

Children's Voices in Disaster Policy Spaces

Field Report: El Salvador

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May 2007

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Introduction

"Before no-one listened to us, but now they listen and take us seriously" Children's Emergency Committee member, Petapa

El Salvador is exposed to significant hazards including hurricanes, earthquakes, drought, land-slides and floods, which translate into disaster events due to the high levels of vulnerability of its population and asset-base. The impacts of Hurricane Mitch in 1998 and the 2001 earthquakes in particular have increased the imperative to reduce disaster risks across all sections and sectors of society. Adverse effects on social and economic development are illustrated by insurance figures estimating economic losses in 2001 totalling more than 12% of the country's GDP.

Children and adults, as well as policy and decision-makers demonstrated a good understanding of the socio-economic and socio-political causes of disasters, particularly highlighting poverty and constrained livelihoods opportunities. However, raising the basic level of awareness about disaster risks and risk reduction remains a major requirement in the country and in communities. This can help build firm foundations across sectors to ensure that development interventions contribute to reduced vulnerability and do not inadvertently increase people's exposure to hazards.

Plan UK is spearheading an innovative project in which children and youth organisations are supported in their efforts to claim their right to safety and to campaign for disaster risk reduction (DRR). This project also involves integrating DRR within Plan's ongoing development work, ensuring child-centred disaster reduction approaches are a programmatic concern for all sectors.

This research represents a preliminary scoping phase to explore the opportunities and capacities for children's voices to contribute to policy-making on DRR. The research is a comparative study of El Salvador and the Philippines, two countries in which Plan's child-centred DRR work is most advanced. This report presents a summary of the research process and early findings from El Salvador following similar research in the Philippines.

1. Research Process

The field research phase in El Salvador was conducted during the week of 23rd April 2007, with a core research team that included:

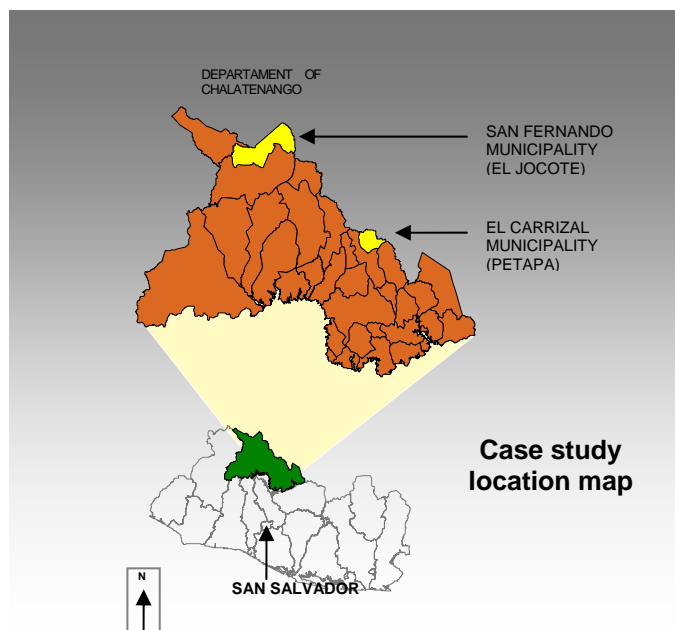
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This team was supported by additional staff from the Plan national headquarters and the regional office in Chalatenango, including Don Evaristo, Lucio León, Guillermo García, and volunteers from the participatory video programme in Chalatenango.

The research was conducted in four locations (see map below):

<i>Location</i>	<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Dates</i>
Community of Petapa , El Carrizal Municipality, Department of Chalatenango	To work with a children’s group in a community where Plan have a strong presence and have already developed CCDRR work	24 th -25 th April
Community of El Jocote , San Fernando Municipality, Department of Chalatenango	To work with a children’s group in a community where Plan have recently initiated engagement, but on themes other than DRR, providing a good baseline comparison	26 th April
San Salvador	To interview key stakeholders involved in disaster management at the national level	23 rd and 27 th April
Chalatenango , Department of Chalatenango	To interview stakeholders involved in disaster management at regional level in Chalatenango, in the central northern zone of El Salvador	27 th April

UCA and IDS research members led the research facilitation process as well as providing support for the research team’s deliberations. The assistance of Plan staff was fundamental both in organising the fieldwork schedule and logistics, but also in facilitating high levels of trust between researchers and community members due to their ongoing engagement. Plan also arranged meetings with policy-makers at regional and national level. It is recognised that Plan had significant control over the research locations but the research team had complete command over the questions asked and the methods of enquiry used.



