too traumatised to organise itself and take its own preventive measures, and left this responsibility to the police and armed forces.

The formal education and family orientation situation in the affected communities and the shelters left a lot to be desired. First, the Ministry of Education established a policy forbidding formal education within the shelters because the Ministry felt it would give the families a sense of permanence. Second, the Ministry of Education was incapable of offering educational alternatives to children whose schools were in hazardous conditions. In addition to the real possibility of danger to damaged infrastructure from subsequent earthquakes or tremors, the nervous disposition of the population in general meant that families did not feel comfortable sending their children to school. The added fear of finding their few possessions gone from their damaged homes or temporary shelters if they were left without a guardian caused many families to keep their children at home to watch over their belongings rather than sending them to school. The Ministry of Education postponed the school year several times due to these factors, yet did not offer a viable alternative to allow children to maintain their educational continuity.

Children also suffered within their families due to their unstable situation. Their parents' concerns were reflected in their own faces as worries about finances, jobs, family and food kept tempers short and nerves on edge, and caused insomnia, stomach aches, headaches and other symptoms of post-traumatic stress. Children too were restless and irritable. They clung to their mothers, crying frequently, afraid to be alone. Many were too quiet, and others too active. They had sleeping difficulties and suffered from nightmares. Adults frequently did not understand that the behaviour of their children was a result of the trauma suffered. Sometimes they reacted with violence towards them and against them, increasing children's sense of vulnerability and sense of abandonment, and closing opportunities for dialogue and family bonding and strengthening.

<sup>10</sup> Situation in "El Cafetalón" in January, discussed in meeting with the Municipal Emergency Committee and support organizations. The measures taken were increased security and control from the National Civilian Police and the Armed Forces.

## The voice of children affected by the earthquakes

**“Before, my community was always happy, beautiful, warm and full of love for children. After, there was sadness. Everything was buried. There was no warmth and there was death.”**

**“My community was very beautiful. We were all happy and content. Every day I would play with my friends. But now it is all destroyed and there is no laughter. Everything is silent and sad. Here, everything has fallen down.”**

**“My community is called Santa Eduvigis. Now it is abandoned and destroyed. There is not a single safe place there now.”**

Children’s ideas on how their communities were before and after the earthquakes

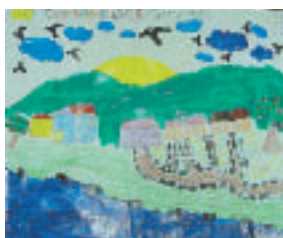
To understand how the post-earthquake situation affected children and youth from their own perspective, it is not enough to observe them, study them, talk with their parents and teachers, have their best interests in mind, or have been a child oneself. It is necessary to communicate directly with them in an atmosphere of trust that provides them with the confidence to participate and voice their opinions and needs. In order to hear children’s voices and attempt to understand their vision of the situation from their own point of view, Plan El Salvador facilitated 10 consultations with 185 children and adolescents in shelters and communities affected by the earthquakes in the Department of La Libertad in February and March, 2001<sup>11</sup>.

One of the questions discussed was “What is your greatest fear?” The responses could be divided into three fundamental ideas: another earthquake; losing my mother/something could happen to my family; and dying.

The participants in the consultations also spoke of their greatest desires. Their responses could be arranged into four principal themes: to have a home/to be back in my home; that there are no more earthquakes/that things calm down; to go to school; to go to heaven with God.



**“My community before the earthquake was happy and without disasters. The families had no pain.” Said a young girl from the Guadalupe II community during the drawing exercise when children portrayed their communities “before” and “after” the earthquakes.**



**Drawing of their Future Community, done by children in the El Conacaste Community, Municipality of Comasagua, Department of La Libertad.**

<sup>11</sup> These were:

- in the El Cafetalón Shelter, Municipality of Santa Tecla, with children between 7 and 10 years old and adolescents from 12-16 years old from the Guadalupe I, Guadalupe II, Santa Eduvigis, San Martin and Los Amates Communities.
- in the Agua Fría Shelter, Municipality of Lourdes Colon, with children between 7 and 10 years old and youth from 12-16 years old from the Colón, Las Moritas, Santa Eduvigis, Cobanal, Las Moras, Madrid, Chiltiupan, Colonia San Rafael, Moritas 2 and San José del Río Communities;
- consultation with children and youth ages 8-15 in Colonia Guadalupe II
- consultations with children (Vista Hermosa, Mun. of Comasagua; and Lomas de Santiago, Mun. of San Juan Opico)
- with adolescents (Vista Hermosa and El Conacaste, Mun. of Comasagua; Las Granadillas, Mun. of New San Salvador; El Mahajual, Mun. of Puerto de la Libertad together with Entre Ríos, Mun. of Lourdes Colon)

**“My family and I were bringing firewood, it was morning. My mother and father were in front, and my brother, my little brother who was six years old, and I were coming behind them when the earthquake started. I told my brother to run to the house, but he never made it. I heard him when he shouted three times “Mama! Mama! Mama!” And when I turned to look, he was buried. He had one hand sticking out, but I was also buried up to my waist and I couldn’t help him. He died when a rock fell on his neck and barbed wire cut his throat. I am sad for losing my little brother, but I give thanks to God because I am still alive.**

14 year old boy, Colonia Guadalupe II

Staff also asked children to describe, by writing and drawing, how their communities were before the earthquakes, and how they were afterwards. The responses demonstrated something very clear: children remembered their communities of before as perfect, happy, warm places that were full of life. They identified their post-earthquake communities as destroyed, fallen, cold, lifeless, abandoned, insecure and sad. “Children, using simple and straightforward language, often clumsy but always meaningful brushstrokes, expressed how much the earthquakes had changed their lives.<sup>12</sup>”

After having expressed how their community was before and after the earthquakes, work groups were formed. Children selected a co-ordinator within their group, and they organised themselves to draw how they would like to see their community in the future, and they discussed what they could do to attain that status. The drawings expressed the faith, hope and optimism that the children had in their future.

At the same time, children have a vision of their own role in the reconstruction of their communities. “We want to collaborate together with you adults, with our parents,” commented one boy in Las Granadillas, “but we don’t want to do things that can put us in danger, like carrying heavy objects.”

Taking the children and youth at their word, grand possibilities are present in terms of their participation in the reconstruction of their communities. The children spoke not only of physical activities that they could carry out, but they also talked of attitudes: solidarity, self-help, helping others, organisation, learning, recreation, and core values (see box). Their offers and interest must be seriously considered – youth must be included in reconstruction instead of being left on the side lines as usually happens. At the same time, these activities must be evaluated beforehand to ensure that they are adequate to the ages and capacities of the children involved so that risky or potentially hazardous activities are avoided.

In addition to the exercises on expression of fears and desires and the “before and after” communities, a story telling exercise was conducted about “what happened to me on the day of the earthquake.”

These and other stories show the anguish that some children suffered during the earthquake. The permanent scar and the profound sadness that the earthquake has left in children are clear in their expressions of their experiences.

<sup>12</sup> Comment by Katia Zacapa, facilitator of the children’s consultations, February 2001.

## The Rights of the Child: Survival, Protection, Development and Participation

El Salvador, as a country that signed the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child, has the obligation to consider the best interest of the child at all times, including times of emergencies or disasters. The Convention speaks of four fundamental areas that child rights can be categorised into: survival, protection, development and participation. During and after a disaster, families, state and civil society must not forget about children and youth's access to their fundamental rights. The state should also ensure that international co-operation goes to support programmes and efforts that benefit children. But when visiting communities and shelters, it was apparent that although there were attempts, children's rights were not being considered in all cases.

But in spite of the lack of attention given to children after the earthquakes, many discourses were heard in their favour. Some, without seeing children's realities first hand, proposed charitable actions in their favour. Others used children's vulnerability for their own benefit, to obtain international financial aid, to gain a positive image in the media, to sell more newspapers by capitalising on particularly gruesome suffering by children, or to increase their television audience, without moving from discourse to concrete actions. A particularly powerful example of this were television pictures of several children being held in the air by adults who were on the front line of demonstrators protesting against perceived improper management of international relief aid.

Within the heated discussion on the unequal and political distribution of international aid that took place in El Salvador after the earthquakes, one could question whether children's particular needs were even considered by most solicitors or grantors of international aid, and how many children actually benefited from the generalised humanitarian aid that was proffered.



## Survival and Protection

After analysing the information collected from the 10 children's consultations conducted by Plan in February and March, 2001, and other information, the need to carry out psychological support programmes with children and youth was apparent as was the importance of housing and the feeling of security that it provides to children.

During the emergency relief stage, specific interventions to assure that children did not die were necessary. This included, of course, the practice of assuring that children are the first to be rescued in a situation of imminent danger. Children must be given adequate nutrition and medical attention with proper hygiene and sanitation in dignified shelter conditions. The shelters set up immediately after the earthquakes sought to provide the latter, but children found them very uncomfortable and felt vulnerable in them.

