

# Children's way to Disaster Risk Reduction



# Forward

**E**stablished in 1962, CARITAS INDIA works on disaster relief and response, natural resource management, sustainable agriculture, sustainable livelihoods, good governance, anti-human trafficking of women and children, peacebuilding and health care with a focus on HIV/AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis and other communicable diseases.

Being a frontline organization in the field of disaster relief, response and risk reduction, CARITAS INDIA advocates for rights-based humanitarian assistance, reducing underlying risks and building community resilience. Learning the people's way of coping with and managing disaster risks has helped CARITAS INDIA create an edge in the field of DRR and establish a wide network of partners spread across the country who work on various aspects like DRR, prevention, mitigation, climate change adaptation and building community resilience.

CARITAS INDIA believes that community is central to the process of resilience building. Working with communities has shown that "Resilience puts more emphasis on the community's strengths rather than concentrating on their needs in an emergency (DFID, 2007). It does not focus on what is missing in a crisis (needs and vulnerabilities) but on what is already in place (resources and adaptive capacities). Hence Resilience as a concept compels external intervention agencies to bring the focus back to communities, their capacities and local institutions of democratic governance. The inherent strengths of people, households and communities based on cultural contexts and diversity of conditions and way of life must be recognized when exploring the idea of resilience.

The focus is now making children active change agents in reducing disaster risk. It is in this context CARITAS INDIA with Pally Unanyan Samity Baruipur piloting Children Led DRR programme carried the theme of "Children as change agents in DRR". The purpose of the booklet was to share experiences and learnings and thereby develop commonality in approach towards resilience building by the children.

This document signifies the role of children in disaster risk reduction initiatives and brings forth an insight on how to build the resilience of children by capturing pieces of evidences from the field in the form of case studies and analysis.

CARITAS INDIA is pleased to bring in this document which provides evidence from the ground on Children led approaches on DRR and resilience.

We hope that this document will be effective in providing a roadmap to CARITAS INDIA and its partners on how to work towards building children's resilience and also act as a knowledge product.

**Fr. Paul Moonjely**

**Executive Director – Caritas India**

# Introduction

Millions of children are affected by disasters every year. Children need not be passive victims, however, but instead may contribute to disaster risk reduction activities. This booklet provides an understanding of Caritas India for children's involvement in disaster risk reduction activities. It also reviews and analyses the literature on children's participation, on their developmental capacity to participate, and their active disaster risk reduction activities in the pilot project in the Sundarbans.

Caritas India believes Children are resources to be cultivated and mobilized for disaster preparedness, response, recovery, and resilience. Attention is needed to identify approaches to appropriately enlist, engage, and involve children in disaster risk reduction activities; to promote these efforts; and to evaluate these approaches.

Our humble efforts with children in the Sundarbans would bring positive results in the community and make children positive agents of change in DRR sector.

**Fr. Jolly**

**Assistant Executive Director – Caritas India**

# Children in Disasters

Disasters threaten the lives, rights and needs of millions of children around the world. When disasters strike, children are especially vulnerable to diseases caused by disrupted access to basic services such as health, nutrition, safe water and sanitation. Their education suffers when schools get converted to immediate relief centres and become unfit for conducting education activities under the disaster impact. Each year 175 million are affected by disasters globally.<sup>1</sup> In 2014 alone, disasters and emergencies forced 9 million girls and boys out of school.

Children make up an extremely large percentage of the particularly vulnerable population, and the implications, especially for younger children, can be long term affecting their development. If speculation about the impacts of global warming doesn't take into account the particular vulnerabilities (as well as capacities) of children at different ages, measure for prevention and adaptation may prove to be inadequate in critical ways and may even result in additional stresses for young minds and bodies. *Potential climate-related disasters pose a serious threat to children and their basic rights to survival, food security, wellbeing, access to clean water, sanitation, education and security.*

In the coming years, children's vulnerability to disasters is expected to increase as the frequency and intensity of natural hazards rises. If children can comprehend the dangers around them in their neighbourhoods and are empowered and given a chance to voice their opinions and concerns, it can play a vital role in their own protection. When their voice is heard, and their needs are prioritised, they are able to contribute to long-term development after the disaster and play an active role in building safer communities for everyone contrary to the popular belief that children are only passive victims of a disaster.<sup>2</sup>

Conscious of the potential of children, and believing in their agency, Caritas India has taken a lead role in developing a distinctive Child Rights-Based approach to Disaster Risk Reduction. The approach marks a shift from perceiving children as passive victims to children as agents of change for their own well-being and the development of their communities. However, power dynamics, combined with the dominant belief that they are passive victims make rights-based approaches to child-led DRR quite challenging in the present-day scenario.

