

# Review of the Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction: Enabling Child-Centred Agency

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## ABSTRACT

The Global Assessment Report on the evidence base developed from child-centred disaster risk reduction projects in the Philippines and El Salvador provides an overview of institutional and legal frameworks that limit or enable developing capacity rather than focusing on vulnerability. In many countries, disaster risk management policy and functions remain focused on a humanitarian and aid driven emergency response agenda, often focusing on the immediate economic loss of the disaster event and the cost of rehabilitation and repair of major infrastructure. The evidence demonstrates that when communities including children are engaged in understanding the causal factors of differentiated vulnerability they can ensure specific needs are planned for before and protected during emergencies. Emphasising the value of engagement with children is not to expect them to have all the answers. Rather it reinforces the case for policy-making to include bottom-up processes to ensure approaches are context specific and take account of the needs of all community members.

**KEYWORDS:** child centred participation, disaster risk reduction, community capacity building.

## RESUMEN

El Informe de Evaluación Global sobre la base de evidencia desarrollada a partir de proyectos de reducción del riesgo de desastres centrados en los niños en Filipinas y El Salvador ofrece una visión general de los marcos institucionales y legales que limitan o permiten desarrollar la capacidad en lugar de centrarse en la vulnerabilidad. En muchos países, las políticas y funciones de gestión del riesgo de desastres siguen centradas en una agenda de respuesta a emergencias impulsada por la ayuda humanitaria, a menudo centrada en la pérdida económica inmediata del desastre y el costo de la rehabilitación y reparación de la infraestructura principal. La evidencia demuestra que cuando las comunidades, incluidos los niños,

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se involucran en la comprensión de los factores causales de la vulnerabilidad diferenciada, pueden garantizar que las necesidades específicas se planifiquen antes y estén protegidas durante las emergencias. Hacer hincapié en el valor del compromiso con los niños no es esperar que tengan todas las respuestas. Más bien refuerza el argumento para que la formulación de políticas incluya procesos ascendentes para garantizar que los enfoques sean específicos del contexto y tengan en cuenta las necesidades de todos los miembros de la comunidad.

PALABRAS CLAVE: participación centrada en los niños, reducción del riesgo de desastres, desarrollo de la capacidad de la comunidad.

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## INTRODUCTION

This review of the Global Assessment Report serves as the background research for interviews that were carried out in December 2017 with 9-11 year olds in Canoa, Ecuador about their understanding and emotions across the disaster life cycle as well as before the possible next earthquake.<sup>1</sup>

The authors of the Global Assessment Report note that from a child rights perspective, disaster impacts affect not only a child's basic right to survival and development, but cut across their right to participate and for decisions to be made in their best interests. Child-centred approaches recognise the role and rights of children as citizens and agents of change, seeking to engage them in Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR)/Child-Centred Approach (CCA) decision-making and accountability processes and supporting child-centred community-based programs of action.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Anne Carr, M. Abad y N. Ullauri, *Conversations about Natural Disasters: Listenig to Children*, 2018. (submitted for publication).
  2. Fran Seballos, Thomas Tanner, *Global Assessment on Disaster Risk Reduction-Enabling Child-Centred Agency* (s. l.: ISDR, 2011), 3. Available <[https://www.preventionweb.net/english/hyogo/gar/2011/en/bg-docs/Seballos\\_&\\_Tanner\\_2011.pdf](https://www.preventionweb.net/english/hyogo/gar/2011/en/bg-docs/Seballos_&_Tanner_2011.pdf)>.

## RESEARCH EVIDENCE FOR CHILDREN'S RIGHTS TO DISASTER PREVENTION PARTICIPATION

Previous research within the Children in a Changing Climate<sup>3</sup> coalition has looked at spaces where children have opportunities to influence and engage in Disaster Risk Reduction climate change policy and developed an evidence base from which to articulate the capacity of children as agents of change within their communities.

The Global Assessment Report (GAR) on Disaster Risk Reduction: Enabling Child-Centred Agency provides an overview of the institutional and legal frameworks for disaster risk reduction (DRR) and child-centred policies in the Philippines and El Salvador as they are translated into practice. Empirical examples of the political, cultural and institutional environment underpinning child-centre DRR programs conclude with lessons learnt from both countries to articulate the key elements of an enabling environment for child centred DRR policies and practice.

