

# Project Briefing

No 78 • October 2012



## Key points

- Children affected by climate-related disasters in South Asia report post-disaster gender-based violence, child labour, family break-ups and barriers to their development and learning
- Child protection issues are rarely prioritised in policies to reduce disaster risk or adapt to climate change
- Disaster risk management and climate change adaptation policies must tailor interventions to address critical aspects of child rights, particularly child protection and education

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## Climate extremes and child rights in South Asia: a neglected priority

Katie Harris and Kelly Hawrylyshyn

**T**he links between climate change and disasters in South Asia, such as flooding in Pakistan or cyclones in Bangladesh, are increasingly evident. However, there is little recognition of the potentially life-long impact of climate change and related disasters on the well-being of the region's children. In a region that accounts for more than one quarter of the world's children, with 614 million children under 18 (UNICEF, 2010), girls and boys must receive greater priority in measures to respond to disasters and in disaster risk reduction planning.

Some positive examples are emerging, including the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation's *Framework for Care, Protection and Participation of Children in Disasters* (SAARC, 2011), which recognises the different needs of girls and boys of varying age groups. In addition, the 'Step Up Campaign' for Disasters Resilience, developed by the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR) prioritised children for the 2011 International Day for Disaster Reduction, and women and girls for 2012. But these initiatives have yet to influence appropriate action at the local level. To help this process and to highlight specific priority areas for policy, Plan International has studied how girls and boys in South Asia perceive and experience climate extremes and disasters. This project briefing presents the findings and policy implications.

### Methodology

Plan International's 2012 research, in partnership with regional research organisations, took place in sites across Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka that represented diverse micro-climatic zones

and ecosystems, covering a total of 104 villages in 39 districts. Researchers consulted girls and boys of different ages, children with disabilities and other marginalised groups. Qualitative and quantitative methods were used, including focus group discussions (FGD) with children; household surveys that focused on care-givers (rather than the head of the household); semi-structured interviews with older children; and consultations with child rights agencies and decision-makers across government, the UN and civil society organisations (CSOs). The research captured the views of 3,421 children (1,722 girls and 1,699 boys), and 1,184 adults.

### Post-disaster threats to child well-being

Children's first-hand accounts of their experience of recent climate-related disasters revealed challenges to their safety and protection. In Bangladesh, children from Jamuna Charlands reported physical abuse in evacuation shelters. Similarly, in Thatta, Pakistan, children spoke of being beaten by their parents while living in the 2010 flood disaster camps, while some told of being sent to beg for food and money. Children perceived abuse to be worse for disabled children regardless of their sex, and spoke of how senior family members displaced by climate-related disasters were highly stressed. More extreme accounts reported children going missing in the camps and a widespread fear among children that they would be kidnapped.

Children who had taken refuge in the homes of relatives or family friends also voiced concerns. In Bagerhat and other regions of Bangladesh children reported feeling neglected, being verbally abused or

not being given food. Older girls (12-17 years) reported staying at neighbours' or friends' houses rather than shelter facilities amid fears for their privacy and safety. Older boys spoke of staying on embankments, high ground and in shelters. In some Bangladeshi focus groups, both boys and girls aged 12 to 17 reported sexual and physical abuse by relatives following disasters. Girls and boys spoke about how these situations were affecting them, and how they felt unable to share these experiences with family or friends.

***'Girls cannot go out that much during the floods. Because bad men try to touch them intentionally. Then girls come home and cry, but cannot complain to anybody.'***

Bangladeshi girl from an urban slum in Gazipur District taking part in 12-17 year olds FGD.

Other children shared their experiences of staying at home during climate-related disasters. For many children, as for Bangladeshi girls aged 6 to 11 from Barind Tract, their own families were cited as the main source of protection. In contrast, Pakistani children and youth from Nowshera said that they did not feel safe in their own houses during the 2010 flooding. Older Bangladeshi girls, aged 12 to 17, and their younger siblings from the flood plains of Shariatpur concurred, sharing their frustrations at being confined in their homes after disasters. Children who remained in their homes in both instances recalled their disaster experiences as traumatising and, in many cases, reported that no special disaster relief provisions were made accessible to them.

