

Youth, gender and climate change: Moving from impacts to agency

Thomas Tanner, Institute of Development Studies, UK. t.tanner@ids.ac.uk

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The coalition came together in 2007 to challenge the presentation of children as passive victims of disasters and climate change, instead seeking recognition of their specific sets of needs and rights, and their own agency to take action and ensure they are represented in decisions affecting their lives, now and in the future. For more information, please visit: www.childreninachangingclimate.org

I'd like to leave you with three overarching thoughts for our discussion now:

1. It's a question of justice not of hitting targets: The imperative for profiling children and girls in the climate change arena comes not just from instrumental concerns around achieving development goals or sustainable economic growth, but from the fundamental ways that it both challenges social justice and at the same time presents opportunities for a more equal, fairer, and more just world.

2. The vulnerability race to the bottom may be misguided: Highlighting the vulnerability of young women and girls to climate change impacts on the assumption that this will ensure their interests and needs will be taken into account is not enough. The race to the bottom to be the most vulnerable group is based on the false assumptions that these lists alone guide decision making and resource allocations.

3. It is time to realise the agency of young women and girls in our response to climate change. This relies on:

- Opening procedural spaces for their participation and representation within the growing initiatives on climate change and disasters, from the UN to community level;
- Initiatives to enhance child participation, with sensitivity to the different ways that women and girls experience climate change but also how they conceptualise risks and opportunities it poses;
- Tailoring information and initiatives on climate change impacts and responses that reaches these groups in ways that fit these different conceptualisations.

Children and climate change: A question of social justice

Much of the framing of the climate change issue in a childhood development context focuses on its impact on child poverty, and on the achievement of poverty targets including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These instrumental concerns link the impact of extreme events and slow onset climate change on child health, hunger and nutrition, and on livelihoods, migration, and education. For example, the nutritional impact of the Bangladesh flood of 1998 and its aftermath was shown to impair growth of children in exposed households².

With projected reductions in agricultural productivity and depleted water resources, these impacts will be gendered, accentuated by the dominance of female domestic roles in water collection and agriculture, and lower domestic investment in girl's healthcare. Girls are also the first to be pulled out of school during emergency periods in order to support domestic activities or income generating work³.

Over-riding these instrumental concerns however, climate change presents a challenge of equitable development and social justice. Climate change represents a global problem created by the older and richer sections of society across the world but with impacts felt most severely by poorer and younger members who have contributed least to the problem. There is therefore a moral imperative to redress this injustice by richer people accepting the burden of action to both achieve a stable atmosphere and compensate the youngest, poorest and most vulnerable victims through new and additional finance and technical assistance for adaptation⁴. Girls and young women in developing countries find themselves at the intersection of low responsibility for the problem and high vulnerability to its impacts. However, to date, most international programmes are blind to the dimension of age, and relatively few contain gender specifics.

Our work within the Children in a Changing Climate coalition has investigated how a child rights approach to climate change would take the concerns of intergenerational justice into account and radically transform the policies and commitments of those in power. Emily Polack's research with children, adults, and policymakers in drought and flood prone regions of Kenya and Cambodia framed local development issues with children's understanding of how their rights are linked to changing climatic conditions and the constraints they face. In her wider analysis, she notes that many national climate change policymakers are not considering children specifically, and that Child Rights actors are not considering the implications of climate change⁵.

I wish to press on you in this presentation that climate change presents a social justice issue and that intergenerational justice should be central to our response at international, national and sub-national levels. A child rights-based approach provides both a normative and legislative basis on which to realise intergenerational concerns.

Moving beyond vulnerability

Children, and especially girls, are often the most vulnerable group to the impacts of extreme events and climate change. The UNFCCC draft negotiating text prior to Copenhagen did recognise this specific vulnerability of children, but I'd like to ask you to consider during this session if it is universally true, and whether it is useful to frame children and climate change issues in terms of vulnerability.

This is regarded as a combination of their gendered role within the domestic environment, where they are likely to be responsible for more climate-sensitive activities such as household food and water security, and gender disparities in access to education, skills and healthcare. Statistics and anecdotes can readily paint the picture of disasters that kill many times more females than males; in the Bangladesh cyclone 1991 the death rate was more than 4.5 times higher for young women than young men.