UCA and IDS researchers facilitated the research process with assistance from Plan staff familiar with the local groups when necessary and requested, ensuring a suitable degree of independence in the research process.

Although there was a clear distinction between the two communities studied in terms of the degree of previous engagement by Plan, the communities shared very similar geographical characteristics. Both communities were located in remote river valleys on the border with Honduras, accessed by steep and sinuous gravelled roads, and with an economy based on subsistence agriculture (predominantly corn and beans) and livestock. The steep slopes and clay soil mean it is prone to landslides due to saturation and earthquake triggers.

Flexibility was crucial to the methodology used by the team, with a set of prearranged options to cope with the dynamic environment of children's groups and different levels of participation. Focus group discussions and visioning exercises were used with policy and decision-makers at national and regional level, complimented by in-depth interviews. These used a set of guiding questions to facilitate discussion that included the causes of disasters, past disaster events and their consequences, and current response and coordination. The sessions were recorded on tape to help the analytical process.

At community level, methods included risk mapping and ranking, visioning exercises, guided walks, stakeholder and influence mapping, and preparation of shorts video publicity pieces. Sessions were recorded through the materials generated, recorded on video by young members of Plan's participatory video programme, in photographs, and in written notes. A detailed account of methods and participants can be found in annexes 1 and 2.

2. Findings

The following section briefly outlines some initial findings and recommendations from the research team's scoping work. These findings are broadly arranged around the research questions, highlighting the experiences and capacity of children and young people to express their voices in policy spaces and foster change, the opportunities to engage in policy spaces nationally and locally, and the implications for Plan's child and youth-centred work on disaster risk reduction.

2.1 Children's Voices and DRR - Capacity and Experience

The power of children's voice in reducing risks

The risk mapping, ranking and guided walk exercises in Petapa clearly demonstrated the ability of the children's community emergency committee to identify and communicate risks from their own perspective. Beyond this, they have also been able to identify actions necessary to reduce these risks and to articulate these needs in different local policy spaces to generate concrete actions.

A wide range of risks were identified during the participatory exercises, including those related to natural hazards such as hurricanes and earthquakes, and those where human activities were considered to be the key determinant of disasters by raising vulnerability, such as burning slopes to clear them for cultivation. Water-related concerns, including contamination, over-abstraction, and erosion/flooding ranked highly in both communities.

High frequency risks were also commonly cited, with the blocked access road particularly important El Jocote. The children's group in Petapa identified the everyday dumping of litter as the highest priority risk due to the spread of disease, contamination of air, soil and water, and the potential to block waterways. The children's emergency committee has consequently undertaken clean-up campaigns coordinated with the adult emergency committee.

An environmental education programme in Petapa has targeted awareness-raising on tree felling, burning of field slopes to clear for cultivation, and the extraction of sand and rocks from the River Sumpul. Tree felling was the subject of a mural drawn on the school buildings (see figure 1) and signs were erected by the committee to forbid the extraction of rocks and sand from the river for personal use (see box 1).



Figure 1 (above): Mural on wall of school in Petapa designed and painted jointly by the school and community emergency committees. It reads: 'By planting trees we protect the soil and avoid disasters'.



Figure 2 (right): Railings installed in the school at the request of the emergency committee to reduce risk of injury to pupils from falling down the steep adjoining slope.

Within the School Emergency Committee, set up as part of a national response to the 2001 earthquakes and the precursor to the current young people's committee, children identified risks within the school grounds. These included potential damage to classrooms from earthquakes and the presence of steep drops next to walkways. With Plan assistance, children lobbied for installation of railings for these walkways (see Figure 2).

The research findings suggest that there is considerable potential for children and young people's voices to act as agents of change. The children involved were quick to express pride in their involvement in the group and in its achievements to date. This contrasted with earlier stages of the process in Petapa, when children had felt shy about expressing their views and were mocked by their peers. By identifying risks and working with others in the community, including the adult emergency committee, the children's group has created tangible changes that bolster self-belief and enthusiasm. Although concrete actions have not been taken to date in El Jocote, the topic was also met there with enthusiasm and interest.

Box 1: Safe policy spaces: At risk from risk reduction?

The River Sumpul forms the border between the study communities and Honduras, generating large flows during the wet season with the power to cause significant scouring and riverbank erosion.

The children of the Petapa Emergency Committee identified the unregulated extraction of rocks and stones from the river as a major risk, leading to increased erosion and vulnerability to flooding of houses near the river. Signs prohibiting extraction for personal use have since been erected with the agreement of the local leaders.



