

Briefing

Urban

Keywords:

Human settlements, children, cities, resilience, adaptation, urban poverty



Issue date
December 2013

Policy pointers

Urbanisation and the 'youth bulge' mean urban children are crucial for the future of Asian cities and an increasingly important focus for disaster risk reduction.

Poor urban children are especially vulnerable: small hazards and 'every day' disasters ultimately affect many more urban children than do large disasters. Yet children in cities are not just victims — they have much to contribute to risk reduction planning.

NGOs tackling urban children's disaster risk need to expand beyond preparedness, response and recovery into development that provides protective infrastructure and basic services.

Priority areas for NGOs should include better housing and infrastructure, children's rights, family coping capacity, community-based collaborations, children's involvement in planning processes, and standardised data collection that reveals the differentiated risks urban children face.

Reducing disaster risks for urban children: insights from four Asian cities

Urban children who live and work on the streets are among the most vulnerable and susceptible to disasters. Yet few urban disaster risk reduction programmes in Asia focus on children, and most remain dominated by preparedness, early warning and response. While these approaches remain important, such programmes cannot address the backlog of need for basic infrastructure and services that underpins urban risks to children and other vulnerable groups. This briefing presents findings from a study of urban children's risk and agency in Dhaka (Bangladesh), Kathmandu (Nepal), Manila (the Philippines) and Jakarta (Indonesia). It outlines priority action areas for child-centred organisations seeking to tackle children's long-term disaster risks in Asian cities.

Population dynamics

Two population dynamics are making urban children an increasingly important focus for disaster risk reduction (DRR) in Asian megacities: the shift in the balance of the population from rural to urban areas (see Figures 1 and 2, overleaf) and the 'youth bulge' — infants, children and adolescents make up a very large proportion of national populations. In rapidly urbanising countries such as Bangladesh, Nepal, the Philippines and Indonesia, absolute numbers of urban children will continue to grow.¹ Asia is the most rapidly urbanising continent, and has more than one quarter of the world's children.² Many countries in the region, including the four discussed here, are among the most vulnerable to disasters and climate impacts.

Knowledge gaps

We know little about the risks children living in urban poverty face, beyond environmental

hazards³ and how climate change is likely to affect their health.⁴ We know even less about how to make children more resilient. These gaps are because child-centred research and non-governmental organisations' (NGOs') programmes have largely focused on rural areas. Child-centred NGOs in Asia, Africa and Latin America therefore lack the information they need to respond effectively in towns and cities.

Research conducted by IIED in partnership with Plan International has engaged with street children, working children and squatter and 'slum' children in Dhaka, Kathmandu, Manila and Jakarta.⁵ The work aims to help Plan International and other child-centred organisations develop their country strategies and urban DRR programmes across the region. It should also be relevant to other NGOs and development agencies involved in child rights and/or DRR in Asia.

Urban children experience disasters along a 'spectrum of risk'. At one end are 'everyday'

With adequate support and protection, children can be extraordinarily resilient to stresses and shocks

hazards (such as illness, seasonal rainfall that floods homes, prolonged droughts, heat waves) and 'small disasters' (for example, a few people are killed or injured or properties damaged, but too few to be classified as a major disaster).⁶ On the other end are 'large disasters' that meet the criteria for inclusion in international disaster

datasets. Although large disasters disproportionately affect children, and girls in particular,⁷ their overall contribution to ill-health, injury and premature death is relatively small. Easily preventable illnesses and accidents

cause the vast majority of infant and child deaths, while the many small hazards ultimately affect many more children and their families.⁸

Yet much work on DRR focuses only on large disasters. In contrast, our research seeks to understand risk from small everyday disasters as well, so that the underlying factors can be tackled.

Trends in child-centred urban disaster risk reduction

Four trends in child-centred urban DRR across the four countries stand out as being particularly relevant for child-centred organisations.

First, a small but growing number of NGOs are initiating DRR programmes in urban areas. This is relatively new territory for humanitarian practitioners and has been driven by several factors, including: recent natural disasters (for example, the earthquake in eastern Nepal in 2011; Typhoon Ketsana in Metro Manila in 2009; and the floods in Jakarta in 2011 and 2013); human-induced disasters (for example, the collapse of Rana Plaza in Savar, Dhaka in 2013); recurrent monsoon flooding (including inundation, which is a growing problem in all cities, but especially in Dhaka); the threat of potentially devastating earthquakes; and the compounding impacts of climate change and unplanned urbanisation.