**"We're not only asking the authorities to respect our rights. We also ask our own families to respect them since they are often the worst violators."**

Youth, El Majahual  
Community

Inside the shelters, where overcrowded conditions are sometimes inevitable, there were insufficient protection measures for children. Mothers, accustomed to leaving their children closed up in their homes while they do errands or chores, sometimes did the same in the shelters. This measure is not adequate, even in normal times, however it was even more dangerous in the shelters because the tents were extremely hot and possibilities of heat stroke were very real. In addition, the set-up of the tents and the organisation of the shelters made sexual abuse a real possibility. Children could easily be abducted as they wandered through the camps. This was a problem in particular in one camp, where drastic measures had to be taken after a child was violated and another child was almost taken from the camp by a stranger. Children also commented to youth that visited them from the Guarjila Radio Programme that they had witnessed cases of abuse and violence inflicted by the entities that managed the shelter.

It is clear that El Salvador was experiencing an extremely difficult situation; however, certain basic conditions that would lead to dignified conditions for their inhabitants, and especially children and youth, were not provided in the shelters. One key factor that contributes to children's dignity is privacy. When children who were moved to better shelters were asked what they liked about the new shelters, they answered:



- “The bathrooms are better here because not everyone can see us.”
- “The latrines are better because there is a plastic curtain.”

These comments show the importance that privacy holds for children, even in an emergency situation. The simple hanging of a plastic curtain on the door of the latrine, or of separating bathrooms and shower rooms between males and females, is an important measure that allows children and youth to maintain their privacy, which in turn contributes to their sense of dignity. Privacy and separate areas also help to prevent sexual abuse against children.

Other key recommendations to emerge were:

- The importance of having Child Friendly Spaces or Childcare Centres in the shelters to allow mothers to leave their small children in the care of other mothers while they did their chores or errands;
- The need for educational campaigns to educate mothers on the possibilities of danger that their children could face in the shelters;
- Skilled staff that can organise and monitor actions related to children should be placed in shelters.

Non-governmental organisations should watch out for children and their rights, while government institutions should also be present in the shelters to protect children and to handle cases of abuse.

## Development and Participation

In general, an attempt at covering children's basic survival and protection needs was made in the shelters and communities. Children in one shelter; however, spoke of their desires in the area of development.

- “We want to go to school.”
- “We don't have anywhere to play.”
- “We'd like to have a ball.”

In these commentaries, and in the section on **The Voice of Children Affected by the Earthquake** above, children and youths' interest in helping to rebuild their communities, attend school and having recreational areas is clearly seen – all vital areas in terms of their healthy development.

A disaster provides opportunities for children and youth to participate in identifying problems, prioritising them, proposing solutions, implementing actions, monitoring and evaluating interventions, and providing a unique outlook that can increase the quality of these interventions. It also provides opportunities to allow them to identify their own responsibilities towards resolving these problems.

By offering children the opportunity to participate more fully in disaster situations, we cease to be interpreters of their needs and thoughts, and instead begin to accompany them in the design of actions and adequate strategies that strengthen their capacity to reflect, contribute, and lead their own development processes. This in turn increases the possibilities of sustainable educational processes on disasters and their prevention. It also contributes to the democratisation process through the formation of young leaders with a vision and knowledge of development.

### Addressing children's views in the recovery process:

Immediately after the earthquake, Plan conducted a community by-community assessment of the damage as part of its commitment to an integrated and child-centred reconstruction process that would lead to a better El Salvador than the one before January 13 2001. This process included group work with adults, women and children. The 10 children's consultations mentioned above were part of this process. Problems were identified and priorities established, as well as solutions and areas for participation by each group.

**“We're not looking for someone to come and help us. What we want is to participate, support and collaborate in the reconstruction of our community and country. We're out here, working. Maybe no one has noticed, but we are out here working hard, putting in our efforts, doing something.”**

**Member of the Socio-Ecological Group Mahajual Community, Puerto de La Libertad**

La Libertad, El Salvador

Upon finalising their group work, the different community sectors would come together and combine their work to form a community plan that took into consideration the viewpoints of men, women and children. Children's views and opinions were therefore an inherent part of the plans in the design as well as solution and evaluation stages. The earthquake disaster revealed that children are more than willing to participate when they realise that their views and ideas are valued and that they are part of the world that has a responsibility of shaping the future.

This methodology was in large part developed after all Plan La Libertad staff participated in a training programme called "Child Pro" (funded by the Department for International Development – DfID). In this programme, staff are trained to facilitate and create an environment in the community where children's opinions and viewpoints are seen as important and valuable. Among the programmes that were subsequently funded by external co-operation were

- child-centred reconstruction plans including housing projects where children took part in housing design;
- psychological recuperation programmes where youth are trained to work with children to reduce the effects of earthquake trauma;
- hygiene programmes where youngsters helped promote improved hygiene practices;
- children and youth's participation in disaster mitigation and education.

Perhaps one of the most important efforts conducted after the earthquakes was the movement to listen to children's views on the reconstruction process at the municipal level. Plan El Salvador together with the local organisation, FUNDE, worked with 12 of the affected municipalities in La Libertad to develop municipal development plans to address reconstruction after the earthquake. All twelve municipal development plans incorporated the vision of children from the affected communities. The local mayors recognised that children's participation is a fundamental part of the municipal development plans and publicly agreed to incorporate children into the reconstruction process.

In addition, the communities, with Plan support, supervised reconstruction work and monitored and audited advances, successes, failures and lessons learnt. Communities also organised themselves to ensure that aid was not politicised or used for political gain by any parties. Finally, local governments and communities worked together and with Plan to improve zoning and precautionary measures and form and maintain disaster preparedness plans and networks to ensure that should there be another disaster, the communities will be better able to react.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

El Salvador is a country with a high propensity to disasters. The 1986 earthquake destroyed the majority of the capital and left 1,500 dead. The civil war that ended in 1992 left the majority of the country emotionally, psychologically, economically and ecologically devastated, and also left a legacy of crime and violence. In 1998, El Salvador suffered through Hurricane Mitch. Epidemics of cholera are experienced every few years, and in the year 2000 poor management of the dengue epidemic cost many lives, especially children's, and became another national emergency. Thus, this series of earthquakes was not a mere "acute" disaster. It was just another in the series of emergencies and disasters that El Salvador has experienced as a country.

Children, however, cannot wait for some imaginary moment in the future to be taken into account in terms of benefits or participation. There may never be an ideal moment, when the country is not in crisis, and when "the time is right" to think about children and their needs. Childhood is the most crucial development period in an individual's life. It is when an individual's main physical, mental, emotional and social development and growth takes place. Damage at this stage cannot be overcome later in life and children need to be considered in the midst of a crisis, not after, especially as they comprise over half of the entire population of El Salvador,

Plan understands that children and adolescents are actors in their own development, not mere recipients of actions led by adults. Working directly with children and youth and fostering their participation and expression of opinion about their situation allows a better understanding of what they experienced during and after a disaster. At the same time, after combining their perspectives with objective information collected from diverse sources, intervention programmes can be planned to contribute to children's survival, protection, development and active participation in a more realistic way.

For this reason, at the national, municipal, community and family levels, plans should exist, preferably plans that have budgets attached, to face these disasters in an integral way. A way for institutions, local and national governments, schools and other actors to incorporate a crosscutting vision of children and adolescents in the aspects of survival, protection, development and participation needs to be found. This requires that children and youth be valued as people with equal rights and with opinions of equal value as those of adults. It requires a self-examination of each individual working in the disaster situation, a pondering on the real value that we place on children and youth as actors who are capable and pro-active in their own development and the development of their countries. It implies sharing power and opening ourselves to the opinions of this half of the population. The results would be a more democratic El Salvador that would see greater levels of sustainable development.





# Chapter 3: The Importance of Education in Disaster Rehabilitation

## – The Rapid Education Programme in Sierra Leone<sup>13</sup>

### The effect of the war in Sierra Leone on children

**“This ECOMOG soldier is firing at a rebel, the rebel is firing at an Alpha Jet. This rebel has just cut this man’s hands off, see it there lying on the board? This other man has been killed, see him lying there? Then, this man has had his foot cut off, but he’s still carrying a bundle to escape. Now here, the rebel in his car: they’ve killed his friend so he laid him on top of the car and is now retreating with the body.”**

Sewa Fofanah, Primary Class 2, who drew such a picture in a Rapid Education class at the Trade Centre School IDP camp (Feb 2000)

The civil war in Sierra Leone between the government and self-proclaimed “rebel” groups started on the 23rd of March 1991 in the south-eastern town of Bomaru and lasted some ten years. During this time, the rebels took over most of the country, terrorising, looting and burning villages and systematically raping, maiming and murdering the inhabitants. As a result of this war, an estimated 2.1 million people, at least half of whom were children, become internally displaced or refugees in neighbouring countries. The rebels reached the height of their strength in January 1999 when they invaded the capital, Freetown, and destroyed a significant part of the east of the city, before being defeated by the West African peace-keeping force.