## Greater burdens on children in the household

***'Our children labour with us. They weave carpets; make bricks on brick-kilns, graze cattle and harvest crops. We know they should instead be going to schools. But we cannot help them, for we are very poor.'***

A mother from Tharparker, Pakistan.

While humanitarian interventions recognise the need to support disaster-affected livelihoods and assets, there is little recognition of the contribution of girls and boys to household income. After the 2010 Pakistan floods, children from Nowshera reported the impact of flood damage, loss of income and rising prices on their households' standard of living. Post-disaster poverty and lack of economic opportunities were seen as fuelling child begging and the kidnapping of children for ransom.

In Nepal, children reported that frequent droughts increased their workload within the home, as well as child labour, early marriage

and child trafficking. Bangladeshi boys from Bagerhat reported being unable to attend school as they had to work to support the household; often in 'risky' jobs such as manual labour or rickshaw driving, which left them 'stressed and depressed'. In Kashinghar Muhallah, Thatta District in Pakistan, a group of adolescent girls from an urban community reported extreme coping strategies that were exacerbated in times of disaster, including being forced to sing and dance at private parties, and even into prostitution. The girls also reported harassment and 'people misbehaving with them'.

Some children highlighted child labour resulting from the pressure of climate-related disasters on vulnerable households. In Pakistan, child labour was reported extensively across the districts of Muzafargarh, Hunza and Quetta. In the district of Thatta, children from communities displaced by the 2010 floods told of contributing to their household income by selling popcorn and peanuts in winter and balloons in summer, as well as working as domestic servants. Children also reported working as water vendors, transporting cans of drinking water on donkey carts, often for more than 16 hours a day. Some children reported that food shortages following the floods were among the factors pushing people to train their children to beg on the streets and even, in some instances, to force boys to sell drugs.

***'During and immediately after disaster, we, along with our elders, are forced to engage in daily wage labour to earn some money in and outside our home. We also have to face the offensive and sexual looks of the landowners and other men who employ us to do on- and off-farm labour work. The way they treat us is also a form of abuse. We sometimes think that if our guardians were at home, we would never experience such inhuman behaviour.'***

Nepalese girl from Babiya.

A recurring and increasing trend identified through the research was the departure of caregivers from their households in search of work. In Nepal, for example, 75% of households surveyed had at least one family member working abroad for a given period each year. The village surveys in Sri Lanka found that 15-20% of parental caregivers had gone abroad for work, because of the lack of opportunities at home as a result of poor harvests, climate-related disaster losses and overwhelming poverty.

In many instances, caregivers left without ensuring adequate protection for children. In a few cases in Sri Lanka both parents had left children under the care of another family member, and accounts told of 'abandoned' children being increasingly at risk of harm and abuse.

Specifically, Sri Lankan children reported that girls and boys have become victims of domestic violence associated with carers' alcoholism and drug abuse.

The experiences shared by children and their caregivers outline the complexity of climate risks in relation to existing poverty and vulnerability. In particular, the study reveals the growing trend of 'climate economic migrants' and the repercussions on inter-generational poverty and socio-economic dynamics – with growing numbers of girls and boys in South Asia at risk of infringements to their rights and protection.

### Greater barriers to education

Education is a key intervention that promotes children's protection and development. While there has been certain progress in integrating disaster risk reduction into national education sector plans in the region, the challenges of gender parity and quality education remain (Plan International, 2007, 2012; UNESCO 2012).

Findings from the Nepal research suggest that climate-related disasters are having a direct impact on children's education, creating additional barriers to accessing and staying in school, as well as to the quality of schooling. There were reports from Nepalese children of schools being used as shelters, hampering regular schooling; of collapsed roads and bridges forcing children to walk further to reach school or deterring them completely; of damage to electricity cables making it difficult to study at night; of tin roofs making classrooms exceptionally noisy during heavy rains, disrupting lessons and concentration; and of school books and equipment being often soaked and damaged in classes exposed to bad weather.

The increased hardship and poverty linked to recurrent climate-related disasters was also identified as limiting the ability of parents to pay for children's education, whether in the form of school fees or the hidden costs of replacing damaged uniforms and school supplies. Both Nepalese girls and boys reported that when post-disaster hardships force their parents to make trade-offs, it is usually girls who are withdrawn from schools.

