

CD/doc. 09/11

# Child Rights in Disaster Risk Management

Policy position paper

**Inter-American Children's Institute**

**October 2011**

## CONTENTS

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### **1) INTRODUCTION**

*Background*  
*The relevance of a policy position paper*  
*Description of the phenomenon*  
*Regional data*

### **2) FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION**

*Hyogo Framework for Action for 2005-2015*  
*The Inter-American Democratic Charter*  
*The Convention on the Rights of the Child*  
*OAS Resolutions*  
*The Inter-American Committee on Natural Disaster Reduction*  
*The Department of Sustainable Development – OAS*  
*The Inter-American Network for Disaster Mitigation*  
*The International Strategy for Disaster Reduction*

### **3) CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

*Historical approaches to disaster*  
*Vulnerability / Risk / Impact*  
*Disaster Risk Management*

### **4) CHILDREN AT RISK AND IN EMERGENCIES**

*The impact of disasters on children*  
*The implementation of action*  
*Child participation in disaster risk management*  
*Challenges faced by governing bodies*  
*Joint responsibility*  
*Cultural diversity*  
*Gender*  
*Coordination and cooperation*

### **5) FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

## 1) INTRODUCTION

The Inter-American Children's Institute, IIN, is a specialized organization of the Organization of American States, which, together with its member states since 1927, has been working in matters involving childhood and adolescence for 84 years, permanently promoting commitment regarding the rights and well-being of children. It has become a hemispheric reference point, and an Inter-American System enabler in processes involving agreement and coordination with regard to the principal regional efforts in this field.

More than any other region in the world, the nations in our Hemisphere enjoy an astonishing level of diversity, which is evidence of its multicultural, multilingual and multiracial constitution, as well as of its multiple religious beliefs. In the awareness of this condition, the IIN, without neglecting the specific features and realities of each country, directs its efforts towards consolidating regional and subregional strategies in order to strengthen the mainstreaming, exchange and generation of learning experiences so that the rights of children may be guaranteed, in keeping with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

The realities of our region and of our own local areas force those of us who work in this field to take a critical look at the tasks we carry out, to redefine our approaches and adjust to change, to confront challenges, to be creative and to constantly learn from others, with the purpose of achieving better living conditions for the children of the Americas.

The overarching purpose of the IIN, expressed in its [statutes](#)<sup>1</sup>, is *"to cooperate with the governments of the member states in the establishment and carrying out of activities contributing to adequate overall development of minors, as well as constant improvement of standards of living, particularly of families."*

A concern which has become increasingly important in recent years is *protecting and guaranteeing the **rights of children exposed to disasters and emergencies***, owing to the consequences and impact events have had on this part of the population. The States, through their representatives to the Directing Council of the IIN, have expressed their concern in this respect, emphasizing that national strategies to address these situations lack directives which position children as an especially vulnerable group and that they therefore need to be given priority and specialized care. It is for this reason that this will be one of the IIN's central lines of action for the 2011-2015 management period.

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<sup>1</sup> Adopted by the Directing Council of the IIN during its 79<sup>th</sup> Regular Meeting, held on 25 and 26 October 2004 in Mexico, D.F., CD/RES. 06 (79-04).

The starting point from which to begin dealing with this subject is the production of a policy position paper as a support tool which will facilitate placing it on national and regional agendas.

## **Background**

At the eighty-fifth Regular Meeting of the Directing Council, held in Panama in 2010, a work group was formed with the purpose of providing support to the General Directorate when drafting institutional Action Plan 2010-2011<sup>2</sup>. As a result of the three meetings held by the work group, priority was given to three areas for the forthcoming period: child rights in risk and disaster management, early childhood and juvenile criminal justice.