Civilians, including children, suffer in all wars. However the wars in Sierra Leone have been marked by appallingly high levels of atrocity, cruelty and sadistic behaviour, much of this quite deliberately directed against children and women.

The cruelty of the rebels knew no limits. The rebels asked their victims to choose between “short sleeves” and “long sleeves” when cutting off their arms. The youngest baby amputee was only four months old. It is also estimated that the rebels abducted between 5,000 and 7,000 children and forcibly conscripted them. Girls had to decide between being a soldier (a killer) or a wife (subject then to gang rape and other humiliation). The boys had to be soldiers. Drugs, alcohol and torture were used as means of persuasion (Bocum 2001).

In October 1999, Plan commissioned an assessment of the violence and psychological trauma experienced by 315 war-displaced children at four Internally Displaced People (IDP) camps in or near Freetown as a result of the January 1999 rebel invasion of the city.



<sup>13</sup> Belle'Aube Houinato, the Country Director of Plan Sierra Leone, Richard Maclure, Associate Professor, Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa, and Amadou Bocum, a former Country Director of Plan Sierra Leone are the principal contributors to this chapter.

**At the stream where children fetch drinking water in a small village in Pujehun, the children played funeral almost every week. They would wrap a stick with white clothing or take turns in wrapping themselves like a body ready for burial in the predominantly Muslim culture. They will take roles of Imam or Preacher, family members, mourners, etc and will weep and cry out for the person who died.**

A description of children living at the war front, where funerals were one of the few social activities they attend.

Source: Teacher's Guide to the RapidEd Programme

The results were truly horrifying: 80% of children suffered the death of a parent, sibling or other close relative; 74% saw someone being killed or injured by machetes and 68% saw someone being burned to death or tortured. More than a third of the children were forced to participate in the killings<sup>14</sup> (Gupta 2001).

Rape – including rape of very young girls and of boys and sexual assault was widespread. Nearly 10% of the girls in the Plan study spontaneously reported that they had been gang-raped by the rebels on several occasions. There is anecdotal evidence that many girls who were abducted by the rebels and raped were later rejected by their families and communities.

All this violence caused severe psychological trauma. 71% of the children saw pictures of their worst experience in their minds; 94% thought about their worst experience even when they did not want to; 72% were plagued by nightmares and bad dreams. Not surprisingly, 76% worried they might not live to be adults.

The children sampled, like all the other children in the camp schools, took part in the trauma healing components of Plan's Rapid Education Programme which is the subject of this chapter, with very positive results which are explained in more detail below.

## The effect of the war on children's education

The war in Sierra Leone caused most children to lose between two to three years of schooling and worsen an already precarious educational situation. Before the escalation of the war, Sierra Leone had an 80% illiteracy rate (88.7% for females, 69.3% for males). Less than 45 out of 100 children of school age entered into primary schools, out of whom only nine then entered secondary schools and only one made it to tertiary institutions (National Education Master Plan, Ministry of Youth, Education and Sports 1997).

During the war, Rebels targeted schools, health centres, churches and mosques. From surveys of schools carried out after the war by the Ministry of Youth, Education and Sports (MYES) in collaboration with UNICEF, it was apparent that hundreds were destroyed throughout the country, especially in the provinces. The tables, desks and benches in schools were used as firewood. Those school buildings which survived the burning were systematically looted of furniture. The zinc roofs of the buildings and any equipment were removed and sold (Bocum 2001).

<sup>14</sup> Plan's assessment of children's psychosocial condition was one of very few carried out in Sierra Leone. However copious anecdotal evidence suggests that many of the country's children have had similar experiences to those undergone by the children interviewed by Plan, and are suffering from the psychosocial consequences. Plan also commissioned a "rapid" assessment of the psychosocial condition of children in Moyamba District in July 2000 and this, plus anecdotal evidence, suggests that trauma levels amongst children there were comparable with those interviewed in the camps.

Schools are a focal point for children’s educational, social, cultural and recreational activities. From the survey mentioned above, and anecdotal evidence, it is clear that many children were victims of the conflict, directly or indirectly, witnessing horrific violence and experiencing profound fear. These children need education and a stable school environment to help normalise their lives and equip them to deal with the challenges of social reconstruction.

While formal school curricula in African countries tend to be attuned to faded contexts of socio-economic stability and national unity, millions of children are growing up in situations of chronic turbulence, where states have either lost their capacity to maintain civil order or have been transformed into pariah structures controlled by regional warlords.

For children who have been affected by such circumstances, there is a clear need for education to play an important role in guiding them away from violence and conflict through the teaching and emphasis of tolerance, reconciliation, and accountability.

The challenge for Plan and other institutional partners engaged in educational renewal, is to participate in the development of curricula that are more attuned to the current realities of children who have been victimised by conflict, or who could become caught up in situations of violent conflict. Simply put, education is the best way to terminate the emergence of a new generation of gunfighters and warlords in another decade or less.

### Spontaneous education in the IDP camps

Prior to the attack on Freetown on the 6th January 1999 almost half of the country’s population from rebel-occupied zones were already relocated in and around Freetown, substantially increasing the number of people in the city.

The 6th January 1999 attack left thousands homeless and displaced, many for the second or third time. Municipal schools, hospitals, the National Stadium and open fields throughout the city became the refuge of many who fled the fighting and bombardment.

In the immediate months that followed the January invasion, the internally displaced people in the camps in Freetown began forming Camp Management Committees, with child welfare a common feature in the agenda of these committees. It was quickly apparent that, despite the destitution of most camp inhabitants, a

**“We couldn’t bear the bombardment and there was no food to eat. We were really isolated and had to jump over fences. We met armed men who threatened us. We cajoled our way out of many dangerous predicaments and finally got to the Ferry Junction and ended up at a Municipal School where we have been for 10 months. We have some basic blankets, lamps and other things. But the situation here is a bit tough, because we are lying on the bare ground, no mattresses, nothing. Our rations only last a week at a time. Most of the people here are unemployed. Children go to school barefoot and shabby.”**

Fatmata Kanu, displaced mother of six at the Trade center Displaced Camp (March 2000)

**“Lots of children were just roaming around, so we begin to teach them, little by little, with small bits of papers and charcoal”**

Testimony from teacher in the RapidEd Programme (2000)

number of them – some who were certified teachers, many others who were concerned volunteers – were attempting to provide organised recreational and learning activities for children and adolescents. They were doing so with minimal resources: paper cement bags for writing pads and charcoal for pencils. Classes were held in camp kitchens and on the steps of the National Stadium. These spontaneous classes served to give the children a sense of normality and also spared parents a few hours to make the contacts once more for the re-establishment of their families and their livelihoods.

## The Rapid Education Programme

### Origins

The rebel invasion of Freetown in January 1999 compelled Plan to formally cease its programme operations and halt its sponsorship activities. It did not shut down its office in Freetown, however, and when security was restored to the city Plan actively sought to assist with the recovery process in ways commensurate with its vision, mission and expertise.

After the invasion, most aid organisations concentrated their efforts in providing food and non-food items, medical care and water and sanitation facilities to the IDP camps. In comparison, the educational and psychosocial needs of the children were relatively overlooked.



Given Plan’s emphasis on the importance of education for child development, the Regional Director of Plan West Africa, Jim Emerson, decided to look into how Plan could help with the disrupted education of children affected by the conflict. Gonzalo Retamal of UNESCO Institute of Education (UIE), who designed the Rapid Education (RapidEd) Methodology based on experiences in Liberia, Rwanda and Somalia agreed to help. In May 1999, Emerson and Retamal travelled to Freetown in order to discuss the proposed RapidEd initiative with officials from the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MYES) and to

visit IDP camps in the Freetown area. In three of the camps visited, the spontaneous efforts of volunteers from camp residents to educate children were evident.

On the basis of these camp visits, the MYES and Plan agreed to assist these volunteer efforts and develop a RapidEd programme for some 3,000 children and young people aged from 5-18 years living in four internally displaced people’s camps in and around Freetown. UNICEF and the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) were also brought on board as partners to develop the RapidEd curriculum and to help establish this new programme in Sierra Leone.

The RapidEd programme was a new activity for Plan in what was still a volatile and unpredictable situation. It was therefore designed to be an emergency assistance intervention, and also a pilot project with a view to replicating it in other areas of the country where the school system had been devastated, and possibly to other countries in the region.