Second, these programmes remain largely confined to preparedness, response and recovery, with little emphasis on linking humanitarian action with long-term development policy and programming. Yet the chronic lack of investment in development is increasingly recognised as a principal driver of urban vulnerability.⁹ This is particularly relevant when considering the risks facing boys and girls, who are more dependent on protective infrastructure and services than adults, due to their higher vulnerability and susceptibility to hazards.

Third, those child-centred urban DRR programmes that do exist have limited geographic coverage. As the number of such programmes grows, so too does potential fragmentation, overlap and duplication. Coordinated engagement with local governments at the city scale can help to avoid this, but the capacity of local governments varies substantially: Kathmandu and Dhaka lack good institutional capacity at the municipal level, while Manila has some of the strongest local governments in Southeast Asia and Jakarta possesses a centralised city government with provincial powers and considerable autonomy. Yet they all suffer from a chronic lack of

Figure 1. Urbanisation levels in Bangladesh, Nepal, the Philippines and Indonesia

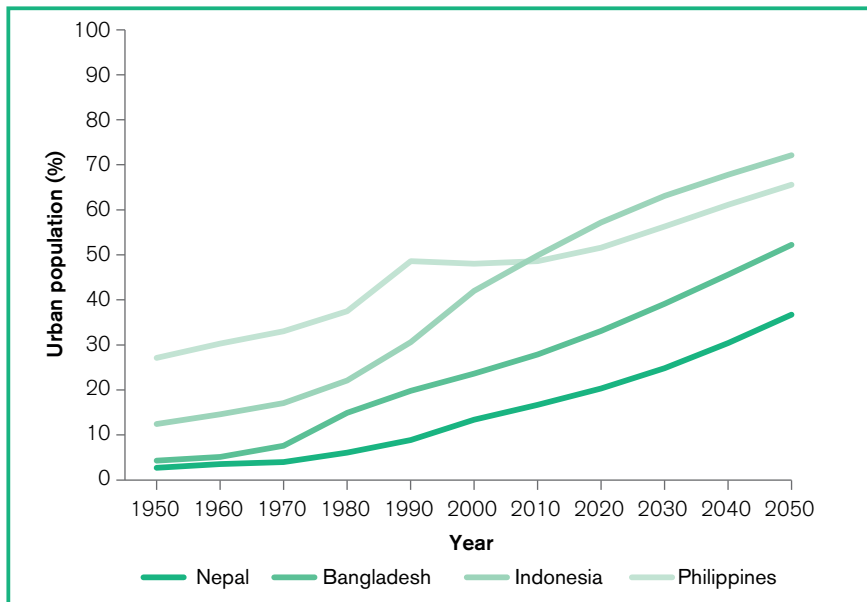
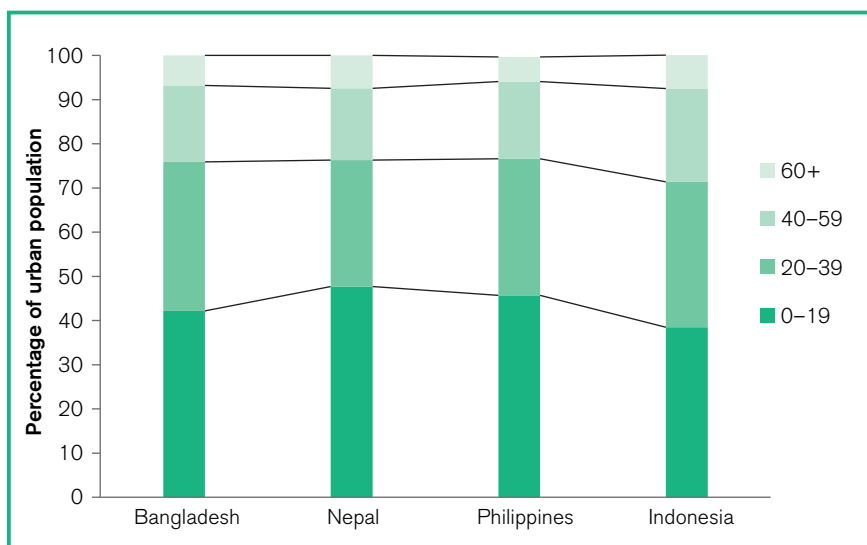


Figure 2. Share of the total population by age



resources for addressing the growing problem of 'slums' and their inhabitants' vulnerability.