After the prioritization determined by the States, a regional workshop was held in Bogotá, Colombia (May 2011), in order to specifically address the subject of disasters and emergencies, with the participation of representatives and technicians from 18 member states (Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Jamaica, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, United States and Uruguay), as well as the principal specialist of the Risk Management and Adaptation to Climate Change (RISK-MACC) section of the Department of Sustainable Development of the OAS, and representatives from the following agencies: International Organization for Migration (IOM), Plan International, Save the Children and UNICEF.

Information and experiences were exchanged between the States, work agreements were reached and political and technical perspectives decided in order to address the rights of children in the context of disaster risk management, with particular attention to the response to complex emergencies.

The States agreed on the priority actions to be promoted in the context of the IIN's Action Plan and shared their strengths and weaknesses in dealing with this subject, underscoring the need to develop channels of interinstitutional and intersectoral coordination and facilitation in order to reinforce the comprehensive protection of children in strategies for the management of disaster risk.

About 47 percent of the total population of Latin America and the Caribbean is under the age of 18. According to a study carried out by ECLAC and UNICEF<sup>3</sup>, in 2007, 17.9 percent of children under the age of 18 in the region suffered from extreme poverty; total figures amounted to just over 32 million children in the 18 countries surveyed.

*"These children were seriously affected by one or more extreme deprivations, involving the precarious nature of their dwellings, the lack of access to safe water or to sanitation, general or serious chronic malnutrition (or both), the lack of access to education systems (children who have never been to school) or to communication and*

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<sup>2</sup> Resolution CD/RES. 07 (85-R/10).

<sup>3</sup> ECLAC and UNICEF - Child poverty in Latin America and the Caribbean. December 2010.

*information systems (including the lack of electricity in their dwellings)”<sup>4</sup>. However, figures show that the diverse circumstances affecting children differ a great deal from one country to another within the region, as well as within the country itself, with significantly different situations in urban and rural areas: “in rural areas, three out of four children live in poverty, whilst in the urban areas only one out of three is in this situation”<sup>5</sup>.*

Despite this, it the diversity of the situation of child poverty in different countries must be recognized, as well as their different capacity to finance and implement public policies with a broad coverage for children.

From a human rights approach, the disaster risk cycle is the negative aspect of development in societies which lack sturdy democratic institutions, an inclusive way of life and a culture of respect for the rights of all, particularly children and adolescents. The absence of certain democratic and institutional conditions may contribute to increase the risk of disasters. For example, if a disaster occurs in countries without democratic governance, Cities for Children and local rights systems, or with weak universal protection systems, children will be left in the hands of special protection systems. Furthermore, when civil rights - such as the right to life and security – deteriorate, this will reflect negatively on children’s economic, social and cultural rights. For these reasons, we should highlight the importance of institutional instruments on human rights since they ensure the development of children’s citizenship.

The social causes which contribute to turning a natural hazard into a risk make the intrinsic vulnerability of children living in poverty and extreme poverty even more acute. Poverty therefore becomes both a cause and a consequence which has an impact on the level of risk. This directly affects children’s vulnerability and the basic conditions for their enjoyment of rights.

*“Governments cannot influence the severity of droughts, earthquakes, tsunamis and tropical cyclones, except in the case of weather-related hazards through international action to mitigate climate change. Similarly, the exposure of people and assets is largely fixed by the location of historical investments in infrastructure, urban and economic development, as well as by social and cultural attachment to places, or by geographical constraints such as on small islands. If hazard severity and exposure cannot be reduced, the main opportunities for reducing risk lie in reducing vulnerability.”<sup>6</sup>*

Comprehensive risk management in a way that favours children should be explicitly mentioned in all public planning and investment processes and each government agency should be committed to reducing risks for children and preventing the development of new ones.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> GAR 2011: Revealing Risk, Redefining Development. United Nations, 2011

The specific vulnerability which affects children and the opportunities responsible bodies in the region have to watch over their rights and well-being in order to reduce it are two key elements which constitute a starting point when addressing the issue of child rights in disaster risk management.

### ***The relevance of a policy position paper***

The importance was highlighted at the regional workshop mentioned above – the third meeting of the work group – of designing specific instruments to address action involving children.