### Objectives

The three objectives of the RapidEd programme were as follows:



- To provide basic literacy and numeracy instruction to camp children, many of whom were estimated to have either not attended school or been absent from school for a long period of time as a result of war-induced displacement
- To provide a series of structured recreational and reflective activities that would facilitate a collective ‘trauma healing’ process and ‘peace education’ among the children, most of whom were estimated to have been psychologically, if not physically, harmed by Sierra Leone’s on-going conflict
- To develop the foundations of a fully formed rapid education methodology that could be widely adopted by the government and other developmental agencies in Sierra Leone.

### The design of the RapidEd programme

The first step in the implementation was the development of a curriculum that catered for the specific needs of children affected by the war in Sierra Leone. This was done through the creation of a Teacher’s Guide written by a team of eight including local experts from Ministry of Youth, Education and Sports, FAWE, UNICEF and the specialist from UNESCO Institute of Education. This Teacher’s Guide took account of material on Liberian and Somali experiences on education for peace and the FAWE training module for peace education.

Combining simplicity with flexibility, the RapidEd programme was designed as a 24-week non-formal education programme open to all children, including those who otherwise might not have been able or eligible to attend normal school in Sierra Leone.

The curriculum had two main domains: **the literacy and numeracy domain** which was designed to help children refit into the formal system when and where possible; and **the expression domain** which consisted of trauma counselling, physical and health education, drawing, drama, songs, story-telling and peace education, and was designed to encourage children to express themselves, share and face their traumatic experiences.



After 17 weeks of normal school we start Peace Education. By then we hope that after the four weeks of trauma intervention and the 13 weeks of cognitive the children will be in a position to forgive and to learn what is forgiveness. So THEN, we bring in PEACE EDUCATION, tell them what conflict is, how to avoid similar things that have happened in our country so that they too will not be in a position to continue the violence that we have seen. This is good for teachers, not just the children, as we have all been traumatised; we help them so that they can be in a position to help the children....”

Grace Harman, RapidEd Trainer and Supervisor for the Trade Centre Displaced Camp Primary School

These two domains were designed to be supported by two teaching kits:

- The **“School in a Box”** kit which has been used by UNICEF since the mid-1990s. It contains school supplies and materials for up to 80 students and their teacher (teacher guides, slates, exercise books, pens, flash-card, clocks, chalk, rulers etc) which are delivered in a locked box.
- The **“Recreation”** kit, which is a companion to the School in a Box, and contains different types of sports equipment for as many as 40 children. It is designed for structured team sports and games led by a teacher, and contains equipment for football (soccer), volleyball and handball, as well as skittles (bowling pins) and balls. It also includes coloured tunics (tabards) for different teams and chalk and a measuring tape for marking play areas. The teacher receives whistles, pickets with flags for the field and a slate for keeping score. Like the School in a Box, the Recreation Kit comes in a metal box that can be locked for safekeeping.

In view of the traumatic situations which many children experienced, the curriculum developers decided that instruction should start with trauma healing activities, and then be followed by literacy and numeracy work. At the end of the course, once a normal routine had been established, peace education would then be introduced.

The curriculum development team, together with Plan, then identified and trained four local supervisors and a co-ordinator to be responsible for training teachers in the camp and supervising the programme.

## Implementation of the RapidEd programme

The RapidEd programme was formally launched on the 7th August 1999, seven months after the rebel attack on Freetown, by the Ministry of Youth, Education and Sports. The four IDP camps where the RapidEd programme was introduced were situated at the National Stadium and at Trade Centre, both situated in Freetown itself, at Grafton which is a rural outskirt of Freetown, and at Waterloo, a village that lies about 35 kilometres from the city centre and had an estimated population of around 3,000 children.

The first step was to carry out a series of three-day training workshops for some 23 female teachers and 41 male teachers on the

**“Before RapidEd came, most of the children who you now see playing around were so withdrawn. They could not even talk to their own counterparts. They were highly traumatised. But when we came, especially with the recreational materials you see around like the drums, the skipping ropes, the footballs, the netballs, you name them. Then we had the first three weeks purely for TRAUMA INTERVENTION you know? We let them play-free expression. After those three weeks, we brought in the cognitive aspect, which is mainly literacy and numerical skills. The programme really is one-of-a-kind because they are learning old things in a new form and learning very rapidly. All our (RapidEd) schools are up to class six levels. They are even preparing children now for secondary school, and everything here is free...”**

Gladys Lamin, RapidEd Trainer/Supervisor.



use of the Teacher's Guide and the materials developed for the RapidEd programme. Dr Leila Gupta, an experienced psychosocial trauma consultant trained the RapidEd team and the teachers on how to recognise and deal with trauma and stress in children. Camp teachers were both unpaid volunteers and displaced teachers on government payroll. On completion of the training, the School-in-a-box and the Recreation kits were delivered to the trained teachers.

Conceived as a 24-week programme, RapidEd was not designed to coincide directly with Sierra Leone's school year which lasts from September to July (a period of 36 weeks). But midway through the school year with no educational alternative available for children in the camps, the teachers and camp leaders, together with MYES officials and Plan decided to extend the RapidEd pilot project till the end of the school year.

**“My father registered me at a Municipal School. But when I went there, the Headmistress despised the displaced kids. She kept telling us we were dirty and unkempt. So one day, I told my father that the teachers were chastising us. The other kids did not even allow us to sit on the benches and were pushing us off onto the ground instead. I begged papa, “please don't send me to that school.” So I returned to the National Stadium Displaced School. From there we came to Grafton just as Plan was beginning its Rapid Ed.**

**At least here I don't get a hard time from the teachers. At the Municipal School, teachers resented me because I was exempted from paying school fees. Here, school is how it used to be before we left Kono. We learn a lot and they help us forget some of our problems. I want to be a doctor.”**

Fourteen-year old Umaru on how he arrived at the Grafton Displaced Camp RapidEd School.

In September 2000, Plan commissioned an independent evaluation of the RapidEd programme. Richard Maclure, an Associate Professor from the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa led the evaluation which was carried out by a team which included people who had participated in the design and implementation stages of the programme. They identified key results of the RapidEd programme, as well as a number of dilemmas which had implications on the further development of the programme. These results and dilemmas are presented below.

### **The results of the RapidEd programme on children**

In many respects the rapidity of the RapidEd programme was a key to its success as an emergency intervention. Children and their teachers, as well as family members and others in the camps, regained some hope and sense of purpose through the provision of a structured learning environment for children. In addition, the programme appears to have contributed to a reduction in the psychological anxieties and behavioural difficulties of many children, and a corresponding increase in their cognitive abilities (Gupta, 2000).

Prior to the introduction of the RapidEd programme many children exhibited aggressive and unruly behaviour. Others were totally withdrawn. But according to most teachers and others who were interviewed, the singular focus on trauma healing activities during the first month of the programme helped to foster remarkable attitudinal and behavioural changes among almost all of the children. Levels of aggression and lack of discipline were reduced, and through various forms of expressive drawing, clay sculpting, dance and drama, many children were able to openly articulate their thoughts and feelings about the

violence that had affected them. Teachers were thus able to establish a calm and ordered learning environment for the children (Maclure 2001).

As several teachers recounted, the trauma healing component of the Rapid Education programme proved to be beneficial for themselves and for parents and others close to the children. A common sentiment among the teachers was **“we learning about grief and stress, and how to identify someone else with these symptoms.”** Through the very processes of animating organised play and different forms of creative expression, or simply observing the children engaged in these activities, the adults were themselves able to experience catharsis (Maclure 2001).

During the second month of the project, the curricular components of literacy and numeracy were introduced, and daily activities soon assumed a more conventional ‘school-like’ routine. Yet the goal of ‘trauma healing’ remained a fundamental tenet of the programme, and was manifested through lessons devoted to peace education, various forms of individual and collective expression, and to organised games and play (Maclure 2001).

- **Stress the importance of repentance and forgiveness. Ask pupils to explain both.**
- **Refer pupils to the rebel war in Sierra Leone and the peace process which has resulted from the Peace Accord.**
- **Let pupils discuss what would happen to the rebels who have returned to their homes and villages.**
- **Put pupils in groups, ask them what will make people repent, and forgive the rebels who have done so many bad things to people.**
- **Discuss the answer and guide the pupils to agree that forgiveness and repentance can succeed if people have love for each other, if there is unity and justice for all.**
- **Explain to pupils that if there is love, unity and justice, i.e. people’s rights are respected, then there will be peace.**

Source: Peace Education, Unit 7, Lesson 3: Sustaining Peace in the Community / School / Home Teacher’s Guide to the RapidEd Programme

### Lessons from the RapidEd programme experience

Plan was able to ensure the rapidity of this intervention largely because of its ample financial resources, its long-standing presence as an international NGO in Sierra Leone (with established connections to the MYES and other government ministries, and to organisations such as FAWE), and its singular project focus (having terminated all other development projects, Rapid Education was its sole programme objective throughout 1999). Such were the ‘ingredients’ that facilitated quick responsiveness to an urgent situation, and by all accounts it was a highly successful humanitarian relief operation. The independent evaluation identifies several features of the project as noteworthy and deserving of replication. These included:

- reliance on international and national expertise in such areas as curriculum development, trauma healing, and teacher training;
- early consultation with the Ministry of Education and with other donor agencies;
- recruitment of qualified supervisors and committed teachers (professionals and volunteers);
- expeditious purchasing, distribution, and replenishment of essential pedagogical materials;
- systematic pre-service and in-service teacher training and regular site-based supervision;
- an organisational capacity to accommodate contingencies, and to adjust programme structure and content in line with locally defined needs and recommendations.