## Children as Agents of Change on Disaster Risk Reduction

Contrary to the popular belief that children are just passive participants in the disaster management cycle, they can act as protagonists for action in reducing risk and catalysts for behavioural change and collective action as well as can play an important role in communicating about risk in communities. This has been demonstrated in Caritas India's Child-led Disaster Risk Reduction (CLDRR) programme in the ecologically sensitive Sundarbans region of West Bengal.

Education can play a crucial role in children's understanding and perception of risk. Past research has also proved that school disaster education programmes are useful in increasing community disaster preparedness. When children are exposed to new ideas they can convey them to the entire family, even if their participation in decision-making is seen as no more than a token effort. Disaster preparedness in India has immense scope for improvement both at the policy as well as the implementation level.<sup>3</sup> Caritas

---

<sup>1</sup>Webster, Mackinnon et al. (2008), The humanitarian costs of climate change (Medford, MA: Feinstein International Center).

<sup>2</sup>Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction: For Children

<sup>3</sup>(2009) Children's Participation in community-based disaster risk reduction and adaptation to climate change: T.G. Tanner; IIED; Participatory Action and Change

India's Child - Led DRR programme is a positive example of making education DRR friendly.

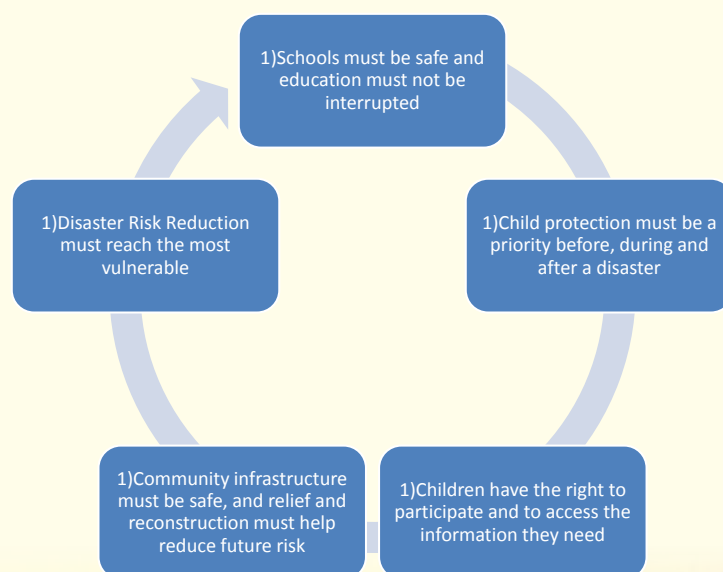
Child-led DRR recognizes children as both programme participants as well as active citizens through a combination of child-sensitive and participatory policy programming, where children actively take

part in decision-making, planning and accountability processes for the preparedness, prevention and response phases of disaster. Therefore, this requires work at the community level in bringing both adults and children together as well as a focus on strategies to influence policy.<sup>4</sup>

## Children's Charter for Disaster Risk Reduction

The Children's Charter for Disaster risk reduction has been developed through consultations with more than 600 children in 21 countries in Africa, Asia and South America. The charter presents five points which were selected based on discussions on three broad topics namely the impacts of disasters on the lives of children, the networks that exist in their communities to tackle disasters and their priorities for DRR going forward.

