

Children's Voices in Disaster Policy Spaces

Field Report: Philippines¹

"Every time it rains, I start to cry, I can't concentrate on my work. I am so scared there is going to be landslide" (female, 14, Himayangan National High School, Southern Leyte)

This field report is an initial summary of the research process and early findings from work in the Philippines. This research, part of a two-stage research strategy, explores 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.

Acknowledgements

This research would not have been possible without the interest and commitment of the UK and Philippine based Plan staff who were instrumental in the development and implementation of this research. In particular we would like to thank Baltz Tribunalo, who coordinated much of the fieldwork. Gratitude is also due to Dr. Emmanuel Luna and Ms Grace Molina from the Centre for Disaster Preparedness, University of the Philippines, for their research assistance. We are indebted to the participants who so willingly and enthusiastically gave up their time.

1. Introduction

In Southern Leyte, children are attending schools sited on land known to be at high risk from disasters. Even new schools are being constructed in extremely exposed locations. Tambis National High School was built last year on a floodplain less than 500m from the edge of the February 2006 Guinsaugon landslide, which killed over 1000 people. Children at other schools in the Province report subsiding buildings, shifting mud, regular flooding, hillsides cracking above their school and locked school gates, which restrict their exit path should something happen. To compound the risks, these schools are used as evacuation shelters in times of heavy rain and strong winds.

This situation is repeated in Albay, though here, 90% of schools were damaged following Typhoon Reming in November 2006². These schools were again designated as evacuation shelters, meaning now families try to live in the few undamaged classrooms in overcrowded conditions. In many cases, families who choose to leave their homes in favour of the evacuation centres are actually putting themselves at higher risk than if they had stayed. However, deaths in the recent Albay disaster can be partly attributed to poor land use planning, grossly inadequate communication of well-mapped scientific information about lahar hazards and an institutional obsession with disaster preparedness and response rather than disaster risk reduction.

This reiterates that disasters are a development concern, predominately caused by poverty, inadequate land use planning, poor construction standards, a lack of awareness, and dysfunctional or absent institutions. Disasters can render decades of development work obsolete in seconds, and accordingly every development sector must have a strategy and undertake concrete actions to reduce disaster risk. If this does not happen, development interventions can inadvertently increase disaster risk by placing vulnerable people in exposed locations.

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² http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/philippines_37864.html

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.

1.1 Research Process

The field research phase in the Philippines was conducted over a two week period from March 2nd -16th and the core research team of seven included:

Dr. Tom Mitchell	Institute of Development Studies, Sussex University, UK
Dr. Katharine Haynes	Centre for Risk and Community Safety, RMIT, Australia
Dr. Emmanuel Luna	Centre for Disaster Preparedness, University of the Philippines
Mr Baltz Tribunalo	DRR coordinator, Plan, Philippines
Ms Grace Molina	Centre for Disaster Preparedness, University of the Philippines
Jack and Noyds*	Masters students, University of the Philippines

*Jack and Noyds replaced Dr Emmanuel Luna and Ms Grace Molina for the 3 days of fieldwork in the Bicol region.

The research was conducted in three locations:

Manila	To interview the key stakeholders involved in disaster management at the national level;	5 th and 6 th of March 2007
Southern Leyte	An area where Plan have a strong presence and have initiated their CCDRR strategy;	7 th to the 11 th of March 2007
Albay	An area where Plan have worked previously, but had very recently reinitiated their programme following Typhoon Reming in November 2006. Albay was thus a good baseline comparison with Southern Leyte.	12 th to the 15 th of March 2007

Baltz Tribunalo organised the fieldwork schedule and logistics, aided in the field by local Plan staff. Emmanuel Luna helped arrange the stakeholder interviews in Manila through his position as CDP Director. It is recognised that Plan had significant control over the research locations and which children and adults were chosen to join the interviews and workshops. However, the research team had complete command over the questions asked and the methods of enquiry used. Independent CDP staff (including UP Masters Students in Albay) helped as facilitators and translators to distance Plan staff from the investigation process. In addition, on a couple of occasions when the research team recognised gaps in the types of participants involved, Plan staff were able to help organise further group research sessions. Thus, the research is considered reasonably independent and robust.

The methods used have included focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, visioning exercises, risk ranking, transect walks, theatre, stakeholder mapping, influence mapping and drawings. With the children and youth, the research methods have been interspersed with games and karaoke to maintain the fun element, their concentration, and their enthusiasm. These sessions have been recorded through digital voice recorder, video, photographs, notes and typed notes. An effort has been made to integrate the data at the end of each day (this is included in a research diary available on request).