In Bangladesh, children estimated they miss over two months of education annually because schools are inaccessible during monsoon seasons. In the hills and in Tarai, Nepal, respondents felt that children would often miss over half of the school-terms annually as a result of a combination of poverty and socio-cultural norms exacerbated by climate-related disasters. Pakistani children from Gulmit reported schools staying closed for six months after the 2010 Attabad landslide disaster, as school buildings became refugee camps. In both Pakistan

and Bangladesh, children believed one reason for the female student drop-out rate was that the floods made school routes inaccessible or alternative routes too dangerous – with parental concerns for the safety and protection of their daughters taking priority over their education.

***'Last monsoon, two girls drowned in Kamala River while returning home from school. It doesn't rain often, but whenever it does rain, the intensity is so high that there is heavy flooding. The need to cross the river to go to school coupled with the inability of girls to swim puts our very survival at risk.'***

15-year-old Nepalese girl from Sindhuli

Many reported that during periods when children could not attend school they would take up temporary or permanent employment; and the longer their absence from school, the more likely their full drop-out. Pakistani children reported local youth loading and unloading trucks from China after the 2010 floods, and that many did not return to school when it became possible to do so.

### Policy implications

Children in the studies perceived that their role in their families is changing because of a growing number of inter-related risks that put unprecedented pressure on their households. Many of these are linked to shocks and stresses resulting from climate extremes. These risks are likely to be exacerbated as South Asia is expected to experience increased extreme climate and weather events in the coming decades (CDKN, 2012). Yet, despite the likely intensification of risks in the five countries studied, Plan International finds little progress at national and subnational levels to protect children from risks exacerbated during emergencies. This is particularly the case in regards to their abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence following a disaster.

There is a clear need to secure safety-nets and services that provide for children who have been separated from their families, and that address physical danger and harm, psychosocial distress, sexual exploitation and abuse, gender-based violence and interrupted education in post-emergency settings (IASC, 2011).

The following recommendations seek to address these challenges and to prioritise child rights in disasters and climate change policy across South Asia.

- South Asia's regional and national climate change adaptation (CCA) and disaster risk management (DRM) policies, programming and funding must address inter-connected disaster and climate threats to child rights. Interventions to strengthen community

## About Plan

Founded 75 years ago, Plan is one of the oldest and largest children's development organisations in the world, working in 50 developing countries across Africa, Asia and the Americas to promote child rights and lift millions of children out of poverty. [www.plan-international.org](http://www.plan-international.org)



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Institute 2012  
ISSN 1756-7602

resilience to climate risks must also strengthen household and community safety-nets that protect girls and boys from harm, abuse and neglect and that, in turn, safeguard their right to reach their full potential.

- Regional and national policies and programming for CCA and DRM need to conduct more detailed disaggregated analysis of risks and vulnerability to respond to differentiated needs. This includes more financial resources to better document disaster impact by age and sex, and for appropriate DRM and adaptation interventions that consider the rights of girls and boys, as well as approaches that promote gender equality. SAARC's *Framework for Care, Protection and Participation of Children in Disasters* should be adopted at national and sub-national levels, with South Asian governments institutionalising and investing in mechanisms to roll-out, monitor and evaluate its ten priorities for action.
- In designing DRM and adaptation policies, South Asian decision-makers must provide appropriate spaces for girls and boys to contribute to the identification of risks and the development of action plans for a climate-

compatible future that takes the rights and well-being of the most vulnerable children into account.

- South Asia's national adaptation and education policies must support greater resilience of education services to ensure that children's access to and quality of learning are not hampered by climate extremes – through safe schools and education in emergencies programming.
- South Asia's governments must empower future generations to better understand the causes and consequences of evolving climate risks as relevant to their local context, through formal and non-formal learning. This can support the effective transfer of adaptation skills, knowledge and resources to those on the frontline of evolving risks.

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### Project information

This report is based on research carried out by Plan International country offices in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka with the following research partners: Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies (BCAS); CTRAN Consulting - India; National Disaster Risk Reduction Centre - Nepal; Rural Development Policy Institute - Pakistan; Environmental Impact Assessment Team - Sri Lanka. Financial support was provided by Plan Asia Regional Office, and Plan's national offices in Australia, Norway, Sweden and UK.