Ironically, however, the evaluation also illustrated how the very success of the project revealed a number of dilemmas which confronted all the stakeholders in the RapidEd programme, and which have salutary implications for similar non-formal education programmes. The main dilemmas the evaluation identified were:

- **Dependency** Many people regarded life in displaced camps as a transient stage, no matter how uncertain their future, or how long ago they had been displaced. With no strong attachment to a camp life that had been forced upon them by duress, camp inhabitants could not easily develop sentiments of communal ownership of a public good such as education. In such a context, Plan's provision of substantial material and human resource assistance in a relatively short period of time simply reinforced a common sense of dependency on outside aid. This was also exacerbated by the speed with which Plan conceptualised and implemented the RapidEd programme, which resulted in the programme being regarded by recipients, and by some MYES personnel, as a 'Plan programme'.



For Plan, the problem of dependency was unavoidable. A context of war and displacement had already made Sierra Leone largely dependent on foreign aid. From a humanitarian standpoint, in camps where many children were traumatised by frightful violence and were without any positive learning environment, it was necessary to start the programme rapidly. In effect, therefore, the dilemma confronting Plan and its partners was **how to reconcile the reality of dependency exacerbated by rapid outside intervention with the need to ensure sustainable education for displaced children AFTER the initial intervention itself** (Maclure 2001).

- **Duality of RapidEd as emergency relief and as a long-term social investment** Parents and teachers did not view the rapid education in the camps as a "one-off" pilot intervention as it was designed and intended. Without a conscious sense of project ownership, they nonetheless had assumed that the Rapid Education programme would be the precursor of normal school to which their children were now entitled, and which would be assured by external support. Therefore, what became clear during the course of the evaluation was that a) children's education is not easily conducive to discrete "stand-alone" projects; and b) emergency rapid education programmes, despite their temporary nature are nevertheless investments in the long term social and psychological development of children and cannot be easily brought to closure or "switched off". In light of this reality, the implementation of short-term emergency educational projects **must** comprise strategies for subsequent longer term education, including the necessary shifts in the roles and responsibilities of the institutional sponsor(s) of rapid education. Ideally these

strategies should be co-ordinated by ministries of education or, in the absence of a viable ministry, by designated organisations with extensive national experience in basic education (FAWE is an example in Sierra Leone and elsewhere in Africa), and this is what eventually happened (Maclure 2001).

### **The expansion of the RapidEd programme in Sierra Leone**

By July 2001, 18 months after the rebel invasion of Freetown, FAWE had assumed responsibility for the continuation of the Stadium, Grafton, and Trade Centre RapidEd schools, and is in the process of securing the legal right to convert these ‘interim’ schools into official primary schools. The Trade Centre camp was in the process of closing, with the bulk of its population relocating to Grafton where many inhabitants of the original Stadium camp had also settled. It is expected that, because a large proportion of the population is unlikely to leave Grafton, it will be eventually recognised as a new permanent suburb of Freetown. What is important, however, is that the remaining RapidEd schools have been sponsored this past school year by FAWE, thus enabling them to retain their status with the Ministry of Education as **bona fide** schools.

Elsewhere Plan assisted FAWE in responding to an educational initiative undertaken in Kissy, in eastern Freetown. The Kissy Grass Roots Women’s Group decided to organise several community schools for out-of-school children, and approached FAWE for assistance. Since then, six rapid education schools have been established, with Plan providing training, pedagogical assistance, and financial support.

On a much broader scale, since September, 2000, Plan has opened over 100 rapid education schools in the rural district of Moyamba, south east of Freetown. Working in conjunction with the Ministry of Education and local educational authorities, Plan helped recruit over 200 teachers for these schools and provided two rounds of training – a two-week pre-service course and a subsequent one-week refresher course. Teachers from the original IDP camp schools in Freetown figured prominently as trainers in this expanded Rapid Education Programme. Similar to the programme in Freetown, trauma healing activities are a key feature of the rapid education curriculum in Moyamba. Likewise, Plan has provided ‘School-in-a-Box’ and ‘Recreation’ Kits to all the new rapid education schools. The schools themselves have been constructed by local people using locally procured materials – adobe, bamboo, or daub and wattle – with tarpaulins provided by Plan as roofing. Rapid Education is now serving nearly 9,000 children in Moyamba district. Plan’s RapidEd team has also conducted a training workshop at the request of ActionAid, a UK NGO for refugee camps in Guinea Conakry.

In the future, Plan intends to continue to extend its capacity to deliver RapidEd programmes to other areas in Sierra Leone and other countries in the region where it might usefully apply.





# Chapter 4: Disaster Preparedness and Safe Villages in Central Vietnam<sup>15</sup>

The sight of pupils trying to wade across shallow parts of the river in Cam Tuyen, an upland commune of Quang Tri Province, is a common one. There are not enough bridges across these waterways for the pupils to go to schools. During the rainy season, heavy rains often cause water levels to rise rapidly. As a result, teachers on hearing of a local flash flood have to keep the pupils in school. This event happens so frequently during the rainy season that a unit of the Committee for Storm and Flood Control has been established in Cam Tuyen's schools to prevent pupils from coming to harm on the way home or to school, and no pupil has been reported dead or missing due to flash floods in recent years. But keeping pupils at school causes many difficulties for both the teachers and the pupils. There is therefore an idea that these schools should be provided with boats to serve the pupils during rainy season.

Source: Central Vietnam Disaster Preparedness Programme – Mission Report

## Introduction: natural disasters<sup>16</sup> in Vietnam

Storms, typhoons, floods, landslides and, paradoxically, droughts, are hazards that the people of Vietnam face on an annual basis due to the country's geographical location.

The causes of these hydro-meteorological disasters are numerous. Many are natural occurrences, such as monsoon storms that bring electrical storms, typhoons and flooding; or hot seasonal winds that bring drought and fire. But the effects of these natural hazard based disasters have been seriously compounded by man made environmental degradation, poor watershed management, rapid population growth, industrialisation, urbanisation and resettlement programmes to more marginalised lands.



<sup>15</sup> Ary Laufer, the Large Grants Implementation Unit Manager of Plan Vietnam was the principal contributor to this chapter.

<sup>16</sup> The terms “natural disasters” and “natural hazard based disasters” are used synonymously in this report to allude to the fact that “natural” disasters have multiple causes many of which are due to people's actions.

Central Vietnam, which includes two of Plan Vietnam's Programme Units<sup>17</sup> as well as project sites in Hue and Da Nang, is one of Vietnam's poorest regions, and is prone to flash floods. The narrowness of the coastal strip combined with very steep mountain slopes, makes floods occur with lightning speed. Torrential rains cause river banks to burst within the space of a few hours, leaving little time to predict and announce imminent floods. In November 1999, tropical storm Eve dumped the equivalent of two years of rain in just six days on the central provinces of Vietnam and was then followed by a second tropical storm a month later. As a result of these two floods, almost 800 people lost their lives, 55,000 were made homeless and almost a quarter of the provinces' inhabitants were directly affected. Agricultural crops were destroyed with devastating effect as the central provinces are among Vietnam's poorest, and depend on rice paddies and fishing for their income. When the flood waters receded, large areas of paddy fields had been rendered unworkable, countless farm animals had drowned, hundreds of fishing boats were shattered and food stocks had been destroyed (ICRC 2001).

While not all floods are as severe, they remain a constant hazard. Therefore, after the floods of 1999, Plan, together with communities it works with in the central provinces, conducted a six month research project to develop a disaster preparedness programme that would focus on vulnerabilities and disaster mitigation at a village level, with a particular emphasis on ensuring the safety of children during natural hazard based disasters.

The outcome of the research was the **"Safe Village" disaster preparedness model** which is the subject of this chapter.

A key feature of this model is its ability to incorporate children's unique knowledge and experience of their local environment, and their thoughts and ideas on how to mitigate floods. Children's knowledge is often complementary to that of adults, and therefore incorporating their knowledge allows the model to assist the villagers to better anticipate and prepare for a wider range of risks. Soliciting the participation and contribution of children encourages them to become more aware of risks and how to avoid them. It also helps long term efforts to establish safe habitats as children make up a high proportion of Vietnamese society, and therefore their participation will give them a sense of ownership that will stay with them as they become adults responsible for the safety of their families and communities.