Children under Article 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child are defined as those who are “under 18” - in line with the “age of majority” in many countries thus the emphasis of the Report is on those internationally recognised as children.

Child-centred DRR is an overarching framework that recognises children as both beneficiaries and active citizens engaged in decision-making, planning and accountability processes for prevention, preparedness and response to be supported as agents of change in their spheres of influence-household, school, the community and beyond.

## FROM VULNERABILITY TO CAPACITY

In many countries, disaster risk management policy and functions remain focussed on a humanitarian and aid driven emergency response agenda, often focusing on the immediate economic loss of the disaster event and the cost of rehabilitation and repair of major infrastructure. Yet there are immediate and long-term human dimensions of loss by an estimated 66.5 million children annually<sup>4</sup> with most literature pointing towards higher mortality and morbidity rates among children as a result of climate

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3. Available en <[www.childreninachangingclimate.org](http://www.childreninachangingclimate.org)>.

4. Angela Penrose, y Mia Takaki, “Children’s rights in emergencies and disasters”, *The Lancet*, vol. 367 (2006): 698-9. Available <[http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(06\)68272-X/abstract](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(06)68272-X/abstract)>.

stresses and extreme events.<sup>5</sup> This is especially acute for children and households with low resilience in developing countries where governance is weak, education systems are poor, coping capacities are lower and where climate-sensitive health factors such as malnutrition, diarrhoea and malaria are higher.

By moving away from a concept of vulnerability involving passivity and suffering, this means increasing capacities and therefore fostering and enabling people's resilience which requires engagement with communities to understand the causal factors of differentiated vulnerability, the specific nature of risk, and working with those actors to build household and community resilience to external shocks, as well as influencing the wider institutional arena and implicating child-centred approaches to ensure specific needs are planned for and protected during emergencies.<sup>6</sup>

## THE IMPORTANCE OF SCHOOLS

Schools remain a focus of much of the action on children and disasters, including through teaching on environmental issues and hazard risks, disaster proofing of buildings to make them safer, and preparedness drills. Schools are also increasingly seen as a community institution from which to undertake community-wide awareness raising. The extensive and growing range of guidance and teaching materials for school-based child-centred DRR is evidenced by the extensive collection of over 2000 items in the Prevention web Educational Materials Collection.<sup>7</sup>

Emphasising the value of engagement with children is not to expect them to have all the answers. Rather it reinforces the case for... policy-making to include bottom-up processes to ensure approaches are context specific and take account of the needs of marginalised groups.<sup>8</sup>

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5. Victor Balaban, "Psychological assessment of children in disasters and emergencies", *Disasters*, vol. 30 (2006): 178-98. Available in <<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.0361-3666.2006.00314.x>>.
  6. T. Waterson, "Climate change-the greatest crisis for children?", *Journal of Tropical Pediatrics*, vol. 52 (2006): 383-5.
  7. Inka Weissbecker, Sandra Sephton, Meagan Martin, David Simpson, "Psychological and Physiological Correlates of Stress in Children Exposed to Disaster: Review of Current Research and Recommendations for Intervention", *Children, Youth and Environments*, vol. 18 (2008): 30-70. Available <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7721/chilyoutenvi.18.1.0030>>.
  8. Ben Wisner, Piers Blaikie, Terry Cannon, and Ian Davis, *At risk: Natural hazards, people's vulnerability and disasters* (London/New York: Routledge, 2004). Bangay, C. and N. Blum (2010), "Education responses to climate change and quality: Two parts of the same agenda?", *International Journal of Educational Development*, 20: 359-68.
  8. Seballos, Thomas Tanner, *Global Assessment on Disaster Risk Reduction-Enabling Child-Centred Agency*.