- 1) Schools must be safe and education must not be interrupted
- 2) Child protection must be a priority before, during and after a disaster
- 3) Children have the right to participate and to access the information they need
- 4) Community infrastructure must be safe, and relief and reconstruction must help reduce future risk
- 5) Disaster Risk Reduction must reach the most vulnerable



<sup>4</sup>Enabling Child-Centred Agency in Disaster Risk Reduction (2011). UNISDR



# Child - Led Disaster Risk Reduction – a proactive approach by Caritas India

Child-led Disaster Risk Reduction is an innovative approach to Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) that fosters the agency of children and youth, in groups and as individuals, to work towards making their lives safer and their communities more resilient to disasters. It is empowering for children, and respectful of their views and rights as well as their vulnerabilities. Child-Led DRR is a flexible rights-based approach combining child-focused (for children) and child-led (by children) activities with interventions geared towards bringing about change in the community, local and duty bearers. It applies strategies such as awareness raising, capacity building, group formation, institutional development, research and influencing and advocacy across a range of areas.

Child-centred DRR also embraces the four principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: (i) non-discrimination, (ii) the best interests of the child, (iii) the right to life, survival and development, and (iv) the view of the child.

Young citizens have the right to participate in the decisions that affect their lives and thus they have the right to participate in the governance of DRR 'services'. Their participation results in better decisions, higher quality services, greater access to those services, and better development outcomes as a result of those services



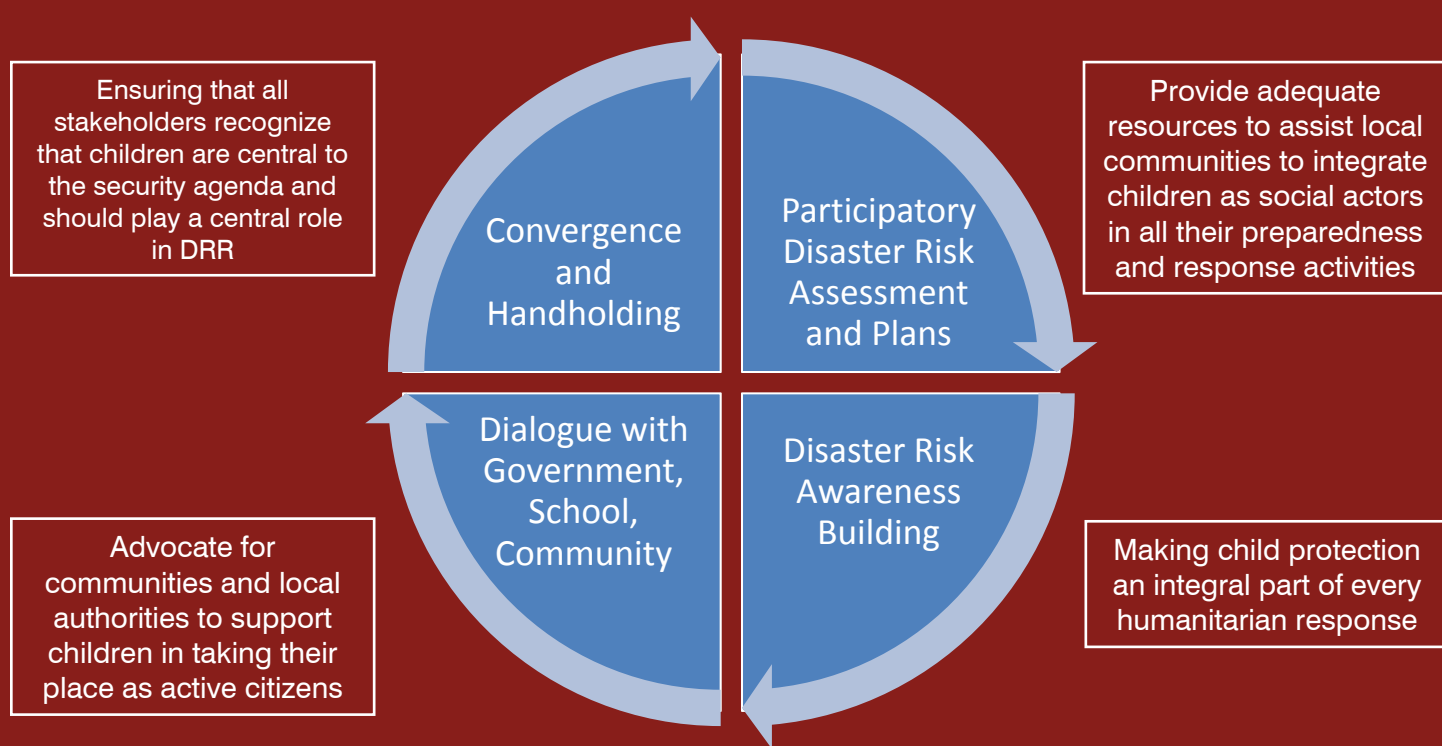
# Child-Led DRR in the Sundarbans – the pilot