Amongst the final strategies discussed in order to make these ideas a reality, it was agreed to design a policy position paper in order to justify the importance of developing priority lines of action for children in risk management, and to provide support which can contribute to placing the subject on national and regional agendas. It is hoped that with this paper, the representatives on the Directing Council of the IIN will be able to rally other stakeholders and institutions and establish a collective, solid and well-established position in this area. This paper describes the principal elements which make up the problem, with the purpose of defining and providing a framework for a general understanding of the subject. It also provides political and technical recommendations which will help strengthen the capacity of governing bodies for children in every State to advocate for the issue in the relevant areas of influence.

The contents of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Inter-American Democratic Charter<sup>7</sup>, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the rights-based approach constitute the conceptual, philosophical and political background on which the IIN's general activity is based and secured. They have also become a permanent reference point in addressing the matters focused on below, and in the general development of intervention and action for positioning the promotion of and priority care for child rights in the region in disaster-related risk and emergencies, and complex emergencies<sup>8</sup>.

This challenge implies undertaking a new, but not unknown direction, since the rights-based approach applied to children will constitute the political and methodological perspective on the basis of which we shall build our work.

### ***Description of disasters***

The increase in both the frequency and the severity of extreme natural phenomena, added to the deficiencies – and social inequalities – present in most of the region,

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<sup>7</sup> The Inter-American Democratic Charter was signed by the General Assembly on 11 September 2001, in Lima, Peru.

<sup>8</sup> In the latest literature and thinking about risk management, the term 'complex emergencies' is used, in the understanding that there may be 'emergencies' regarding which there is a capacity to respond and handle, whereas 'complex emergencies' refer to those that exceed the capacity of the 'system'.

which seriously affect children, make it difficult to implement responses to confront the consequences of these disasters, which underscores the urgency of addressing policies for disaster risk management comprehensively, with an emphasis on vulnerable groups.

Worldwide and regional statistics show an increase in the occurrence of disasters in recent years. The Department of Sustainable Development of the OAS, through its Risk Management and Adaptation to Climate Change section, has arrived at the following conclusions through a comparative study of the 1991 to 2000 and 2001 to 2010 decades, on the basis of data provided by the Centre for Research of Epidemiology of Disasters of the Université Catholique de Louvain, Belgium: whereas during the 1990s the number of recorded disasters reached 700, during the following decade figures exceeded 900; that is, an increase of 30 percent. In terms of persons affected, numbers doubled in the period between 2000 and 2010: 81 million people were affected by disasters, compared to 38 million in the previous decade, according to this report.

In the American continent specifically, only in the past decade, from 2001 to 2010, **over 260,000 people were killed in disasters**. In economic terms, **material losses** caused by the more than 600 disasters recorded during this period<sup>9</sup> **amounted to 440 billion dollars**. The distressing event in Haiti, where close to 220,000 people died in the earthquake (that is, 85 percent of the deaths over the decade) is particularly notable, as is the fact that nearly one third of the total economic losses in the region during the last decade were caused by a single phenomenon: Hurricane Katrina, which affected the United States and the Gulf of Mexico (this is also related to the assets existing in the affected area).

Total number of deaths according to type of disaster		
1	Earthquakes	225,172
2	Storms	10,227
3	Floods	8,556
4	Extreme temperatures	1,765
5	Mass movements	1,113

Data taken from “*The 2001 – 2010 Decade in the Americas marked by disasters: a look in retrospective*”, Risk - MACC/DSD OAS, 2011

With regard to children, it is estimated that 66 million of them are affected annually by intensive<sup>10</sup> and extensive<sup>11</sup> risk worldwide, according to the “*Global Assessment Report 2011: Revealing Risk, Redefining Development*”<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> Data taken from “*The 2001 – 2010 Decade in the Americas marked by disasters: a look in retrospective*”, Department of Sustainable Development, OAS, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Extensive risk: Extensive risk is mainly a characteristic of rural areas and urban margins where communities are exposed to, and vulnerable to, recurring localised floods, landslides storms or drought.

