

Protecting children in emergencies

Protecting children in crises must be a top priority in every stage of every emergency response

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Wars, conflicts and natural disasters worldwide are putting millions of children at risk. Since 1990, over 2 million children have died as a direct result of armed conflict. At least 6 million children have been permanently disabled or seriously injured, and more than 1 million have been orphaned or separated from their families.

In contrast to a century ago, when only five percent of war casualties were civilians, today more than 90 percent of those killed and wounded as a result of hostilities are civilians, about half of them children. Natural disasters, such as the Asian tsunami of December 2004, can affect even more children, causing them to lose their homes, their families, their schools, their access to adequate food, water and sanitation and even their lives in a matter of minutes.

Despite these statistics, however, the protection of children remains a secondary concern for the international community in all phases of emergency response. The failure to protect children from these escalating threats not only results in personal tragedy but carries a long-term social cost as well, including the spread of HIV/AIDS, an elevated maternal and infant mortality rate, a loss of education and a generation of marginalized youth.

During emergencies children face unique dangers

Types of protection children need most in emergencies

Save the Children has identified seven critical types of protection that children require in disaster areas and war zones:

1. protection from physical harm;
2. protection from exploitation and gender-based violence;
3. protection from psychosocial distress;
4. protection from recruitment into armed groups;
5. protection from family separation;
6. protection from abuses related to forced displacement;
7. protection from denial of children's access to quality education.

Both boys and girls face an increased risk of disease, malnutrition, gender-based violence, exploitation and a wide range of other violations including death and injury. They often become separated from their families and caregivers and have difficulty obtaining food and humanitarian assistance. The emotional impact on children affected by emergencies can be profound, but those who remain in the care of their families and communities are likely to recover more quickly. Schools are often closed or inaccessible during emergencies, leaving children without structure in their daily lives. Under these circumstances, children – some as young as 7 years of age – have been abducted or coerced into joining armed forces or groups, where they are used as porters, spies, fighters and for sexual purposes. Child traffickers take advantage of social and community disruptions when governments and aid agencies are focused on other aspects of the emergency response.

Effective strategies already exist to protect children

Save the Children seeks to integrate child protection into all its emergency response programs, at every stage of the crisis. As part of this integration, Save the Children has developed strategies and programs to identify and prevent abuse; restore dignified living conditions for children; and promote children's rights. Principal strategies include family tracing and reunification; education for displaced and refugee children; improved monitoring and accountability systems; land mine awareness; and activities to support children's emotional and developmental needs.

To better protect children in emergencies and reduce their physical and emotional risks, Save the Children is calling on the international community to take the following steps:

- Make child protection an integral part of every humanitarian response. Incorporate child protection programming into the delivery of all services including food, shelter, health and water and sanitation. Recognise education as an important means of protection.
- Ratify, enforce, monitor and report on international treaties created to protect children,

including the Geneva Conventions, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and its Optional Protocols, the International Criminal Court Rome Statute, the Genocide Convention, International Labour Organization Convention 182, and the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty.

- Provide adequate resources for child protection activities, not only as an immediate response to current crises, but also as part of a long-term effort to prevent conflict, promote sustainable development and mitigate the effects of natural disasters.
- Urge states to support a systematic and comprehensive monitoring and reporting mechanism designed to provide timely, objective, accurate and reliable information on violations against children.
- Ensure that all nation states recognise that children are central to the peace and security agenda. Peacekeeping mandates should include specific provisions to protect and assist children and improve and expand child protection training for all those involved in an emergency response, including members of the armed forces. Child protection advisors should be part of every UN mission.

What is child protection?

While assuring the physical safety of children is crucial, child protection encompasses more than stopping attacks or moving children out of harm's way. It includes measures that promote children's physical and emotional well-being, provide them equal access to basic services, and safeguard their legal and human rights. After a conflict, protection programs provide long-term support to those who have suffered.

The best protection measures prevent violence and abuse from happening in the first place. They strengthen the ability of individuals and communities to protect themselves and their children from future threats, laying the groundwork for lasting security and stability. Even at the earliest stages of an emergency, a community-based approach that mobilises resources among the affected population and creates a sense of community, is critical in helping children and their families recover from an emergency and begin to rebuild their lives.

Effective child protection programmes exist but funding is inadequate

As outlined in a recent report by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, donors did not fund

children's programming at the same level as other projects in the United Nations Consolidated Appeals (CAP). On average, donors provided 73 percent of funding requested for all projects in the CAP, but only 60 percent of funding requested for children's projects over the same period of time. The report also noted that 60 percent of the UN and NGO staff surveyed in 28 countries indicated that funding levels were insufficient to meet even the most basic protection needs of children in these situations. Furthermore, projects focused on providing child protection activities received less funding than traditional child survival projects during this period.

International legal framework for child protection

The CRC provides a comprehensive framework of children's rights, as well mechanisms of accountability. The CRC recognises children's right to be free from abuse and neglect, sexual exploitation, trafficking, abduction, torture, deprivation of liberty, and other forms of maltreatment at all times and provides for special protections during times of conflict.

The Rome Statute defines the "most serious crimes of international concern" to come under the International Criminal Court and classifies rape and other forms of sexual violence, recruitment or use of children under the age of 15 into armed groups as well as attacks against schools as war crimes.

In addition, the International Labour Organization's Convention 182 declares child soldiering to be one of the worst forms of child labour and prohibits forced or compulsory recruitment of children under the age of 18 in armed conflict. The Optional Protocol to the CRC on the involvement of children in armed conflict sets 18 as the age limit for compulsory recruitment and participation in hostilities and a minimum age of 16 for voluntary recruitment.

These instruments, together with the relevant provisions of the Geneva Conventions, the Genocide Convention, the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty, the 1951 Refugee Convention, the 1967 Protocol protecting refugee children and several Security Council Resolutions (1261, 1314, 1379, 1460, 1539), constitute a strong and comprehensive body of legal instruments which provide standards on the protection of children affected by armed conflict and emergencies.