Fourth, school-based disaster safety management programmes dominate child-centred urban DRR initiatives. These tend to favour non-structural interventions (such as education and awareness-raising) because making the built environment more resilient is expensive. But importantly, school-based programmes do not reach many of the poorest and most vulnerable children who do not attend school, either because they are forced to work or because school is too expensive.

Urban children at risk

While urban children are generally better off than rural children, this is not true for the hundreds of millions living in urban poverty. These children are more exposed to hazards because their families are often forced to live on the street or in informal settlements in hazard-prone areas (for example, steep slopes, floodplains, low-elevation coastal zones). Children are more susceptible to such hazards than adults, due to their developing cognition, limited experience and risky behaviour. As a result, children living in urban poverty are at higher risk than their more affluent peers.

Street children, working children and squatter and 'slum' children are widely regarded to be most at risk from urban poverty. However, their risks can vary considerably. For street children, the nature of their relationship with parents or adult carers can particularly influence their capacity to cope with bad weather and everyday health hazards. For working girls and boys, gender relations strongly shape the type of work, the occupational hazards and children's ability to attend school. For squatter and 'slum' children, the environmental trade-offs that their parents make to remain close to their livelihoods can determine the nature and extent of hazard exposure (for example, living in a floodplain versus a garbage dump).

Many children who work on the street or in factories return home to low-income informal settlements, meaning they are simultaneously working children or street children and 'slum' children. So distinguishing between these groups may not be particularly useful for child-centred NGOs interested in tackling the long-term development issues that keep all children living in urban poverty at high risk.

Urban children's resilience

Although children are disproportionately at risk on many fronts, they are not just victims. With adequate support and protection, children can also be extraordinarily resilient to stresses and

Box 1. Children's ideas for urban disaster risk reduction (DRR)

Risk communication and awareness raising

- Raise DRR awareness in communities through street dramas, singing, dancing, storytelling
- Use multimedia to reach children and communities, particularly through the internet (including social media), radio and television.

School safety and education

- Better integrate DRR into formal and informal school curricula
- Develop training programmes to make schools safer.

Environmental protection

- Clear drains to prevent floods
- Develop better solid waste management services to ensure drains are not clogged and rivers can flow
- Plant vegetation to prevent landslides and riverbank erosion.

Structural solutions

- Partner with governments to build infrastructure, such as drains and stormwater systems
- Build and maintain good all-weather roads with drains and culverts
- Retrofit schools and workplaces so they resist building collapse, earthquakes and extreme weather events
- Ensure communities have fire breaks and wide roads that allow emergency access.

Governance

- Work 'hand in hand' with vulnerable groups, including children and adolescents
- Strengthen collaboration between vulnerable communities, government and civil society to address needs and priorities that people (rather than international agencies) define.

shocks. Children across the four cities we studied had an impressive variety of ideas on DRR (see Box 1) that refute any claims that children and adolescents lack the knowledge and capacity to make meaningfully contributions to DRR.

The challenge for child-centred organisations is to educate children in active citizenship and to provide them with the support and protection they require to articulate their ideas within broader community development initiatives. Conventional approaches have tended to conduct child participation as separate projects.¹⁰ As a result, these are often short-lived, concluding when the organisation leaves. There is a clear need to involve children in shared processes that draw on their ideas and ingenuity to address local concerns.

Box 2. Priorities for reducing urban children's long-term risks

Enhance access to quality housing and other buildings by providing adequate basic infrastructure and services: these are the key factors determining child health and disaster /climate resilience. Children are particularly dependent on protective infrastructure and services because they are more vulnerable and susceptible to hazards than other age groups.

Expand remit to advocate children's rights to an adequate standard of living and to a safe working environment with local and national government institutions. Addressing the backlog of infrastructure and service needs will depend on the capacity of households, communities and local governments to act. Promoting children's rights to a safe living and working environment will also require stronger governance frameworks that engage civil society, government and private actors, including developers and employers.