Before we continue, we should explain what is understood by disaster. The International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR) suggests the following definition for disaster:

*“A serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society involving widespread human, material, economic or environmental losses and impacts, which exceeds the ability of the affected community or society to cope using its own resources.”<sup>13</sup>*

It is stressed that disaster is a complex phenomenon, since its occurrence and its possible impact are marked by the level of exposure to a hazard originating in natural causes (in the cases we are addressing), the vulnerability of the community and/or the State, combined with insufficient capacity or measures to reduce or cope with the negative impact on that territory. It is possible to identify different types of hazards according to their origin: geological, meteorological, hydrological, biological and also anthropic. The latter may have a technological origin but they may also be directly induced by human actions such as wars and social violence, so their characteristics and complexity are different.

Disaster impacts on a community or society may include: *loss of life, material losses, damage to infrastructure, means of production, the general development of the State and partial or total disruptions suffered by people regarding their way of life and customs.*

The disaster risks are most prevalent in poor communities and territories, since they often lack essential basic living conditions, which increases their vulnerability to the effects of disasters. Impacts even lead to the violation of the rights of persons, not only during the event, but also after it, since the increased fragility of prior living conditions and the impact of the phenomenon itself jeopardize their possibilities and capacity to overcome its effects.

Overcoming the social and economic effects of disasters is hindered by the levels of poverty, vulnerability and social inequality which most of the countries in the region suffer from. This vulnerability is frequently intensified by territorial legislation that does not take into account environmental impact or risk, and increased by poor environmental management and the lack of regulatory means which could prevent and check the installation of communities in areas which are highly exposed to natural hazards.

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*Extensive risk is often associated with poverty, urbanization and environmental degradation. Terminology on Disaster Risk Reduction, UNISDR, 2009.*

<sup>11</sup> Intensive Risk: Intensive risk is mainly a characteristic of large cities or densely populated areas that are not only exposed to intense hazards such as strong earthquakes, active volcanoes, heavy floods, tsunamis, or major storms but also have high levels of vulnerability to these hazards. Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> United Nations, 2011 (a report on the reduction of disaster risk).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

The deterioration of social and economic conditions has led to an increase of migratory flows to urban centres. Cities have become the answer to the search for resources and livelihoods, but frequently lack public policy regarding territorial legislation which contemplates an analysis of risk and latent hazards. These movements and the unplanned concentration of populations lead to situations in which people settle in territories, unaware of the hazards to which they are exposed, increasing their levels of vulnerability owing to a lack of preparedness. At the same time, environmental degradation in rural areas has affected the productivity of natural resources. The alteration and increase of extreme events – mainly meteorological – has led to the increasing deterioration of the quality of life of populations who depend on agriculture or livestock for their sustenance. This has wide repercussions on access to rights and the satisfaction of basic needs.

In addition, large-scale human movements as a result of the effects of disasters also transcend borders, inasmuch as the same phenomenon can have different impacts on different “systems” (State, municipality, community, etc.). In a Hemisphere with increasingly stronger regional integration processes, which generate economic interdependence between States (as well as that which exists between systems within the same State), even when the phenomenon only causes disaster in one State, the impact can overflow into another. Examples of this are mineral supplies and fuel (Katrina), the earthquake in Haiti and all of the structure implemented by the Dominican Republic to aid Haiti.

The magnitude of these phenomena and their hazards represents a threat to human development and the development of the region as a whole. It is essential that States, international agencies and civil society should take coordinated and urgent action with regard to this problem.

It is also important to ensure the existence of effective and efficient mechanisms for the deployment of humanitarian aid. This requires a special effort from the States in terms of coordination and cooperation to guarantee that the affected populations have access to the aid and they do not become yet another problem that hinders recovery.