## **THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS AND GOVERNANCE - CHILDREN'S RIGHTS, NEEDS AND CAPACITIES**

Much of the recent advocacy work around child agency and capacities for DRR and Child Centred Agency (CCA) are built on rights-based arguments. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) sets out four main principles which reflect all the articles in the convention, these are: survival and development; non-discrimination; child participation; and the best interests of the child. Many of these underpin the need for child centred DRR and CCA to take a protective approach to ensuring that disasters and the changing climate do not erode a child's basic right to health, shelter, food, clean water, education and freedom from harm. However, participation, as one of the four fundamental principles, is increasingly recognised as fundamental to policy making that is sensitive to children's needs and well-being, and therefore of value to wider society. It is also fundamental to children's self-esteem and a means of empowerment. Child participation is recognised as a right under Article 12, but participation is also a means to children realising their rights more generally.<sup>9</sup>

Recognising a child's right to participate empowers them as individuals and members of civil society-as citizens - it gives them the opportunity to exercise their citizenship rights and to influence the actions and decisions that affect their lives.

Despite internationally supported frameworks for promoting childhood well-being and securing child rights, it is increasingly recognised that recurring disasters and the changes in climate are "...causing child rights to become even more difficult to safeguard, as adults, communities and governments do not fully appreciate the threats to their children's future or are increasingly powerless to fulfil their responsibilities to protect them."<sup>10</sup>

### **FOCUSED CASE STUDIES: EL SALVADOR AND THE PHILIPPINES**

The Global Assessment Report focuses on research that took place in the Philippines (2008-09 and 2010) and in El Salvador (2008-09). The susceptibility of the

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9. Ibid.

10. CCD, "Closing the Gaps", en *Commission on Climate Change and Development* (Stockholm: UNICEF, 2008); *Our Climate, Our Children, Our responsibility. The implications of climate change for the world's children* (s. 1.: UNICEF, 2008).

Philippines to disaster is revealed through Office of Civil Defence statistical records covering the period 1997 to 2007 which show that the total cost of damages brought about by various types of disasters was P176.733 billion (over \$4billion). This does not include the indirect losses nor does it factor in the loss of lives. In 2004, the World Bank estimated the cost of disaster annually to be 15 billion or 0.5 per cent of the country's gross national product. A report from the Centre for Research and Epidemiology of Disasters places the Philippines as number one in occurrence of disasters in the world for 2009, with the third highest number of deaths globally and 14.8 per cent of the population being affected.<sup>11</sup>

- a) El Salvador is also highly susceptible to disaster events due to its geographic location on tectonic boundaries and tropical storm tracks, the presence of active volcanoes, exposure to drought events, and low levels of capacity to respond due to widespread poverty and degradation of natural ecosystems. El Salvador in 2009 ranked second globally for relative loss in GDP, losing 4.4 per cent, when recording deaths per 100,000 people it ranked fourth.

Climate change is likely to add to the burden in both countries due to the increasing unpredictability of weather, and changes to the frequency and magnitude of extreme events including storms, drought, flooding, and heat and cold waves.

- b) While national bodies in both the Philippines and El Salvador have their basis in science-based approaches, interviews undertaken with key actors relating to DRR at local regional levels in the study areas revealed an approach focused primarily on understanding and tackling the human causes of disaster events rather than hazard management. Most respondents stressed underlying causes of vulnerability based on the levels of socio-economic development and human behavioural factors influenced by cultural tradition. The poverty and livelihoods context of the case study communities were therefore seen as the dominant entry points for improving risk reduction by the majority of regional and local DRR actors.

## ADULT PERCEPTION OF CHILD AGENCY

The research suggests that adult views on child agency have the potential to foster or stifle child participation and contributions to reducing disaster risk. Whilst families

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11. Sheridan Bartlett, "The Implications of Climate Change for Children in Lower-Income Countries", *Children, Youth and Environments*, vol. 18 (2008): 71-98.

value the potential of children as actors within the household they are often not prescribed with individual agency or voice within the home and this is often carried over into the community sphere. Even where adults vocalised support for child-led DRR activities this was commonly contradicted by household decision making structures in which children have little or no voice. However, the support of the family for a child's action is a central enabler for child participation and agency.

As a reflection of this, the children themselves often expressed concern over their physical capacity to act on behalf of the community due to their multiple commitments to the school and the family. Some household interviews revealed that schooling and family duties had to be completed prior to extra activities with youth groups. This was particularly evident in the more remote rural villages visited.