Children recounted the story of the arrival of a lorry from outside the community to load stones from the river. Acting on the strength of their convictions and buoyed by their previous activities, a number of children went to the river to protest at this activity, sitting on top of the lorry until it agreed to leave. Although for personal use, this collection had apparently been sanctioned by local authorities, revealing power relations central to the challenge of risk reduction.

Empowerment of children's voices is likely to lead in future to children's groups directly challenging vested interests and power relations that adversely affect vulnerability. These challenges, including direct action as seen in Petapa, while laudable in their convictions, may inadvertently put children in positions of potential danger. Such possibilities need to be carefully monitored by Plan, which is in a strong position to mediate in such situations and ensure that action does not put children themselves at risk unacceptably.

Concrete actions as drivers of agency

This scoping research suggests that such concrete actions may be crucial in allowing children to develop confidence in their own capacity to act as agents of change within and outside their community context. The research exercise itself allowed the children to reflect on their abilities and achievements, as well as to consider their communication channels and levels of influence to create change. The results highlight the importance of using a risk management framework to allow identification of low impact / high frequency 'everyday' risks as well as disaster risks influenced by more occasional hazards such as hurricanes and earthquakes.

These elements are an important part of a long-term approach to facilitating disaster reduction through engagement at community level, and are well represented in the contrasts evident between field sites in Petapa and El Jocote. In contrast to Petapa, both adults and children in the smaller location of El Jocote, where Plan's engagement was far less mature, had more limited experience in valuing their own and each others' perspectives, harnessing

the potential agency of all community members. The process of empowering community members with the self-belief in both the value of their point of view and their ability to take action to affect change is a valuable outcome of Plan’s work in El Salvador in its own right. Such empowerment and self-belief in their voice as an agent of change may be regarded as a crucial pre-requisite to fostering the regular management of disaster risks.

These findings are particularly salient in El Salvador, where Plan is planning to finance micro-projects of up to US\$500 based on ideas formulated and implemented by children’s groups. Preliminary work has generated a number of project ideas with community groups, and Plan will need to ensure a strong monitoring component in trialling of projects and feeding back the resulting processes, impacts and engagement with policy spaces.

2.2 Policy Spaces – Opportunities for Engagement

The study of policy spaces for children’s voice was necessarily limited to the Petapa case due to the relative infancy of the El Jocote community in disaster-related work and the younger age profile of children participating in the research activities. Policy spaces were identified through participatory stakeholder and influence mapping exercises, and during informal discussions during breaks and on guided walks.

A range of both official and unofficial pathways were identified for children and youth to communicate information about risks and risk reduction actions. Informal pathways focused on talking with family members and friends, and with teachers and the priest. Formal pathways included links with teachers through the School Emergency Committee, with adults by meeting with the community emergency committee, and direct liaison with local leaders in various bodies.

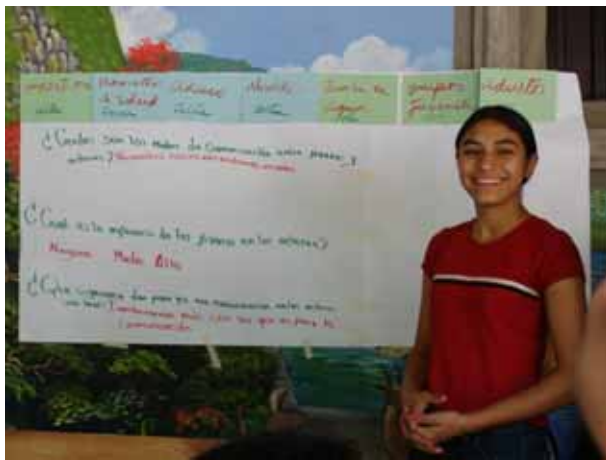


Figure 3: Stakeholder and influence mapping

The table below summarises communication levels and perceived degree of influence with a variety of these formal channels in Petapa.

Actor	Communications	Degree of influence
Teachers	Very good	High
Local water board	Very good	High
Adults in the community	Very good	High
Midwives	Very good	High
Community Priest	Excellent	High
Municipal Mayor	Poor	Medium
Community Development Association (ADESCO)	Poor	Medium
Health worker	Poor	Low

Policy spaces within households and communities

Formal communication pathways were found to exist primarily within their households and the immediate community. Although parents and siblings we mentioned during discussions as providing the most immediate communication pathway for children in Petapa, they were not included in their stakeholder mapping, which focused on formal pathways and actors.