The methods employed were flexible, enabling the incorporation of the views of the children and members of the project team, but to also adapt to the dynamic research environment. The exact numbers and backgrounds of those attending the group discussions were always uncertain and

on two occasions when the team was expecting 15 children the group grew to over 50. Rather than disappoint the children, the groups were split in a purposefully random way and different activities undertaken.

Thus, the activities carried out within each group discussion were tailored for the numbers and unique backgrounds and experiences of the participants, maximizing the detail and wealth of the information collected. Although each group differed slightly in the actual format and activities undertaken, they all had the same underlying objectives, and the data collected is highly complimentary and comparable. Details of the methodological approach adopted with each stakeholder group are included in Annex I and a list of research participants in Annex II.

2 Findings

The following section very briefly outlines some initial findings and recommendations from the research team's first impressions.

2.1 Voice of Children and Youth

Formal and informal pathways

Initial cursory analysis of the data gathered reveals a number of official and unofficial pathways for children and youth groups³ to communicate information about the risks they face and how they would like these risks to be reduced. These include: talking informally to their family at home; their friends and teachers through informal means but also more formal classroom discussions and through the Parents, Teachers and Community Association (PTCA); official representation at youth forums and councils; theatre productions (Teatro Basillik), NGO newspaper articles and art exhibitions.

Street Theatre

Theatre was cited by the children and youth as a very popular means of transferring their concerns to the wider community. Themes of recent productions have included: landslide disasters (causes, event and recovery) child trafficking, ecology, family relationship, HIV, substance abuse, birth registration etc. The scripts are written by the children but facilitated by the youth leaders who take the roles of directors and choreographers. The theater is a mobile "street production" performed from one village to another with limited props, some lighting and music. On occasion they are also invited to perform to visitors / tourists. Donations are accepted following the performance in a "pass the hat" fashion. This income is managed by the children for further productions or to help with a wider need in the community such as school uniforms.

The theatre play has two main objectives. Firstly, it is seen as a form of stress release and recovery, as the children can share their stories and experiences. Of equal importance is the power of the production to also communicate the children's views. After each performance, a discussion is facilitated to allow the audience to express their opinions and reactions to the topic presented. Previous productions, for example following the Punta, San Francisco landslide in 2003, have been shown in Manila and in Europe. These have helped spread the children's message beyond Southern Leyte aided by press conferences following the performance, where the media have asked the children about their experiences.

³ Children are considered as being under 18 and youth can informally refer to people up to the age of 30 depending on the definitions of the organisations involved.

Barriers to the children's ability to communicate were most commonly stated to be a lack of time, financial problems, a lack of interest from their parents and a lack of interest by the Sangguniang Kabataan (SK – Philippines Youth Council) and official Barangay level.

Policy spaces and influence

The Philippines has a predominantly reactive disaster management system and at many levels disaster preparedness seems to be confused for disaster risk reduction. There appear to be numerous organisations and councils with overlapping responsibilities for disaster management, all are burdened by institutional redundancy and none are functioning effectively (see Annex III on the Philippines Disaster Management System). Within this outdated and confused system it is little wonder that there is no effective avenue (direct or unofficial) for the voices of children to successfully impact on risk reduction policy.

The transition of youth to youth leaders, and in turn, on to become influential members of the community was noted by the children and youth as an important route for them to impact on policy. The SK was discussed numerous times as a possible route for children's voices to be heard. However, many of the children and youth felt that the youth council was either not active or those involved were not interested in the views and concerns of the children in the community but only in furthering their own political careers. Even when there was some consultation no further action was taken generating a lack of trust and cynical view of the power and integrity of the S.K.

“The S.K. are irresponsible and are always busy doing nothing”
Male out of school youth from Nahulid

In addition political affiliations were cited as a serious barrier to policy change, with people blocking or not listening to the ideas of those who were not in a favored or particular party.

Following the 2006 Guinsaugon landslide, youth leaders working with the children in the temporary evacuation camps had found their interaction with the Disaster Coordinating Council very disappointing. They stated the officials did not want to listen and were apathetic to the needs and views of the children. In other administrative districts, such as Nahulid in Southern Leyte, children's voice is more formally represented on the Barangay Development Council. This is the result of the barangay captain being particularly aware of the important perspective's children can bring to community development issues. On the occasions children were being listened to by policy bodies, it almost always coincided with an adult in a position of power being sympathetic to the voices of the children. Identifying these key actors and working to sensitise them to the insight and power of children's voices must continue to be a key project priority for Plan.