For the IIN and the representatives of governing bodies for children, this constitutes a double challenge; on the one hand, they must lobby for policies regarding risk management and emergency care, and on the other, incorporate disaster risk management into their own institutionality as a cross-cutting perspective in existing programmes and action for the promotion and protection of child rights.

In general, it has been observed that in our region, institutions responsible for coordinating government action for the care of affected populations in each country usually fail to pinpoint children as a group requiring specific and specialized action. Some States have made progress in this subject and their input will be very valuable for the others.

In those States which lack a clearly defined strategy for a child-centred approach to the problem, this aspect must be borne in mind in order to develop comprehensive strategies which tend towards fulfilling their rights, guaranteeing their well-being and fostering the resilience of children in disasters. Specific and specialized action focusing on children would make it possible to obtain a fuller outlook in order to determine and implement strategies conducive to overcoming the consequences of these situations on the family group, and enable overcoming the effects of the disaster in the best possible way.

## 2) FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION

Every year disasters affect thousands of people, a great many lives are lost and injuries are caused, as well as major economic and social losses. In order to confront this, international and regional agencies, together with the States, have established agreements and frameworks for action which will allow them to take more efficient and timely action when facing disasters.

This process has generated a “shift from disaster response towards greater emphasis on disaster risk reduction [which] culminated in the adoption in 1994 of the Yokohama Strategy for a Safer World”<sup>14</sup> (1995-2005). In this strategy, the emphasis is on disaster risk management and on the need to invest more and better in prevention and preparedness for disaster as a means to mitigate its effects. It is stressed that at the preventive stage, participation and the involvement of different stakeholders are essential if the strategy to be implemented is to work (community, local governments, national institutions).

### ***Hyogo Framework for Action for 2005-2015***

This approach is consolidated and renewed by means of a current, international instrument which guides the States in the implementation of policies devoted to the reduction of the impact caused by disasters: the *[“The Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015: Building the resilience of nations and communities to disasters”](#)* (HFA), which was signed by 168 States at the World Disaster Reduction Conference, held in Kobe, Hyogo (Japan) in January 2005, amongst which were the member states of the OAS. “[T]he international community recognized that ‘a culture of disaster prevention and resilience, and associated pre-disaster strategies, which are sound investments, must be fostered at all levels, ranging from the individual to international levels’.”<sup>15</sup> As a result of the implementation of actions established in this framework, it is expected that there should be a: *“substantial reduction of disaster losses, in lives and in the social, economic and environmental assets of communities and countries.”*<sup>16</sup>

This framework for action establishes five priorities which should guide national strategies aiming to address risk management:

1. *Ensure that disaster risk reduction is a national and a local priority with a strong institutional basis for implementation.*
2. *Identify, assess and monitor disaster risks and enhance early warning.*
3. *Use knowledge, innovation and education to build a culture of safety and resilience at all levels.*
4. *Reduce the underlying risk factors.*
5. *Strengthen disaster preparedness for effective response at all levels.*

<sup>14</sup> United Nations – Protection of persons in the event of disasters. A/CN.4/590, December 2007

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Hyogo Framework for Action, UNISDR, 2005.

### ***The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)***

The CRC is a binding international legal document which stipulates the specific aspects and commitments which its signatory States have undertaken on behalf of children. It reaffirms the need to provide protection and special care for children, as well as the States' responsibility to guarantee their well-being and security.

It describes guiding principles and rights regarding survival and development, rights associated with protection, and participation. In this respect, the Convention is a major supporting document, not only because of its content and specificity, but also because it stipulates the States' obligations and responsibilities with regard to children.