The results suggest a positive relationship between the children's emergency committee and that constituted by adults in the community. The presence of family members in both adult and children's emergency committees in particular created positive linkages and fluidity between formal and informal pathways. These links can also help to build trust, open further pathways and spaces, and increase influence with other local actors, as evidenced in Petapa between children and the local water board. The operation and actions of the children's group extend into the neighbouring community of Olosingo in Honduras. This is particularly important given the collective action necessary for risk reduction related to common property such as the riverbed and riverbanks.

Early experiences in Petapa highlighted the importance of including parents and other community members in the process of forming and facilitating children's groups. When parents are excluded from the process of awareness-raising, action and empowerment, they may question the motivation or activities of their family members. In the past this has led to parents denying permission to children to attend training, drills or campaign activities. The research suggests that there has been some improvement in Petapa in this regard as the work has progressed, but Plan need to be aware of this potential problem, particularly in communities where disasters work is less advanced.

External policy spaces

Interviews, focus groups and visioning exercises with policy- and decision-makers at regional and national level suggest a sound understanding of the disasters context. Participants noted both the high levels of disaster hazard in the country due to its geographical position and geomorphology, and contribution of high poverty levels to enhancing vulnerability. Solutions tended to focus on aspects of vulnerability rather than hazard prevention, which should favour community-based bottom-up solutions.

The impact of children's groups supported by Plan El Salvador at community level is both tangible in terms of actions undertaken and intangible in terms of empowering the voice of children. Although the research was limited in terms of time and location, the findings suggest that despite these successes, there has been limited engagement to date within policy spaces outside community boundaries. Such engagement is vital if children are to affect policies and processes shaping development necessary for disaster risk reduction, rather than actions based only around hazard prevention, disaster mitigation and preparedness.

Research with actors outside the community suggests that this limited engagement may be due to a variety of factors. Not least among these was the limited awareness of the existence of children's groups, both those facilitated by Plan and other NGOs, and their relationship with the national Schools Protection Plan (PPE). This encourages Plan's external dissemination and advocacy strategy, and for the potential targeting of key policy spaces and actors to sensitise them around the potential of children's voices and agency.

Generally, focus group participants acknowledged a major shortfall between the potential role of children in a normative framework for disaster reduction and their current limited engagement with policy and decision-making processes outside their communities. Children were candidly acknowledged as playing no current role in disaster risk reduction, but there was enthusiasm for including them in the future. This highlights an important role for Plan in targeting individuals in strategic positions in order to prepare an enabling environment that allows children to initiate and sustain dialogue with them in the longer term.

Key barriers to strengthening children's voice

Research with both children and focus groups revealed a number of barriers to risk reduction practices embedded within national development processes. Despite the well-developed understanding of disaster risk reduction among focus group participants, organisations and institutions remain geared largely towards emergency activities and preparedness at best. Coordination mechanisms between organisations are largely ad-hoc and based on interpersonal relationships rather than formal structures. The language and terms within the disasters field and literature was also an issue raised by focus group participants. Frequently changing terminology, definitions and emphases have the potential to cause confusion for practitioners and policy-makers alike.

Resource constraints and limited wider awareness on disaster risks were cited as factors limiting capacities to work beyond emergencies and preparedness measures, and to proactively include children within their work. The differentiated access to and distribution of resources based on political and religious allegiance was also cited as a problem, providing perverse incentives for relief and rehabilitation rather than preparedness or risk reduction.

Cultural factors also create barriers, in part instilled by widespread poverty, and often causing a dislocation between identified risk priorities and everyday actions. These include a reticence to relocate away from high risk areas even when assistance is provided and the continuation of traditional but vulnerability-enhancing cultivation practices in the absence of alternative practices or livelihood options. While litter was identified as a top ranking problem for example, many participants in the exercises regularly dropped their litter during breaks as part of normal cultural practice.

Perhaps most importantly, the research highlights a fundamental disconnect underlying the discussions with adults and children. The prevailing understanding of policy makers conceptualised the role of children as passive participants and recipients across a range of potential policy spaces. Stemming from a view of children primarily as a vulnerable sector of society, children's voices are thereby contained and constrained, largely operating in the context of emergency systems. Their role is therefore one of receiving instructions and adding value to the efforts of externally-generated activities, for example through community brigades under local government systems. This is in stark contrast to the vision of Plan and children's groups themselves, where children are take the lead and present their own vision of risks and risk reduction actions. They are therefore empowered to act as the protagonists, seeking and generating internal and external policy spaces, linking with adults in a horizontal dialogue on risks and priorities.