Example of Power of Children's Voice: School Relocation - Santa Paz

The Mines and Geosciences Bureau (MGB) conducted a risk assessment of landslides in Southern Leyte in 2006, determining that eight barangay were at high risk within the Municipality of San Francisco. These included Santa Paz Sur and Santa Paz Norte, with recommendations to relocate affected houses. These two Barangay were home to a high school and an elementary school, both of which were considered to be extremely exposed (see fig. 1).

Following debates about whether and how to relocate the school, the headmaster opened the decision to a community-wide referendum to include a vote each for the children of the school. Broadly the children were in favour of the relocation and their parents against it, because the parents were concerned about their children having to travel to school in a different community and the loss of livelihoods associated with the relocation of a school (e.g. loss of lunch business for local shops). In addition, different political affiliations of the leadership in the two Barangay led to confusion over the exact risk communications of the MGB. The children's organisations in the school (Supreme

Student Council and Student Government Organisation) embarked on an education campaign about the physical processes of landslides and a great many students wrote to the School Division Superintendent expressing their desire to relocate. The actions by the students to win the vote by 101 to 49.



Fig. 1 Photograph of the abandoned Sta. Paz National High School (photograph Kat Haynes/Tom Mitchell)

Due to concern from the Provincial authorities, a more protracted timetable for relocation was shortened to just 2 days following heavy rains. The tent school was erected over one weekend with children and parents helping to put up the tents and children digging drainage channels due to the temporary school's location close to a paddy field (see fig 2). The tents, water supply and toilets were provided by Plan Philippines, along with a scholarship programme helping poorer students to afford uniforms and schools supplies. The children reported feelings of excitement about the whole process and did not express any regret about the decision to move. They did report difficult conditions in the temporary school, particularly the heat in the tents, though the children helped to line the tents with banana leaves to cool them.

A new school is now being constructed in Pasanon, a safer location a few hundred meters from the temporary school, with co-financing from Plan. The new school will include earthquake mitigation measures such as steel ties on the roof. Toilets are also being built in each classroom in preparation for its use as an evacuation shelter.



Fig. 2 Children of Santa Paz National High School in their temporary school, constructed with the support of Plan Philippines (photograph Kat Haynes/Tom Mitchell)

Children and their Families

The vast majority of the male and female children and youth stated that within the family they discussed issues which concerned them with their mothers and not their fathers. They stated that their mothers would then pass this information on to their fathers if they felt it was important. Very few examples existed of positive direct communication between the child and father on concerns. This phenomenon was further reinforced by the mothers group, who all unanimously agreed that their children would always come to them first with issues and problems which concerned them. They felt that they were more likely to believe and listen than the fathers who were *“not that open”* to their children.

“the mother is the first person that the children approach when they want to say something rather than their father....the mother becomes the middle woman”.

Mother from the temporary evacuation centre, St Bernard

Participants in Southern Leyte spoke anecdotally about the actions of children prior to the Punta, landslide in 2003 who, alerted by the heavy rain, tried desperately to drag their parents out of the house. However, many perished as the parents would not listen to their children, did not balance the risks in the same way and instead had a fatalistic attitude.

Furthermore, following initial analysis of the research data, it appears children are more aware and concerned about less-certain hazards (such as landslides and typhoons) with extended timeframes, whereas their parents are more worried about dangers on the road, drowning, illnesses and house fires. Simply, adults place more emphasis on the day-to-day hazards they feel they have some degree of control over, but children appear to place greater concern on those less controllable and low probability, but very high consequence events. Should this finding be confirmed by further, more rigorous analysis of the data, it provides an important rationale for Plan's decision to focus efforts on children in reducing the risk of natural disasters.

However, within the Filipino culture, adults/ parents have the authority in decision-making and children are expected to follow. In addition, those most respected in the community are the village elders. However, it was clear that all the children hoped that their parent's perspective could be

changed “*children can offer something*”. They felt they had the power to act and could make a substantial contribution instead of just being passive.

Further research is needed to explore the communication networks within the family:

- Do children have clearer opinions about risks in comparison to their parents, who have to balance their decision making against everyday struggles? Are children yet to be biased by the socio-cultural norms which influence their parents.
- How can the incorporation of the child’s view into family decision making about risk trade offs be facilitated and promoted?