Amongst officials at the municipal and provincial level the dominant view follows that of Jose Rizal, a Philippine national hero, who is famously quoted as saying "the youth is the hope of our future". The officials consistently depicted children as the "inheritors of the future" and the "leaders of tomorrow", but in need of both protection and guidance today.

## **CHILDREN NEED TO BE SEEN TO BE HEARD**

There was considerable evidence that the visibility and experience of children's group activities was a crucial enabling factor in fostering community support. Many adults and even parents of group members were not aware of the DRR activities of the children's groups. Yet where adults had been exposed to or involved in the activities, they were more supportive and there was a significantly higher level of support for child participation in communities with longer standing experiences. Visible demonstrations of children engaging in activities to reduce risks in the household and community provide a lived experience that acts as an important catalyst for shifting cultural understandings to support child agency.

## **INCLUSION AND EXPERIENCE GENERATE SUPPORT**

Household support provides not only formal permissions for children to participate and engage in activities, but also confirmation to the children that their actions are valued within the community, that their motivations are respected and thus they are empowered to continue in their efforts and advocacy.

## **FACILITATION IS A CRUCIAL ENABLING FACTOR**

The research demonstrates that children are capable actors, but they need stimuli and support. There was a common perception that realising the potential of children is necessarily a guided and supported process that may come through community based sources such as schools, health centres or adult-led disaster groups, or through external interventions by NGOs and CSOs. This catalytic role enables children's groups to draw on outside expertise for training and resources, as well as opening up potential interaction with policy spaces and actors outside the community.

## **CHILDREN WORKING TOGETHER GENERATE AGENCY AND ACTION**

Facilitation needs to go beyond training and knowledge, and support analysis, debate, prioritisation and action at community level, as well as dissemination of learning. The ability to transform training and knowledge into action is lost without the support of others with common and shared knowledge and agency. Holding training events with a mix of adults and children provides an important route to common ownership of the DRR agenda. It is essential that training and awareness of DRR policy and practice is delivered community-wide.

Creating opportunities for presenting work to parents and adults in the community, and safe spaces for engaging with authority figures represents an important part of a child-sensitive enabling approach. Children are often overwhelmed by the notion of authority, so bringing officials into spaces where children feel secure, such as facilitated workshops, is important. The creation of formal spaces for informal engagement between government institutions and children allows adults to be exposed to the children as they learn, discuss and debate, building recognition of the agency and capacity of children and seeing the potential of engagement.

## **COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND EXISTING PROGRAMS ARE STARTING POINTS FOR ACTION**

Where existing programmes such as health and education are seeking to meet the basic needs of child welfare and improve well-being, it is important that the contribution of these programmes for DRR is communicated and understood; as children and communities see the multiple benefits of their action, they are motivated to continue and strive harder to achieve the common goals. Focussing early activities on nationwide campaigns builds links with the local, municipal and provincial authorities.



## **INDIVIDUAL CHAMPIONS ARE OFTEN THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SUCCESS AND FAILURE**

Authority figures (or champions) in the community who already command the respect and trust of both children and adults, especially ones not subject to political influence and whose roles directly pertain to child welfare such as school directors or health workers provide a working link between outside networks and facilitation and a reference point for parents regarding the appropriateness of group activities.

## **GROUPS NEED TO ENGAGE WITH WIDER NETWORKS TO ACCESS RESOURCES AND POLICY SPACES**

Wider support networks enable groups to exert influence beyond their own households and community members, as well as interact with others. These networks were often developed through schools, health workers, and NGOs rather than enabled by government structures. Where groups were well linked with municipal government, child groups accessed opportunities to exchange with peers, attend municipal wide training and secure resources to undertake actions that are visible to community members. The relationship also provided potential access to higher level policy spaces.

## **ACCESS TO POLICY SPACES AND LONG-TERM CULTURAL SHIFTS LEAD TO SUSTAINABLE CHILD GROUPS**

Building partnerships and networks within and beyond the community appears to be critical in sustaining children's participation, including links with formal institutions to access and mobilise resources. Community structures can help sustain the enabling environment through providing policy spaces where children's voices can be heard in community committees or school planning boards.

Importantly, there was a significantly higher level of support for child participation in communities with longer standing experiences, and especially where former children's group leaders are now in local executive positions or indeed parents themselves. This suggests that just as awareness and behavioural change around DRR will be carried into adulthood, investment in child participation is a multi-generational mission.