<sup>17</sup> Quang Tri and Quang Ngai.

## The effect of natural disasters on children in Vietnam

Children are often exposed to natural disasters in Vietnam, and are at very high risk when disasters strike. In the rural areas of the central provinces, children have a high burden of labour, collecting firewood and water and taking domestic stock to graze. This requires them to spend a considerable proportion of their day on the peripheries of their village – in woodlands, grasslands and watersheds. Additionally, six days a week, children travel to school on foot or by bicycle. Routes often follow creeks, rivers and also go through woodlands and grasslands. All this increases their immediate vulnerability to flash floods, electrical storms or fires.

When disaster does strike, children are severely affected. With less physical strength than adults, they have more difficulty in reaching a safe zone during a flash flood or sudden storm, and have less ability to survive in water. Indeed, most children in rural Central Vietnam cannot swim, thus being ‘caught’ in the water during a flash flood is often fatal.

The floods of 1999, and the subsequent floods of 2000 highlighted the lack of families’ capacities, and especially poor families, to properly store food, seed and potable water, when disaster strikes.

When flooding occurred, many families were not rescued and did not eat for a few days. They were therefore all the more vulnerable to the shock of discovering that they had lost all their agricultural produce and livestock. In some of the communes that Plan works in, each household lost, on average, more than six animals and one ton of seed / food.

These overwhelming losses left children and families surviving on minimal food intake, reliant on food aid or having to borrow money at exorbitant interest rates placing them in a dangerous spiral of debt. In many cases this had the adverse effect of making children drop out of school to seek paid employment and provide additional income for families.

The physical destruction caused by the flooding also had a great impact on the children. Children’s education and health are often adversely affected as school buildings and health centres are damaged, and often take a year or more to repair, while health supplies and educational materials take months to be replaced. Roads are damaged or closed, reducing safe passage to health stations, schools and neighbouring towns, and placing children at risk by compelling them to take alternative and possible unsafe routes.

Finally, disasters place obvious burdens on parents, which causes increased domestic and agricultural duties for the children. Women in Vietnam are the major care providers within the family structure. Thus in the aftermath of a disaster, the greatest burden within the family structure is on the mother. She must look after sick members of the family and young children, and provide food and income through her farming work. In a post-disaster situation, the time required for these activities increases considerably. Fathers often become migrant labourers who leave the village in search of income for the family further disrupting the life of the children and adding to the trauma of disasters.

**In the floods of 1999, water levels rose rapidly around the house of Tran Thi Nga, a young girl in a village in the Nghia My Commune of Central Vietnam. A neighbour came in his wooden dugout canoe to rescue them in an act of community self-help, and she left in it with her mother and brother. Her father, however, stayed on the shaky roof of their traditional house. He remained on the roof for two days without food or drinking water, watching his livelihood disappear in the flood. The water took five days to subside, by which time their house was ruined, their personal belongings severely damaged and they had lost all their seed, livestock, over 200 kilograms of rice.**

**While a community housing improvement project subsequently contributed to the construction of a cement three-roomed house that includes an attic area for storage and in which the family can take refuge in future disasters, Nga and her brother were greatly affected by the floods, and remain terrified of water.**

## Disaster response and preparedness at village level

Tree branches were littered with plastic bags, of various shapes and colours all at the same height. After talking to local residents it transpired that these plastic bags were litter, and they had become stuck in the tree branches, becoming a vivid high water mark in a flood damaged community.

In Vietnam, villages are clustered together into an organisational unit called a commune. Communes are managed by a Commune People's Committee, which is the lowest administrative level in the Vietnamese government. The People's Committees at a commune level collectively report to a People's Committee at a District level, which in turn reports to the Province level which in its turn reports to the national government in Hanoi.

Each village within a commune provides representatives for the Committee for Storm and Flood Control (CFSC) at the commune level. The CFSCs are also organised in a commune – district – province – national reporting structure and are responsible for disaster preparedness and management at all these levels. The CFSCs co-ordinate closely with the People's committees at each level.

Plan works at all levels within this official structure, but places particular emphasis on its work at commune and village level which allows it to facilitate quality child centred community development projects for poor families and their children, and to work with the Commune CFSCs.

During the six-month study of disaster preparedness at village level, a number of important issues became apparent. It emerged that while disaster preparedness plans and disaster response teams were resourced at commune and district level, there was little attention to specific village situations, nor was there detailed information on the particular vulnerability of each village within a commune or district to flooding, storms or fires. As a result, when disaster struck, it was the village disaster response teams, rather than the commune level teams, who were on the front line, evacuating, rescuing and responding to the emergency needs of children and families while being severely under-resourced. In the floods of 1999 and 2000, many villages were completely cut-off and villagers had to fight exhaustion and survive for two to three days often without food, water or shelter before outside rescue teams arrived. Like Nga's family, many families had to use neighbours' dug-out canoes, rubber tyres or other items that could float to get to safe areas. This placed them at substantially greater risk than if the village response teams had been better equipped to deal with the hazards of the local village environment. Warning and communication systems, in particular, often failed, delaying and hampering rescue and relief activities.

The study also found that despite extensive knowledge, at village level, about local conditions and potential disaster patterns and vulnerabilities, awareness of the need for disaster preparedness was low. This was partially due to floods and storms prior to 1999 being "manageable". Nevertheless, this knowledge was not used to prepare villages and increase their capacity to deal with hazards despite the bad experiences of 1999.

**Disaster Preparedness – specific measures taken before disaster strikes, usually to forecast and warn against disasters, take precautions when they threaten and facilitate a rapid response (e.g. preparing disaster plans, identifying institutional responsibilities, organising evacuation procedures, stockpiling food supplies, and training and equipping rescue services).**

NGO Natural Disaster and Mitigation and Preparedness Activities (2001)

## The “Safe Village” Disaster Preparedness Model

Plan has a global strategic objective that “Children should live in communities with the organisation and capacity to respond and mitigate the effects of hazard, pollutants and disasters.” (Plan 1999). Plan International returned to Vietnam in 1993, to work in partnership with the national government and local communes and districts on child centred community development projects. Working in over 65 communes in the North and Central regions, Plan has seen first hand the devastating effects that natural hazard based disasters such as storms and floods have on children and communities, especially in the Central Provinces of Quang Tri and Quang Ngai near Hue and Da Nang. As a result, Plan Vietnam has an objective in its 2000 – 2005 Country Strategic Plan **“to strengthen the capacity of community institutions and organisations to manage disasters in all Plan communities in the central coastal provinces through the provision of technical and managerial assistance and emergency interventions to minimise losses resulting from natural disasters.”**

The “Safe Village” model<sup>18</sup> which emerged from the study on disaster preparedness will be one of Plan’s main endeavours to achieve this objective. Roll out is expected to commence in early 2003, and the model will provide a process through which local indigenous practices, knowledge and memory can be captured, from all sections of the community, and particularly from children on a village by village basis to underpin the creation of village level disaster preparedness plans.

Different villages have different exposures to natural hazards and therefore need to prepare differently. Recording and highlighting local variables, like rainfall and water levels at village level is also essential for this process.

Some villages may require a larger interventions for riverbank protection through bamboo planting, while others could benefit from indigenous practices such as using gongs or drums as early warning devices to complement more modern warning systems. Most will need to capture local knowledge and memory about flood water flow paths to design safe evacuation procedures and to locate flood and storm shelters in safe areas. Children are often especially knowledgeable about such water flow routes, and listening to them not only improves the disaster preparedness process but also helps make them active participants in disaster preparedness projects and increases their knowledge of their local environment and how to care for it.



<sup>18</sup> Which at the time of writing is in design stage, and is seeking funding for implementation.

**Children participating in a “Safe Village” consultation meeting.**

A village is considered a “Safe Village” when (Ton 2001):

- The local community is fully aware of the specific potential vulnerabilities it faces should a natural disaster occur;
- The local community has a disaster preparedness plan which takes specific account of the needs of children and people with a disability and is updated annually;
- Children have a basic knowledge of how to respond to the disasters their local community is prone to, and simple protection principles;
- A comprehensive warning system is available that provides a system of escalating warnings on when a disaster comes and how dangerous it generally is; when to start the preparedness activities separately on their houses and together within the village; and when to start the evacuation;
- 100% of the village population can be safe for at least a few days before outside help arrives. This includes setting up safe houses, to share with neighbours when necessary; safe shelters within the village area; and safe shelters outside the village for very special cases.
- The village disaster response team is organised, well trained, provided with sufficient rescue equipment, ready for evacuation and rescue activities;
- The village is able to maintain communication with relevant external institutions (particularly the commune and district CFSCs and the Red Cross) in all situations;
- The village can guarantee its food security, health care service and clean water supply during and after a disaster.