Caritas India has been working on Child led Disaster risk reduction since 2016 and has adopted a Child-rights based approach to DRR to create an enabling environment for the empowerment of children to take an active role in decision-making at the community level. This was done through awareness building of not just children, but also adults, school teachers and local government authorities through continuous dialogue.

Even though at first the community was against the idea of children being active agents of change

continuous dialogue with all the project stakeholders fostered an environment that was receptive of this idea in the disaster management cycle.

Caritas India's model can be understood as a child-centred community-based framework where children play leading roles in their community to minimize the negative impacts of disasters. This can only be achieved through the meaningful and ethical participation of children in assessing, planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating DRR based on the UNCRRC.



Only after establishing that children must be empowered to act as change agents in their communities, Caritas India facilitated a completely participatory risk assessment with the children. Caritas facilitated discussions about hazards and risks handing over the lead to the children. This enabled the children to take full charge and lead the assessment. Several tools like transect walks, resource and risk mapping etc were used by the children. They were then able to reach a common understanding and prioritise their concerns with regards to structural safety and present them to the local government. These concerns were

seriously taken up and the local governments were able to include these ideas in their respective village development plans.

The programme has also focused on training children on Early Warning systems, information dissemination, search and rescue and first aid, Standard Operating Procedures during Earthquakes, Cyclones, floods etc. The programme also focuses on building the capacity of children in various sectors like psychosocial care. The module mixes both classroom and outdoor learning so empower children to participate in dialogue

with the community, dialogue with the government and dialogue with nature, which in the larger picture has also played a vital role in helping children develop better coping strategies. It is important to note that whilst the programme strives to empower children to actively participate in the Community Disaster Risk

Reduction dialogue, it in no way absolves adults and the state of their roles and responsibilities. Even though the children are playing lead roles, it is done with the support of adults in their communities, thus creating a space for children to work together with adults.

## The programmes and actions

Gosaba Island is an isolated area in the Sundarbans and is highly prone to disasters. Its inhabitants' lives and livelihoods suffer annually at the hands of recurring disasters. Children are the most vulnerable in any kind of disaster. Resource-poor communities lack infrastructure and knowledge on disaster preparedness which has been seen to have an effect on gradually increasing child abuse, child labour, school dropout rates and underage marriage.

Caritas India through her partner Palli Unnayan Samiti Baruipur has implemented the CLDRR project in 16 sansads and 10 schools under 2 Gram Panchayats namely Pathankhali & Bipradaspur under Gosaba Sundarbans.

### Interventions

- Capacity and leadership on DRR in schools, making champions of reduction of Disaster Risk.
- Trainings for children on the CLDRR process.
- Conducting a completely participatory HVCA (Hazards, Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment) which was led by the children. The findings of this study highlighted the issues faced by children in their school and community during disasters, and they were presented in the Gram Panchayats.
- Forming children groups on Early Warning, Search and Rescue, Environment Protection, WASH and Coordination groups and training them.
- Making family disaster preparedness plans and conducting mock drills.
- Improving behavioral change communication specially on hand washing and diarrhea management





## Views from the field

### Kids are accessing disaster risks at the World Heritage site: The Sunderbans

Children from the Sunderban area are identifying hazards and potential risks during Disasters to assess the Vulnerability and potential resources to avert future calamities. The Sunderbans, one of the World Heritage sites is facing dramatic changes in terms of rising water levels due to gradual climate change. Floods, embankment erosion and cyclones are some of the common phenomena in the Sundarbans. The island has once had a population of 40,000 people but today only over 3,000 live here.