According to Article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, a 'child' is any person under the age of 18. The principle of progressive autonomy should also be borne in mind, in terms of children's level of evolution. In Article 5, the Convention declares that *"States Parties shall respect the responsibilities, rights and duties [...] to provide, in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child, appropriate direction and guidance in the exercise by the child of the rights recognized in the present Convention."* This situation implies a challenge and a greater level of complexity when designing public policies, strategies and programmes, since it is necessary to ensure that they recognize and include the faculties and capacity children possess, according to their stage of evolution. In this context it is important to remember General Comment No. 11 (2009)<sup>17</sup> adopted in Geneva during the 50th Session, 12 - 30 January 2009.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child, as a human rights treaty, and the Hyogo Framework for Action, together constitute documents which provide an operational background for the perspective of children in strategies for disaster risk management.

In the Inter-American system there are several documents which, through agreements and consensus amongst the States, provide a framework for action for the establishment of national and regional strategies and actions in order to address disasters. Some of these documents are:

### ***The Inter-American Democratic Charter***

One of the most important documents for regional action is the *Inter-American Democratic Charter*, adopted unanimously by the States at an Extraordinary Session of the OAS General Assembly held in Peru in September 2001 (Article 15): *"The exercise of democracy promotes the preservation and good stewardship of the environment. It is essential that the states of the Hemisphere implement policies and strategies to protect the environment, including application of various treaties and conventions, to achieve sustainable development for the benefit of future generations."*

### ***OAS Resolutions***

In addition, there are Resolutions of the General Assembly and the Permanent Council, which address this subject specifically: AG/RES. 2610 (XL-O/10), 'Existing mechanisms for disaster prevention and response and humanitarian assistance among the Member

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<sup>17</sup> CRC/C/GC/11 - 12 February 2009

States’, and [CP/RES. 792 \(1277/01\)](#) ‘Statutes of the Inter-American Committee on Natural Disaster Reduction’. Vitally important is the [Inter-American Convention to Facilitate Disaster Assistance](#)<sup>18</sup>, which formalizes and consolidates means to reinforce partnerships and mutual cooperation between the States in the Inter-American system.

### ***The Inter-American Committee on Natural Disaster Reduction***

The Inter-American Committee on Natural Disaster Reduction (IACNDR) is the principal forum in the OAS and the Inter-American system for the analysis of policies and strategies related to the reduction of disasters in the context of the development of Member States. It was created by the General Assembly (AG/RES. 1682 XXIX-O/99) in order to address the need to strengthen the role of the OAS in reducing disaster risk. The IACNDR is chaired by the Secretary General of the OAS and is comprised of

- the President of the OAS Permanent Council,
- the Assistant Secretary-General of the OAS,
- the President of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB),
- the Director General of the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO),
- the Secretary-General of the Pan-American Institute of Geography and History,
- the Director General of the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA),
- the Director General of the Inter-American Agency for Cooperation and Development (IACD).
- the Executive Director of PADF
- the President of ICW
- the President of IADB

The aim of the IACNDR is to propose policies and strategies to guide the decisions of member states in the reduction of disasters and coordinate the actions of the agencies of the Inter-American System.

### ***The Department of Sustainable Development – OAS***

In addition, the OAS General Secretariat, through its *Executive Secretariat for Integral Development (SEDI)* and its *Department of Sustainable Development (DSD)*, was identified as the principal strategic political partner or regional institution to coordinate the implementation of the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA), and as such, has played a leading role with the Secretariat of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR), through its Regional Office for the Americas, by establishing a Regional Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction in the region.

The Department of Sustainable Development (OAS/DSD), through its Risk Management and Adaptation to Climate Change (RISK-MACC) section, supports the priorities of OAS member states with regard to adapting to and managing the risks associated with natural hazards. The ultimate goal is to mainstream Risk Management – or “deconstruct risk” – into development policy and planning across all sectors and government levels, taking into account the changing priority needs of member states

<sup>18</sup> Adopted on 7 June 1991, by means of resolution AG/RES. 1101 (XXI-0/91).

and relevant OAS mandates received from the highest policy-making bodies in the Americas.

### ***The Inter-American Network for Disaster Mitigation (INDM)***

This is another body, which is composed of the major agencies and organizations involved in the reduction of vulnerability and disaster mitigation, and responds to requests from OAS member states to increase practical and specific cooperation between governments, as they increase their programmes for reducing the harm caused by natural disasters to human beings, economies and development.