Equally, slow onset climate changes such as changing distributions of rainfall or temperature could affect women and girls, responsible for collecting water, and for ensuring domestic food and health. In many societies of the developing world, parents invest less for girls' education, training and healthcare, limiting their capacities to prepare for and respond to climatic extremes and changes⁶

There are a number of possible explanations for the dominance of these vulnerability narratives⁷. First, they act as advocacy instruments to call attention to and direct resources towards the specific needs of children, highlighting the injustice of impacts felt by those with little say in determining their causes. This is increasingly linked to strategic questions around action and resources in light of international financial flows linked to climate change. Second, it reflects the dominance of top-down adult-led expert information flows on climate and disasters information, with scientific institutions at the top and the public at the bottom⁸. The third possible explanation relates to the commonly held belief that parents make decisions about the level of risk their child faces.

I would like to argue that outlining specific vulnerabilities of girls and young women and then assuming that decision makers will act in their best interest is unconstructive for three main reasons. First, while there are empirical cases that back up these generalisations, we need to unpack the specifics of vulnerability and capacities to take action in different societies and cultures. In some disaster events for example, more men have been killed than women, for example where gendered roles have cast males as risk takers and life-savers (as was the case in Hurricane Katrina for example).

Second, within global climate change politics, there is little evidence to date that the vulnerability discourses used to attempt to push certain groups interests to the top of the list of priorities in tackling climate change has resulted in changed behaviour or decision making. It requires a constant effort to lobby and sensitise, without transforming the structures that have reinforced gender and age inequalities. Achieving social justice to tackle child poverty in a changing climate instead requires use of rights frameworks to

enshrine normative, legislative and procedural aspects of decision making around responses to climate change.

Third, the use of vulnerabilities as a framing rationale for action reinforces a view that children and girls are incapable of taking action themselves. Instead, they require adults to take action on their behalf as passive victims of the impacts of climate change. A growing body of evidence is emerging that challenges this view, particularly in a development context. This challenge is underpinned by the capacity of children to act as agents of change in their own communities and globally.

Unlocking the agency of girls and young women to act on climate change

In contrast to vulnerability discourses, there is growing evidence of children's potential agency to respond to climate change. In richer societies, this has tended to focus on mobilising communities to lower their carbon footprint and on lobbying politicians for national action and a global deal to stabilise greenhouse gas emissions⁹. In developing countries and poorer communities, the urgent and immediate need is for greater capacity to adapt to the changing climate, albeit underpinned by global efforts to stabilise greenhouse gas emissions and prevent dangerous levels climate change.

I wish to argue here that, in contrast to emphasising vulnerability, unlocking the agency of girls and young women to take action in developing countries is vital to meeting the climate challenge. A recent stocktake of the evidence of child-centred DRR and adaptation from round the globe shows how initiatives variously tackle questions of knowledge, voice, and action, including their potential to enhance protection, influence change, and lead to transformational reductions in the risks facing children's lives and future livelihoods¹⁰.

The first route to unlocking agency lies with opening **procedural spaces** for participation and representation within the growing initiatives on climate change and disasters, from the United Nations, through national governments, and down to community level. Experiences of the Children in a Changing Climate coalition of supporting children's global advocacy indicate there are both direct and indirect opportunities for them to influence climate change policies. Attendance at meetings such as United Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Global Platform on Disaster Risk Reduction appear most effective when underpinned by prior consultations with country delegations and media engagement to sensitise policy makers.

Save the Children in Bangladesh experiences show the value of actively targeting the participation of girls in community disaster management planning where previously they were not considered as an important or visible part of the community. Not only has this empowered girls and young women to take preventative actions, it had also led to a procedural channel for women to challenge the fatalistic attitudes of many adults to disaster events.

In El Salvador, our research with Plan International has shown how bringing children and young people's disaster coordination committees together with formal adult structures has resulted in a greater joint understanding of the risks and capacities of the local community. In some cases the actions of the children's groups have provided the impetus for the adult groups to come together rather than only exist on paper. In others, children's groups have merged with adults groups to strengthen community response and lobby political leaders for support in managing and reducing risks.