## **WHAT CHILDREN ACCOMPLISHED DURING THE RESEARCH PERIOD**

- Documented change in participation that was successfully undertaken by children's groups with relative autonomy in the Philippines: Mangrove reforestation projects (Age: 10-16 years).
- Earthquake and cyclone preparedness drills (Age: 8-15 years).
- Removal of large stones above school buildings (Age: 8-15 years).
- Planting hill slope stabilizing plants to prevent landslides (Age: 11-16 years).

Documented activities that required behavioral change by other members of the community in El Salvador:

- Advocacy and protests over quarrying of river beds (Age: 10-20 years).
- Identifying high risk structures and discussing reinforcement with owners (Age: 10-15 years).
- Banning artisanal mining near the community to reduce contamination and flood risk (Age: 14-18 years).
- Awareness campaigns and provision of communal waste disposal (Age: 12-16 years).

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **THE ROLE OF DECENTRALISATION**

Decentralization is often viewed as a governance solution to enable local and appropriate risk reduction measures yet it requires investment from the national level to make it work. The research identifies four key issues for decentralisation in engaging children in DRR.

i) First, the research found strong support for the decentralised approach to DRR on the basis of local appropriateness. While decentralisation is limited in El Salvador and the country relatively small, in the Philippines there is significant heterogeneity across regions and islands.

“...because each region is unique. It is relative; the implementation is not always the same to all. There are traditions and rules in certain areas that should be followed”.<sup>12</sup> Decentralisation can enable DRR at the local level to recognise the heterogeneity of the community (including children), through community-based risk assessment and the identification of locally relevant risk reduction actions - policy or practice.<sup>13</sup> Local level institutions also support community mobilisation through their ability to embed historical cultural norms and values concerning intra-community cooperation.

ii) Second, decentralisation enables greater coherence across sectors at the delivery level. At the municipal and local level, policies come together from across formal institutions with the potential to deliver holistic programmes of community development that incorporate activities and programmes that contribute to DRR at the local scale.

“The most useful measures to protect children’s health are also fundamental in reducing risks from potential disasters-such as adequate drainage, waste removal and proper sanitation”.<sup>14</sup>

iii) Third, although there is a lack of explicitly coherent DRR policy in either the Philippines or El Salvador, the role of policy within other sectors provides an institutional framework for local action. For example, in the Philippines the Department of Environment and Natural Resources annual national coastal clean-up campaign was delivered through schools via a national level partnership with DepEd; at the municipal scale the Pamugsay Festival in the Camotes Island - which raises awareness of sound management of coastal resources - was delivered by the Pilar National High School through the municipal government’s Coastal Resource Management Project.

Such examples demonstrate a blend of cross-sector and local programs of action that deliver relevant and context specific messages and action for mobilising children for DRR.

iv) Finally, stronger decentralisation of both mandate and resources to the community level is required to make this happen. It is important that the lowest levels are enabled to carry out effective planning even if budgets for disaster prevention are

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12. Provincial DepEd representative, Surigao Del Norte, Philippines.

13. Van Aalst, M. K., T. Cannon, and I. Burton, “Community level adaptation to climate change: The potential role of participatory community risk assessment”, *Global Environmental Change*, vol. 18 (2008): 65-179.

14. Bartlett, “The Implications of Climate Change for Children in Lower-Income Countries”.

minimal at the municipal level and the skills, knowledge and politics for delivering are weak. DRR and community planning at the local level needs strong support from higher levels of governance.

The research and analysis of child-centred DRR in both El Salvador and the Philippines provide a number of common findings and recommendations based on investigating the realities of child-centred DRR in areas of relative poverty and high disaster risk. The GAR on the research findings point to a set of key issues which need to be addressed in order to realise child agency and capacity for DRR in disaster prone countries:

- Adult perception of child agency.
- Children need to be seen to be heard.
- Inclusion and experience generate support.
- Facilitation is a crucial enabling factor.
- Children working together generate agency and action.
- Community development and existing programmes are starting points for action.
- Individual champions are often the difference between success and failure.
- Access to policy spaces and long-term cultural shifts lead to sustainable child groups.

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