**Six suggested steps in a community based preparedness programme for a Safe Village**

- Raising awareness in the village about storm risks and the Safe Village model
- Developing local warning and communication systems based on local knowledge with a particular focus on warning children
- Establishing, training and equipping village disaster response teams
- Assessing and improving housing to better resist floods and storms
- Constructing a two-storied public village shelter
- Enhancing the local health care system to better assist people during and after disasters

Source: Central Vietnam Disaster Preparedness Programme – Mission Report

Thus, the “Safe Village” model aims to achieve a sustainable level of safety for the whole village, including children, with the minimisation of property and production losses in natural disasters. This requires lasting improvements in the quality of life of the village. It builds on the experience and knowledge of the village, and of the wider community, while ensuring that children’s safety within their immediate habitat remains central. The “Safe village” model also complements and supports existing efforts with the government structure to train and build disaster preparedness capacity at commune and village levels through local Committees for Storm and Flood Control (CFSC) and provide them with essential equipment.

Co-ordination is needed between typical development interventions and disaster preparedness interventions to ensure that the great potential for complementarity between the two is realised. For example, multi storey schools can be used as village shelters in times of natural hazard based disasters, while at a household level, sanitary latrines, which should be designed to be child friendly should also be designed not to overflow in times of flooding.

Such co-ordination often takes place at commune, district and provincial levels where the “Safe Village” model meets and complements the macro-development approach of the Natural Disaster Management (NDM) Partnership of the central provinces which focuses heavily on essential large scale infrastructure projects, vital for disaster preparedness.

Finally, the Safe Village model will also complement the work of other international NGOs in Vietnam and draw in best practices from their work. An example of this is the disaster preparedness manual drafted for children aged between 9-12 produced by the Red Cross in Vietnam in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Proven as effective, introducing it into “Safe Village” villages will increase disaster awareness among children, and enable them to be a conduit of disaster information to their family.

## Conclusion

Investment in people is an essential element of any programme. Building capacity is required at every level of society to reduce the impact of disasters. Information, education, and knowledge are key, as well as appropriate technology. Children in rural Central Vietnam still live in poverty, and natural hazard based disasters have the potential to destroy the gains made in child poverty alleviation through community development programmes. Thus it is essential that disaster preparedness features as a component of any community development intervention. The Safe Village model, while flexible, adaptable and responsive to a village needs, intends to create a safe local habitat for children to develop to their full potential, with the knowledge that if disaster strikes, they and their community are well prepared.





## Chapter 5: Meeting children's rights in a disaster

The three preceding case studies are a small indication of the breadth of what can be done to help children at times of disaster.

Plan is a long-term development agency, and does not specialise in emergencies. But in recent years we have had to deal with an increasing number of disaster situations, both natural and man-made, which have affected the lives of children, their families and their communities with whom we work.

This report is a response to this increasing number of disaster situations. In preparing it, we looked at all the literature we could find on children in disasters, lessons learnt from the experiences of other organisations, the outcome of disaster response reviews and information from the communities we work with. The bibliography of this report contains the full list of sources we studied.

This chapter contains recommendations on children in disasters based on these materials and on reflection on our experiences as a development agency. The recommendations are organised under the following headings:

- The importance of child participation in response to disasters
- Children, international law and disasters
- Raising public awareness about children in disasters
- Suggested good practices
- The need for further research

### The importance of child participation in responses to disasters

“Children are undoubtedly the most photographed and least listened to members of society” (Roger Hart quoted in Van Bueren 1998). This is particularly true during times of natural disasters and armed conflict. “The rights to protection, prevention and provision are uncontroversial and even regarded as inherent, but the right of children to participate in decisions affecting their own destinies is often regarded in a different light. To allow children to participate in decisions means the loss of an element of adult power and control” (Van Bueren 1998).

Why is this so? Probably a combination of the view from societies in developed countries that regards children as passive, dependent and incompetent, with the view of many societies in developing countries that ascribes to children a diminished status, despite them being highly valued and loved, and despite the significant economic and social contribution they are expected to make. As a result, “although the question is viewed from the child’s best interests, the answer is frequently given from an adult perspective.” (Van Bueren 1998)

At times of disaster, when stress, tension and fear are running high in the adult population, it is very understandable that adults are very reluctant to take time to listen to a crying inarticulate child. Understandable, but short-sighted. While disasters often start suddenly, they almost never end suddenly, and during the long process of rehabilitation, recovery and, hopefully, preparedness, there is much space for children's voices. As the three case studies illustrated, listening to them not only helps heal their trauma and ease their suffering but also releases a source of knowledge and energy sorely needed in the aftermath of disaster. But children are very sensitive to approval signals from adults around them, and therefore, no matter how well intentioned, suppressing their voices in the initial stages of a disaster often makes children afraid of speaking up later on.

Nevertheless, their right to participate is guaranteed by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and children and adults need to be aware of their rights. The Convention "...clearly places a duty on State Parties to involve children when they wish in all matters which affect them. There are many instances where children are denied the opportunity to participate in decision making processes. This may not only be detrimental to the child but also to wider sections of the community. In specific areas such as school, the family and neighbourhoods children not only have opinions, but 'superior knowledge' " (Van Bueren 1998).

It is also very important to note, and to ensure that children are aware, that in order to assure a child's right to freedom of expression, the child has the right to choose the medium of expression, and this medium need not necessarily be verbal. Children who have been through trauma may not always be capable of verbalising their feelings, thoughts or ideas, but this does not mean that they are incapable of expressing them through another medium.

The law is ideal, and reality is very different and much more complex. A situation of disaster with people dying from disease, injuries and hunger and where children have traditionally never been consulted is probably the most difficult environment imaginable to bring about social change. In such situations, the skills and time required for effective consultation with children are very difficult to obtain, and then bringing the results of that consultation effectively into decision making and planning, and identifying roles for the children, in the midst of a disaster situation is also extremely difficult, **unless** all actors in a disaster see the need for it and make space for it – which usually they don't.

Nevertheless, given the numbers of children affected, the importance of correctly assessing their very varied vulnerabilities and needs and the universal acknowledgement of their rights, involving children in all stages of a disaster response is not just the correct thing to do, but the smart thing to do as it helps assure a community's long-term survival after a disaster.

The rest of this chapter highlights some key recommendations to make this happen.

## Children, international law and disasters

While the Geneva Conventions and the CRC make specific mention of children affected by armed conflict, and while the CRC makes specific mention of other children with special needs (children with disabilities, refugee children, unaccompanied children, children in conflict with the law, etc) there is little explicit mention of children affected by natural disasters. This therefore implies the existence of a gap in international law, as while armed conflict is certainly the more odious of the two, almost seven times as many children are affected by natural disasters than by conflict – and studies indicate the suffering and trauma that children undergo as a result of a hurricane, or earthquake or flood or other natural disaster is often no less severe than that experienced in conflict. It is just that till now, not enough attention has been given to their plight.

**We therefore call on the United Nations and on member governments to safeguard the rights of children in all types of disasters and to adopt effective mechanisms to monitor their implementation.**

Possible such mechanisms could be to request:

- The Committee on the Rights of the Child when receiving reports from countries affected by disasters explicitly enquires into whether and how children's rights during the disaster had been met and to request that responses to its enquiry include information directly from children; or
- An international body, perhaps under UN auspices, is established specifically to monitor and review the enforcement of child rights during disasters – natural, armed and complex humanitarian emergencies. Such a body could act as a focal point for awareness raising on children in disasters and publish an annual review of both good practices and violations of children's rights during emergencies and afterwards. If such a body is established it should include children in its composition and monitoring and reporting mechanisms; or
- The terms of reference of the UN Special Rapporteur on Children in Armed Conflict be extended to include children in natural disasters; or
- All reports and assessments on disasters issued by UN agencies include a mandatory chapter on children which contains children's input and involvement.

## Raising public awareness about children in disasters

**We need to ensure that the public and people in power clearly know that millions of children have been killed or seriously affected in disasters, armed conflicts and complex humanitarian emergencies over recent years and continue to be so.** Tens of millions of children have been made homeless or orphaned, have witnessed or experienced violence and have suffered immeasurable psychological trauma as a result of such disasters. It is simply unacceptable to stand by as children suffer in these ways (Mandalakas 1999).

**All parties responding to a disaster must be firmly aware that, despite the very difficult circumstances, children have rights which need to be enforced holistically not minimally.** In particular:

- That their right to the highest attainable standard of health is based on the World Health Organisation's (WHO) definition of health of 1948 as "not being merely the absence of disease, but also the physical, psychological, intellectual, spiritual and social well-being of a person" – implying that only providing for physical needs is necessary but not sufficient;
- That their right to education is a right from which there cannot be any derogation – even in the aftermath of disasters. The Sierra Leone case study clearly shows how education has the potential to be a healing mechanism for the children who form a very large proportion of the affected population. Children's right to an education directed towards respect for human rights and responsible life in a free society in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance and friendship<sup>19</sup> is particularly appropriate and relevant in the wake of a disaster.