Secondly, I would like to highlight the growing sensitivity to the different ways that children of different ages and genders not only experience climate change but also how they **conceptualise the risks and opportunities** it poses. Experiences using risk, vulnerability and capacity toolkits in places like El Salvador, show how children's groups are able to explore what climate change means for their lived experience, placing climate risks in the context of a wider spectrum of social, economic and environmental risks. For example, children may highlight social risks such as drugs or a lack of household cohesion as crucial in the capacity to respond to disaster events, where conventional assessments may have simply emphasised infrastructure protection.

Often the gender differences reflect prevailing social norms, with girls more concerned with household-related risks such as health and boys prioritising risks related to agricultural production or income generation. Importantly however, these gender divides, while recognisable at community level, differ across communities, cultures and nations. Improving our understanding these different conceptualisations of risk and opportunity is central to our ability to tailor information and initiatives on climate change impacts and responses that reach these groups in ways that fit these different conceptualisations. This can be crucial to infrastructure as well assessment social interventions, for exemplified in UNICEF's work on gender and child-sensitive disaster resilient school design in Bolivia¹⁰.

Finally, I would like to highlight the **broader multiple benefits** of focusing on girls and young women in climate change responses, other than just their protection from hazards. The achievement of reduced risks from concrete actions implemented by children is often the participatory goal that is most frequently highlighted in advocating for children-centred approaches to climate change and disasters. However, there are significant co-benefits including educational and developmental learning, empowerment and the potential for coherent approaches to tackling risks from household up to national scale. But don't take my word for it. The process of researching, creating and screening participatory videos in Philippines demonstrates this very well, with the video capturing the community dialogue process and then screened at municipal and provincial levels as the basis for further campaigns for actions to tackle climate change and disaster risks and opportunities. This video, led by girls from Barobo community in Eastern Samar, illustrates these benefits far better than I can in words:

Barobo: The Sinking Barangay www.youtube.com/watch?v=d5PskEFrNWc

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ENDNOTES

¹ See www.childreninachangingclimate.org for more details.

² Del Ninno C and Lundberg M 2005. The long term impact of the 1998 flood on nutrition in Bangladesh. *Economic and human biology* 3(1), 67-96.

³ Save the Children (2008) *Delivering Education for Children in Emergencies: A key building block for the future*. International Save the Children Alliance, London.

⁴ Tanner TM and Mitchell T (eds). 2008. *Poverty in a Changing Climate*. IDS Bulletin 39(4). Institute of Development Studies, Brighton.

⁵ Polack E (2010) *Child Rights and Climate Change Adaptation: Voices from Kenya and Cambodia*. Children in a Changing Climate Working Research Report. Brighton: Institute of Development Studies. www.childreninachangingclimate.org/research

⁶ Neumayer E and Plümper T 2007. The gendered nature of natural disasters: the impact of catastrophic events on the gender gap in life expectancy, 1981–2002. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 97 (3). pp. 551-566; Save the Children (2009) *Feeling the Heat: Child Survival in a Changing Climate*. Save the Children UK, London.

⁷ Mitchell T, Tanner TM, Haynes K 2009. *Children as agents of change for Disaster Risk Reduction: Lessons from El Salvador and the Philippines*. Children in a Changing Climate Working Paper 1. IDS, Brighton. www.childreninachangingclimate.org/research

⁸ Wisner B, Blaikie P, Cannon T, and Davis I. 2004. *At risk: Natural hazards, people's vulnerability and disasters*. Routledge, London.

⁹ See summary paper by Adam Cade (StudentForce for Sustainability) at: www.unescobkk.org/fileadmin/user_upload/apeid/Conference/12thConference/paper/4F1.pdf

¹⁰ Back E, Cameron C, Tanner TM. 2009. *Children and Disaster Risk Reduction: Taking Stock and Moving Forward*. UNICEF/Children in a Changing Climate Coalition Research Paper. IDS, Brighton www.childreninachangingclimate.org/docs/Child Led DRR Taking Stock.pdf