Build the capacity of families and communities to cope with shocks and stresses. 'Coping' should take on a broader meaning in DRR, to include families' capacity to manage shocks and stresses without compromising children's wellbeing.

Collaborate with local community-based organisations engaged in development and DRR. Community organisation and action can motivate governments to fulfil their roles and responsibilities, while building families' coping capacity.

Design programmes that integrate children into community development and risk reduction decision making. Help children to participate in local-level planning processes that are community-driven and sustainable — when these are based on the principles of participation, inclusion and co-production they have significant potential to achieve significant benefits.

Work to improve understanding of the different risks faced by high- and low-income urban children. Little intra-urban data exist that are sufficiently disaggregated by age, sex, income, disability, school attendance, occupation, among other important variables.

Work with government and other agencies to develop standardised data collection methods so information can be aggregated and compared. Use these methods to prioritise the communities where the poorest and most vulnerable children live and work.

Reducing long term risks

NGOs wanting to reduce the disaster risks children face in urban areas will ultimately need to link DRR with long-term action on development. Box 2 outlines a set of priority actions that provide child-centred organisations with entry points for a long-term agenda in Asian cities.

Many of these priority areas may challenge child-centred organisations to expand their traditional remit beyond preparedness, early

warning and response. They also present a number of opportunities for supporting disaster prevention alongside better disaster awareness and preparedness. It is these longer-term activities that will ultimately make more resilient families and communities.

David Dodman and Donald Brown

David Dodman (www.iied.org/users/david-dodman) is a senior researcher in IIED's human settlements and climate change groups and leads the institute's work on cities and climate change. Donald Brown is an independent researcher, and a consultant with IIED's human settlements group.



Knowledge Products

The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) promotes sustainable development, linking local priorities to global challenges. We support some of the world's most vulnerable people to strengthen their voice in decision making.

Plan has been working for, and with, children for more than 75 years in 50 developing countries across Africa, Asia and the Americas. We focus on the inclusion, education, and protection of the most marginalised children, working in partnership with communities, local and national government and civil society.

Contact

David Dodman
david.dodman@iied.org

80–86 Gray's Inn Road
London, WC1X 8NH
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)20 3463 7399
Fax: +44 (0)20 3514 9055
www.iied.org

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This material is financed by Sida, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency. Sida does not necessarily share the opinions expressed here. The sole responsibility for content belongs to the authors.

Notes

¹ UNFPA. 2007. *Growing Up Urban. State of world population 2007. Youth Supplement*. UNFPA. / ² UNICEF. 2010. *State of the World's Children Report 2010 (Statistical Annex)*. UNICEF, New York / ³ Satterthwaite, D. et al. 1996. *The Environment for Children: Understanding and acting on the environmental hazards that threaten children and their parents*. Earthscan, London / ⁴ Bartlett, S. 2008. *Climate change and urban children. Impacts and Implications for adaptation in low- and middle-income countries*. IIED, London / ⁵ This paper draws on: Brown, D., Dodman, D. *Understanding children's risk and agency in urban areas and their implications for child-centred urban disaster risk reduction in Asia*. IIED, London. See: <http://pubs.iied.org/10652IIED>. The focus on capital cities will be complemented by ongoing IIED research in partnership with Save the Children on secondary Asian cities. / ⁶ UNISDR. 2011. *Revealing Risk, Redefining Development: The 2011 Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction*. ISDR, United Nations, Geneva. / ⁷ Swarup, A. et al. 2011. *Weathering the storm: Adolescent girls and climate change*. Plan International and UK Aid. / ⁸ UNICEF. 2012. *Children in an Urban World: The State of the World's Children 2012*. UNICEF, New York / ⁹ Satterthwaite, D. et al. 2007. *Adapting to Climate Change in Urban Areas: The Possibilities and Constraints in Low- and Middle-income Nations*. In: Dodman, D., Satterthwaite, D. *Adapting Cities to Climate Change: Understanding and Addressing the Development Challenges*. Routledge, London, Washington DC, 3–47. / ¹⁰ Varney, D., van Vliet, W. 2005. Local environmental initiatives oriented to children and youth: a review of UN-Habitat best practices. *Children, Youth and Environment* 15(2), 41–52.