Plan should initiate programmes to work with both the children and their parents (and in particular with the fathers) to help promote a trusting and valued attitude towards children’s communications within the home. This process could go further to take the form of well evaluated action research where children are encouraged to communicate and educate their family about the risks they face and make changes around the home to reduce the risks identified.

Plan should also facilitate sessions between the children and community elders. Greater communication links and trust between the most respected people in the community and those who have the clearest and least biased views on risks would be very beneficial.

2.2 Advocacy

As DRR policy spaces are generally closed in the Philippines at present, Plan Philippines and other supporting Plan offices cannot afford to focus their attention solely on internal processes (such as mainstreaming DRR) and on the organisation of children’s groups around DRR. National and local DRR organisations and institutions must be built side-by-side and this process will require agencies like Plan to dedicate considerable efforts to networking and advocacy.

If serious about DRR, Plan Philippines must take a lead in formalizing the Philippines Disaster Management Forum (PDMF), establishing meetings on a regular basis and must encourage a strong advocacy mandate. Securing a suitable legislative environment for DRR should be a priority as Philippines institutions appear to flow from a legislative basis. This will require forging lobbying links with key political figures and to agree draft legislation supported by all NGO members. This will require a dedicated individual within Plan Philippines to work on policy and advocacy and cannot be considered as additional duties for those working on organizing in the field. Learning from the advocacy approaches taken by other sectors and organisations is a positive starting point. The PDMF can then become a route through which children’s voices can directly impact DRR policy spaces. However, until such policy spaces exist at a national and regional level, it is very difficult for children to be heard on disaster issues.

Following from this, the profile of DRR on Plan websites is low. A strong website is an important signal that an issue is being taken seriously by an organization and can be used to help advocacy efforts. Children’s voices can be directly represented on such a website through audio or video features. At present, the website pages on ‘children in disasters’ focuses on response rather than risk reduction.. The BBC World documentary series provides an opportunity to re-author the website considering the series may cause a spike in website visitors.

Internationally, the UN-ISDR campaign ‘Disaster Reduction begins at School’ should provide an opportunity to highlight the case study of Sta. Paz, and the BBC World documentary could be shown at international meetings held during this campaign. On a more local level, the children we spoke to in Southern Leyte appeared to be united in their concern over the safety of their school buildings. This cause could form a coordinated children’s campaigns approach to advocacy, where more effort is made to organize children on a larger scale. Media interest in the Philippines may be used to highlight the issue of safer schools in Southern Leyte and nationally, using the UN-ISDR campaign and the BBC World documentary as opportunities. In addition, a children’s

campaign could include letter writing, a theatre tour, petitions and art displays. This could be supported with a children's congress, and Plan could offer prizes and incentives. For example, a winner of an essay or art competition could be invited to present the essay in Manila at a meeting of the National Disaster Co-ordinating Council or the Philippines Disaster Management Forum. Children could also be supported by Plan to attend and speak at international meetings. A child's voice is very powerful in these forums.

2.3 Gender

The workshops held with the children were dominated by girls and the theatre production presented to the research team only contained two male actors. In turn the workshop for the out of school / work youth was dominated by boys. This is supported by the wider trend seen in the Philippines as a whole where there are more girls than boys in school. This difference becomes more marked in secondary and tertiary education. Within the research meetings with children and youth, neither boys nor girls voice dominated, though participation from girls was considerably higher. No discernable difference was noted between girls and boys vis-à-vis their understanding of DRR, though this element was not carefully researched.

Plan needs to address the lack of participation of boys in disaster risk reduction related activities and in other sectors. Programmes to help keep boys in school are important and should be accompanied by holding separate sessions with boys designed to address issues of masculinity and to overcome barriers to their engagement. Further research to understand the trend is also important, given it is commonly cited as the reverse in other countries.

2.4 Climate Change

In Legaspi city, Albay, the children's group identified the following hazards as highly dangerous and then ranked them in order from most dangerous and likely to cause them harm to least dangerous.

Risk Ranking:

- 1) Global warming
 - 2) Volcanic eruption
 - 3) Typhoon
 - 4) Landslide
 - 5) Flooding
 - 6) Family breakup
 - 7) Earthquake
 - 8) Tsunami
 - 9) Over mining
 - 10) Oil spill
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Surprisingly global warming was rated as the most dangerous and likely risk by the children. Although there is no direct evidence to link Typhoon Reming, which remobilized lahars and caused serious flooding, with climate change, much media speculation and social amplification has obviously left a very strong impression on the children.

