

## Addressing Climate Change in South Asia, with More Focus on Children.

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Over the last few decades the South Asian region, has been vastly impacted by the adverse effects of climate change. With a large percentage of the poor and vulnerable in the world living in the region, the social context makes the impacts of the situation to be increased in impact for the region. With the release of Working Group 1, AR4 Report of the IPCC, it has been shown that climate change can no more be called a myth, and that we all need to take action to address this phenomenon created by man. In order to address the issues of climate change, and find solutions, it is necessary that we look into its impacts with children of the region in mind.

### **Children, the Vulnerable and the Victimised.**

Over the last 25 years, extreme weather events, including heavy rainfall, heat waves, droughts, floods, cyclones and hurricanes, have contributed to injury, illness, impoverishment, displacement, hunger and death for hundreds of millions of people, often with particular implications for children.<sup>1</sup> It is further highlighted that without adequate planning and good governance, poor urban areas can be among the world's most life-threatening environments. (5) In some informal settlements, a quarter of all children still die before the age of five.<sup>2</sup> And in many urban areas, the risks children face are bound to be intensified by climate change.

Various conditions associated with climate change are likely to result in increased risks for young children. In slower onset disasters such as droughts and famines, mortality rates are also more extreme for young children. Overall death rates for young children continue to drop in most parts of the world due to improved health care, immunisation rates and environmental conditions. But for many of the children most at risk from the biggest killers – diarrhoeal and respiratory diseases, malaria and malnutrition – the situation is likely to worsen with some of the effects of climate change.

Moreover, small children, along with women and the elderly, are most likely to be victims of such extreme events as flooding, high winds and landslides. A study of flood-related mortality in Nepal, for instance, found the death rate for children to be double that of adults, with pre-school girls five times more likely to die than adult men.<sup>3</sup> The disproportionate health burden for children of challenging environmental conditions is well documented. According to the most conservative estimates, children under 14 are 44 per cent more likely to die because of environmental factors than the population at large.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Bartlett, Sheridan, (2008) *Climate Change and Urban Children: Impacts and Implications for Adaptation in Low- and Middle Income Countries*, SAGE, IIED

<sup>2</sup>Ibid

<sup>3</sup>Pradhan, Elizabeth Kimbrough, Keith P West, Joanne Katz, Steven C LeClerq, Subarna K Khatri and Sharada Ram Shrestha (2007), "Risk of flood-related mortality in Nepal", *Disasters* Vol 31, No 1, pages 57–70.

<sup>4</sup>Prüss-Üstün, A and C Corvalán (2006), *Preventing Disease through Healthy Environments. Towards an Estimate of the Environmental Burden of Disease*, WHO, Geneva.

In addition to weather events triggered by climate event, malnutrition also plays a key role in impacting the children of South Asia. Reduced rainfall and other changes affect agriculture which in turn impacts agricultural systems of the region and result in interruptions in food supplies in sudden, acute events. After Bangladesh's 1998 floods, when families were unable to compensate over time for the shortage of food and the deterioration in health conditions, flood-exposed children failed to experience the "catch-up" growth common after a shock, remaining shorter than unexposed children from the same neighbourhoods.<sup>5</sup> Malnutrition appears further to be a greater risk among children of displaced families.<sup>6</sup>

### **Children as Agents of Change**

Despite the vulnerability of the children to climate change, it has been shown that with adequate support and protection, children can also be extraordinarily resilient in the face of stresses and shocks. There is ample documentation, moreover, of the benefits of having older children active, informed and involved in responding to the challenges in their lives, not only for their own learning and development, but for the energy, resourcefulness and knowledge that they can bring to local issues.<sup>7</sup>

In addressing climate change, climate education plays a key role. Article 6 of the UNFCCC focuses on this aspect and highlights the need for equal education for male and female children which would allow changes in mind sets, and awareness to react to climate change. We also need to take into account the context of South Asia, where the poor and vulnerable households are of adults who are without a formal education. In this context, children who are educated will play a key role in changing the lives of communities through the knowledge that is bestowed upon them through education. Children educated on climate change will result in education of families as well as a future generation.

Furthermore in building climate change related strategies and agendas, the policy makers need to pay attention the inclusivity of children, and how the changes will impact the lives of children. In the creation of these, it is necessary that children's requirements are well understood. This is purely based on the fact that unless such understanding exists, the steps they take to respond to the crises of climate change are likely to be mis-targeted in some important ways.

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<sup>5</sup>Del Ninno, Carlo and Matthias Lundberg (2005), "The long-term impact of the 1998 flood on nutrition in Bangladesh", *Economics and Human Biology* Vol 3, No 1, pages 67–96.

<sup>6</sup>Jayatissa R, A Bekele, C L Piyasena and S Mahamithawa (2006), "Assessment of nutritional status of children under five years of age, pregnant women and lactating women living in relief camps after the tsunami in Sri Lanka", *Food and Nutrition Bulletin* Vol 27, No 2, pages 144–152; also Barrios, R E, J P Stansbury, R Palencia and M T Medina (2000), "Nutritional status of children under five years of age in three hurricaneaffected areas of Honduras", *Revista Panamericana de Salud Pública* Vol 8, No 6, pages 380–384.

<sup>7</sup>Hart, R (1997), *Children's Participation: The Theory and Practice of Involving Young Citizens in Community Development and Environmental Care*, Earthscan/ UNICEF, London.

In South Asia some countries have understood the key role that children play in battling climate change. In order to address the issue on a much more effective manner, countries such as Sri Lanka have incorporated a method of getting the active participation of school children in environmental projects which address pollution through environmental clubs set up in schools through the guidance of the Ministries of Environment and Education. However there remain improvements that could be made with a focus on climate change, given that despite the existence of a structure to implement the inclusivity of children in addressing climate change, there remains the need for them to be climate change focussed, or linked to the theme.

In other countries of South Asia there also remain other projects which have understood the role of children as change makers. Many Civil Society Organisations having understood the importance of children in this process have focussed their awareness creation projects to focus on children, and also on climate education. In India Clean India initiative has successfully reached out to many schools in different regions, as well as many other countries are thinking in lines of similar action.

In conclusion we could say that the focus on children as a solution of climate change is not missing. However there needs to be a consolidated effort on developing the quality of the space allocated to children to be agents of change, and improvement in their inclusivity in structuring strategies to act on climate change.