2.3 Implications for Plan's child and youth-centred advocacy work

This initial research suggests that Plan's focus to strengthen the voice of children in disaster reduction policy spaces should work in three main areas:

First, Plan should continue to work from the basis of ongoing community-based activities that empower children to generate risk management actions at the local level. Second, Plan can use its position as an influential NGO to generate an enabling environment and specific entry-points where children can express their vision and priorities in their own terms. Finally, while country-level engagement is high, with disaster risk reduction as one of the country programme's cross-cutting themes, Plan will also need to act internally to facilitate organisation learning and linkages necessary to realise the benefits of cross-sector disaster risk reduction. Salient recommendations are presented below in these three areas.

Doing what Plan does best: Working with children and communities

- Provide greater opportunities for children's groups to critically reflect on their roles as communicators of disaster risks and agents of disaster risk reduction. This entails providing spaces for children to deliberate on their activities, and generate evaluation and feedback in communities where Plan is active.
- Promote exchanges to allow horizontal dialogue and lesson-learning between community groups about risk reduction.
- Further investigate and support informal pathways for risk communication, focusing particularly on the household. Plan should involve parents and other adults including community elders in awareness-raising activities in order to foster understanding and support of risk reduction activities within the community.
- Pro-actively link children's disaster/emergency groups with adults groups, community leaders and other local actors to facilitate informal and formal pathways for children's voice to be heard.
- Utilise this year's UN-ISDR campaign 'Disaster Reduction begins at School' to generate media coverage (including through a potential BBC documentary) and national dialogue on child-centred disaster risk reduction, particularly in the context of ensuring safe schools in the context of implementing the School Protection Plan (PPE) with the Ministry of Education (MINED).

The enabling environment: Working with external actors

- Identify and work with influential key actors at the local and national level to raise awareness of the ongoing work and future potential of children's groups.
- To sensitise these actors regarding the potential insights and voice of children as protagonists for change rather than passive recipients and participants in activities established by adult-based organisations.
- Work with regional and national organisations to map out the institutional landscape for disaster risk management in order to promote enhanced coordination and identify spaces for the voice of children within the process.
- Work with children and other actors to generate specific opportunities for child-led participation within policy spaces.
- Strengthen and publicise linkages between Plan's disaster risk reduction work and the School Protection Plan (PPE) of the Ministry of Education (MINED)
- While there has been an active drive to stress the human and development aspects of vulnerability that cause disasters, Plan can work more closely with SNET and others to ensure adequate integration of scientific hazard information into community-based vulnerability assessments.

Putting the house in order: Working with Plan nationally and internationally

- Continue to promote and mainstream disaster reduction as a cross-cutting development issue and country programme theme, stressing the potential tangible and intangible benefits of disaster risk reduction and its distinctiveness from emergency response and preparedness.
- Fast-track the provision of micro-projects to communities where children's groups are advanced, and particularly where project ideas have already been formulated.
- Update and improve the profile of DRR on the Plan website, at country as well as international level.
- Create a culture of disaster reduction across national offices by continuing to establish internal emergency management and risk reduction procedures, and providing training programmes to help identify risks.
- Strengthen and publicise linkages between Plan's disaster risk reduction work and the School Protection Plan (PPE) of the Ministry of Education (MINED)
- Improve the training and action programme for non DRR Plan staff to improve awareness and understanding, and facilitate mainstreaming across Plan's programmes.
- Include disaster risk and vulnerability as component of the procedure to assess communities for engagement, and ensure that disaster risks are addressed in the context of other risks that may be a higher priority for inhabitants.

3.0 Conclusions

The dominant pathways for children's voices were found to be confined to the local community, where partnership with the adult emergency committee has yielded beneficial actions. The abilities for children's voices to influence policy are limited by lack of spaces for dialogue and poorly developed national and regional systems for disaster risk management. However, they are also impaired by a prevailing adult perception that views the role of children and young people not as proactive protagonists, but as vulnerable recipient-participants in externally generated disaster risk reduction plans and programmes.

This field report is the result of a week-long scoping research trip to identify the policy spaces for children's voices and their current experience and capacity to influence disaster risk reduction policy. It also built research relationships between academic partners and with Plan staff, and to raise the profile of risk reduction both within Plan and amongst the research participants. The research links formed and the momentum gained with participants and staff in the field during this short field visit has been extremely valuable and constructive. Further research, will allow additional locations and a more detailed project to examine and promote the communication links from the child to adults within the home, wider community and policy level. Finally, the self-belief and motivation demonstrated by the children's group in Petapa should encourage Plan in its work to directly facilitate and create an enabling policy environment to help children take concrete actions to reduce disaster risks in their communities.