Although heavy rainfall has preceded all the landslide events in Southern Leyte and many participants discussed the significant recent increase in rainfall intensity, only one or two linked this to climate change (one of these was a member of Santa Paz National High School). This further supports the claim that the media plays an important role in highlighting climate change within the public consciousness.

2.5 Plan's Disaster Management Strategy

The project team was asked to comment on a March 2007 version of the *Strategy to Strengthen Plan's Disaster Management*. While the team appreciate that significant strides have been made to incorporate a DRR perspective within the strategy, in the introductory text (pages 2-5) DRR still appears to be somewhat de-linked from development. It alludes to that fact that financing is only available for DRR as a product of additional funding provided by a disaster relief effort. If this is the case, then Plan must develop a strategy for ensuring relief efforts are the catalyst for disaster risk reduction (Albay would be an important test case in this regard). However, it would be preferable if the language was stronger to support DRR as a crucial element of ongoing development and as a way to prevent disasters, rather than as an adjunct to better preparedness and relief. It is vital that DRR is not seen as a way of helping communities to be better prepared for a relief effort, but rather as a crucial part of every development sector to ensure development does not inadvertently increase vulnerability to disasters.

More practically, in order to actively make inroads to reduce the risks from disasters Plan may have to adapt their strategy for choosing the communities it works with. Currently criteria for selection are needs and impact based, relying on development indicators and the absence of other NGO's. However, it would also be prudent to include a broader criteria of exposure and vulnerability to include areas of high risk which might not necessarily coincide with lowest development.

Another practical recommendation would be to use relief efforts as a statement of intent. Relief supplies should only be obtained from sustainable/green sources (e.g. school supplies from recycled materials branded with slogans about Plan wish to work with victims to reduce the risk of future disasters) as much concern is being aimed at the supply chains of materials used by NGOs in relief. Ensuring materials are coming from sources which do not employ child labour, pay reasonable wages, avoid environmental damage and do not increase disaster risk, is an important starting point.

2.6 Human Resources and Staff Training

Plan Philippines staff need help to identify how they can integrate DRR into their own areas and programmes and this will require improved training, induction courses, workshops and on-the-job experience.

- Independently facilitated feedback sessions should be a feature of Plan's organizing of youth and children to ensure Plan's programme and staff are meeting their needs and expectations.
- Visiting a Plan project site such as Santa Paz, and talking through the challenges and processes related to the children's role in relocating the school is of enormous educational value. Additionally, as the child-centred DRR project is rolled out across other Plan countries, developing a programme of exchange for Plan staff to visit such projects in other countries should become part of the DRR inception and training phase.
- Make sure everyone who participates in Plan events, including Plan staff are taught first aid, water lifesaving techniques and can swim at least 50 meters. This is something very basic, but it appears a high proportion of Filipinos are unable to swim.

3.0 Summary of conclusions and recommendations

This project is the result of a two week scoping research trip to identify the policy spaces for children's voices and their current experience and capacity to influence disaster risk reduction policy. Additional priorities were to build research relationships with Plan staff, and to raise the profile of risk reduction both within Plan and amongst the participants' interviewed and involved in the workshops. The abilities for children's voices to influence policy were found to be limited due

to the outdated and reactive disaster management system dominant in the Philippines. At many levels disaster preparedness seems to be confused for disaster risk reduction.

The dominant pathways for children's voices to be heard were within the home and through both informal and formal pathways in the school and local community. Within the home, children were found to discuss their concerns with their mothers who would pass important messages on to the fathers. Initial cursory analysis shows that children are more aware and concerned about less-certain hazards (such as landslides and typhoons), whereas their parents are more worried about day-to-day hazards they feel they have some degree of control over (dangers on the road, drowning, illnesses and house fires).

Recommendations withheld (for more details contact Tom Mitchell t.mitchell@ids.ac.uk)

The level of understanding of disaster risk reduction and confidence of the children and youth leaders in Southern Leyte, contrasts with those in Albay, demonstrating the very positive impact Plan has had in this area. In particular, the commitment and bravery shown by the Santa Paz children to go against their parents and move their school highlights the power of children as drivers for change. The motivation and hope shown by all the children and youth involved substantiates further the great potential of Plan to help children make real progress in reducing disaster risks in their communities.