Children are particularly vulnerable to a range of risks especially during disasters due to their coping capacity. Caritas India's Child Led Disaster Risk Reduction (CLDRR) programme at Pathankhali & Bipradaspur panchayats of Gosaba Sundarban is helping these areas build children's capacity to reduce the loss of life and property by strengthening adaptive coping strategies using appropriate practices.

The program involves each and every child in the area to develop their knowledge and skills on disaster management as well as develop their leadership qualities to lead and prepare their community from any natural calamity. 16 Children were facilitated to conduct Hazard, Risk, Vulnerability, Capacity Assessment (HVCA) at 16 Gram Sansads of Bipradaspur and Pathankhali Gram Panchayat under Gosaba, South 24 Parganas through transect walks, Resource mapping, vulnerability mapping and institutional mapping. These learnings were shared as a plan in the Gram Sabha. It is imperative that the children understand the scenario of their neighbourhood to get a clear idea of the risks, their vulnerabilities and their capacities. "We are the residents of a very remote island village in the Sundarbans where flooding is very common. We could not even learn anything about it in our school. But now we have come to know our risk, vulnerability and capacity after this programme and I promised to involve our friends in this process", says Monidipa Sarder one of the students of class IX and resident of Choto Kamarpara village under Pathankhali Gram

Panchayat. Children come in advance and wait to learn new things like hazards, vulnerability and propose possible solutions to the issue.

*"Amra Khub Bhalo Ginis Shiklam, Barita geya Bolbo, bandhuder bolbo",*

(We have learned very important things, we will share it with our family and friends)", shared Rinku Barman, a student of class VI from Amratoli village. Guardians are encouraging and supporting their children to be involved in this programme. Children are now participating in development issues by raising their voice in terms of repairing and soiling of their school ground, roads etc. They have shown a keen interest in knowing the process of early warning, rescue, first aid, school safety and social forestry issues.



### Continuous Knowledge Sharing:

In Pathankkali Grampanchayat of Goshaba, many children are first generation learners. Their parents were not able to receive an education. Therefore, by sending their children to school, many mothers reported that even they look forward to learning from their daughters and sons.

Arpita Das, mother of Prithi Das shared that when there was a warning received for strong winds, her daughter immediately instructed her to start preparing a small family survival kit with dry food, candles and matches, important medicines and water. She also asked her to

gather all their important documents and wrap them in plastic so that they wouldn't get damaged in the storm. She informed her that before the storm approaches they should evacuate their home and go to the safe shelter which was identified.

*Rupam Medha studying in class four at Pathankhali F.P School of Gosaba block*, became a change agent, as he taught his parents, friends, and neighbours on how to prepare a stretcher with very minimum household equipment to carry patients during an emergency.

*Subhra Mondal, of class 3*, shared about preparing ORS.

Likewise, 260 child volunteers are carrying the DRR information to their parents and peers from school to communities. They shared how their parents had started keeping the important documents safely packed to prevent any loss or damage. This indeed has instilled confidence in the children. Now the young changemakers speak on the do's and don'ts and safety measures during cyclones, floods, and lightning to which Sundarbans and their schools and villages are vulnerable. This has been possible with the support they received from their headmaster and teachers, and the entire education authority at different levels, in additions to their parents. Caritas India is planning to train more student volunteers, who will educate not only peers but parents and community and be the messengers of DRR.

## Influencing local self-governance

Children as actors of change was always believed to be something unfathomable by the local governing bodies. When the children presented their points in the Gram Sansad meeting, the PRI members were pleasantly surprised to see how mindful the children's observations were of the risks that surround them in their locality.

These points were included in the village development plans, and the local bodies are already acting on repairing roads, identifying more locations to build storm shelters for the community and build an Eco Park for the children. They would like to see more children get involved in this process and be better prepared for any disaster that the community may face.

Rubaiya and Suparana, both students of Class 9 in Pathankali GP never thought they would have the opportunity to go to the Gram Panchayat to present the findings of their risk assessment. The girls also raised points like including spaces for pregnant women, elderly and infants in flood shelters. They were introduced to different ideas which were not part of their school curriculum, and would like to continue learning more about disaster preparedness, early warnings, assessments, monitoring etc. School teachers have also stressed that these topics must be included in the state education board's curriculum so that these messages can spread to children all over the state and not just to the programme participants.