**Government and inter-government funding must be available to support the holistic application of child rights in disaster situations.** "In the emergency phase, there is often money for specific children's work such as family tracing, support for reunification and managing transit centres. But in the later transitional phases, when some stability has come to a country but life is still fragile, finding financial support for broad programmes that support children becomes harder. Yet this is when the value of community based programmes is greatest, to provide a safety net for the most vulnerable children" (MacLeod 2000). Ensuring such funding, will help relief and development NGOs and governments to take better account of children in disasters.

**Children in disaster prone areas should be made aware of their rights and be involved in disaster preparedness planning.** This is probably the most effective method in the long-term of ensuring children's well-being when disaster strikes.

<sup>19</sup> Article 29 of the CRC.

## Suggested good practices

From the case studies and the research underpinning this report, a number of suggested good practices on working with children in disasters emerged. The key ones are listed below. The list is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather indicative and thought provoking. The list also does not include general good practices on natural disasters, armed conflicts and complex humanitarian emergencies. Many such recommendations can be found in the material listed in the report's bibliography.

### Disaster preparedness

- **Children in disaster prone areas should be made aware of what might happen, how to react appropriately, how to seek help and what they can do to safeguard themselves, their families, their property and their environment.**
- **Communities in disaster prone areas should develop disaster preparedness plans which include children's input.** These plans should clearly identify **local** risks and hazards, be produced in media that all community members can understand and access (e.g. posters, murals, simple drawings for primary school children) and ensure that everyone is familiar with them. The Vietnamese Red Cross disaster preparedness manual mentioned in the third case study is a good example of this, as are the material on disasters for children on the US Federal Emergency Management Agency<sup>20</sup> and lessons plans prepared by the American Red Cross for teachers and pupils of all school grades on how to prepare for a disaster and what to do when it happens<sup>21</sup>.
- **International, national and local government and non-government organisations who carry out disaster related work should ensure that they have sufficient staff trained in child health, child development, child protection and child consultation and participation skills.** Joint training with other NGOs, especially indigenous partners, government officials and key community members such as teachers and religious leaders makes good use of limited resources and helps build partnership relationships essential for good disaster management. In addition, child development experts who visit projects could run short training sessions for local staff (MacLeod 2000).

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.fema.gov/kids/>

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.redcross.org/disaster/masters/>

### Disaster relief

- **Programmes for children should always have top priority in natural disaster, armed conflict and complex humanitarian emergency situations.** Beyond the basic physical requirements of food, safe water, clothing, shelter, sanitation and health care, these programmes should:
  - 1) **Protect children from danger, violence, abuse and sexual and economic exploitation – not only in the immediate aftermath, but in a way that can be extended for the duration of disaster recovery operations.** One particularly successful strategy by UNICEF is the establishment of “Child Friendly Spaces” in disaster relief areas where children have access to safe drinking water and sanitation facilities and a safe, learning-friendly environment. These “Spaces” can be developed through appropriate community management approaches to ensure their sustainability.
  - 2) **Monitor children, adolescents and mothers of young children<sup>22</sup> for symptoms of psychological trauma and intervene when they occur.** Such monitoring can be done via teachers, indigenous healers, community health workers, food servers and others. It is important to inform these people about the special mental health risks to children and how to help them. One approach is to talk with parents and caretakers about their children. Do they note significant changes in a child’s behaviour? Are children confused and upset? If the children are toddlers, do they cry constantly or are they mute? Are they unresponsive to physical contact? Do they show developmental regression? Another approach is to observe children at play. Does the play seem normal? Are children acting out recent events after the disaster? (Mandalakas 1999)
- **Organisations responding to a disaster relief situation need to be able to track the history and situation of individual children.** Simple but effective record keeping of the children’s on-going status helps emergency staff ensure the development of children in and after emergencies (MacLeod 2000).
- **Reliable caretakers must be found for unaccompanied children, and especially for those under two years of age who do not survive without constant care.** Ideally, they should be female, of the same ethnic group and speak the same language. Adolescent girls and elderly women make good caretakers. Discreet supervision should be maintained to ensure caretakers are not verbally, physically or sexually abusing the children.

<sup>22</sup> Maternal depression is associated with concomitant symptoms in their children. (Mandalakas 1999).



- **In conflict areas, relief organisations should use the universal concern for children to negotiate with combatants and organise “zones of peace” where a temporary cessation of hostilities allows them to provide food, medicine and vaccinations to the children.**

### Disaster recovery

- **Children and adolescents can, and should, help in a variety of recovery tasks in the aftermath of a disaster.** Too often they are perceived as being in the way, as just hanging around or as non-contributors in disasters. They can in fact, help with caring for young unaccompanied minors, gathering wood, distributing water, working in gardens, making food, assisting in health clinics and making clothing. Adolescents can prepare entertainment programmes for young children. Depending on the culture, these may include pantomime, puppets, story-telling or musical programmes (Mandalakas 1999). Children often develop very resourceful survival skills during times of disaster from which adults can learn. Also, the contribution of children in non-affected areas should not be forgotten. Simply by befriending affected children, they could provide invaluable support.
- **Children’s education in the aftermath of a disaster needs to be established as an urgent priority.** This sends a clear signal to children affected by disasters that they are important and cared for, and provides a healthy routine that allows them to recover a semblance of structure and normalcy in their lives. Depending on available resources, the learning can be tailored to help with trauma healing and, where necessary, peace education efforts.
- **Routines for children should be established as soon as possible to help them recover from a disaster.** Regular, meals, story-telling, sports, music, bathing, washing clothing, holidays and festivals are all reassuring to children and should also be a high priority in any planning for them.
- **Identify adults with child relevant skills and ask them to help organise programmes for children.** Very often in a disaster affected population there will be teachers, coaches, artists, musicians etc. Asking them to help with programmes for children and to act as good role models for the children will be therapeutic and beneficial to all.
- **Adults should promote resilience in children affected by disaster by connecting each child to a trusting loving older person, by praising their accomplishments, by showing love and empathy and by encouraging children’s hopes and confidence.** (The International Resilience Project, quoted in Mandalakas 1999)

- **Use the disaster recovery situation to influence and change the perceptions of adults about the needs and views of children, and particularly children with special needs.** The needs and views of children in many disaster prone areas are traditionally neglected. A disaster recovery situation presents an opportunity to change adult perceptions of children and their behaviour towards them. Government organisations and international and national NGOs can work with affected communities to determine what is needed to ensure that a community's children grow up to be healthy, productive adults who can work on preparing for and possibly preventing similar disasters from occurring. In particular, communities have a special responsibility towards any of their children who are particularly vulnerable: those with disabilities, perhaps as a result of the disaster, those orphaned or unaccompanied. Efforts need to be made to ensure that such children are taken care of within the community and that child residential care institutions (such as orphanages) are only used as a last resort.
- **In conflict areas, where possible, bring together children from divided communities to discuss peace.** This can often be ground-breaking. It also can empower children who have been victimised by war to assume leadership roles in initiating a grass-roots inter communal healing (Van Bueren 1998).

## The need for further research

**The literature on disasters should give much greater consideration and attention to the needs and views of children.** Studies of natural disasters, armed conflicts and complex humanitarian emergencies has evolved over recent decades. Originally, treating responses to disaster as logistical operations they subsequently moved to acknowledging the importance of local vulnerabilities and capacities. They also began to look at the needs and capacities of particular groups, and especially women.

Given the number of children affected by these calamities, it is essential that studies now take account of the needs, views and capacities of children explicitly and consistently. There is much untapped scope for international, national and local government and non-governmental organisations to share their experiences and rapidly increase the amount of knowledge available to ensure the survival, protection, development and participation rights of the children are met. Slowly over time, it should be possible to gather the experience and expertise necessary to ensure that the practice of involving children in disaster relief, recovery, preparedness and evaluation efforts becomes the norm.

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**Plan Limited**  
Chobham House - Christchurch Way,  
Woking GU21 6JG, United Kingdom  
Tel: +44 (0) 1483 755155  
Fax: +44 (0) 1483 756505

Email: [info@plan-international.org](mailto:info@plan-international.org)  
[www.plan-international.org](http://www.plan-international.org)

**Plan UK**  
5-6 Underhill Street, Camden,  
London NW1 7HS, United Kingdom  
Tel: +44 (0)20 7482 9777  
Fax: +44 (0)20 7482 9778

Email: [mail@plan-international.org.uk](mailto:mail@plan-international.org.uk)  
[www.plan-uk.org](http://www.plan-uk.org)

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