The purpose of the network is to strengthen practical collaboration between government agencies in the field of risk reduction, particularly through the exchange of information, knowledge and lessons learned. This includes providing support to countries to mainstream risk reduction actions in economic activities and specific sectors.

Resolution 2314 of the 37<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, held in Panama on 5 June 2007, recognized *“the Inter-American Network for Disaster Mitigation (INDM) as the permanent hemispheric mechanism for strengthening practical cooperation among intergovernmental agencies in the area of disaster reduction, especially by sharing technical information and best practices”*.

The INDM also supports the actions to be implemented within the [Hyogo Framework for Action](#), in collaboration with the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction Global Platform, facilitating the exchange of information and good practices in the region, and at the same time, promoting agreements of cooperation between governments in order to proceed with the implementation of this strategy’s national platforms.

As the principal forum for discussion between the governments of the Americas in matters concerning sustainable development, the OAS proposes using the INDM as a tool to assist member states in designing and developing public policies related to disaster risk management.

### ***The International Strategy for Disaster Reduction***

In global terms, the ***International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR)*** is a United Nations inter-agency initiative whose mandate is to coordinate, promote and strengthen disaster risk reduction at worldwide, regional, national and local levels. It is composed of States, inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations, cooperation agencies, academic bodies and civil society, working jointly on actions to reduce disaster risk.

In accordance with the mandate of the UNISDR Secretariat, the purpose of the **Regional Unit for the Americas** is to support stakeholders throughout the region, including North America, Latin America and the Caribbean, fostering a culture of disaster prevention and contributing to build disaster-resilient nations and communities. Other references are **Resolutions 46/182 and 57/153**, adopted by the

UN General Assembly on 19 December 1991 and 3 March 2003, respectively, for strengthening the coordination of United Nations humanitarian emergency assistance. We must also remember the Declaration of Quebec City issued in 2001 by the Third Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Americas, which met in Canada.

Examples at the regional level are the 2006 -2015 **Regional Plan for Disaster Reduction (PRRD)**, for its initials in Spanish) of the CEPREDENAC (Centro de Coordinación para la prevención de desastres naturales en América Central [Coordination Centre for the Prevention of Natural Disasters in Central America]), and the **Política Centroamericana para la Gestión Integral del Riesgo (Central American Policy for Disaster Risk Management, PCGIR)**, for its initials in Spanish) adopted at the 35th Meeting of Heads of State and Government of the Central American Integration System, held in Panama in 2010.

Other international agencies and programmes that work towards disaster risk reduction and foster timely response to emergencies caused by disasters are:

***United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)***

It works to mobilize and coordinate effective and principled humanitarian aid, through partnerships with local and international actors in order to:

- Alleviate human suffering in disasters and emergencies,
- Advocate the rights of people in need,
- Promote preparedness and prevention plans, and
- Facilitate sustainable and lasting solutions.
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***United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)***

Its functions include building capacities to overcome vulnerabilities, preventing crises and enabling recovery. It provides support for national development strategies for prevention and recovery in the face of natural disasters.

***Humanitarian Information Network for Latin American and the Caribbean (REDHUM)***

This network originated from Cooperation Framework Agreement signed by OCHA, SICA and CEPREDENAC in 2006. Its work consists in the creation of links among the main humanitarian actors or organizations that produce relevant information for humanitarian action and those which prepare responses to emergencies in Latin America and the Caribbean. The reliable information and the coordination tools are useful to decision makers working on disaster management.

***International Disaster Response Laws, Rules and Principles Programme (IDRL)***

This programme was started in 2001 at the request of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Council of Delegates. It seeks to explore the way in which international, regional and national legal frameworks can help to overcome the operational challenges faced by international disaster response operations carried out by States, international organizations, NGOs, military forces and private companies.

***PanAmerican Development Foundation(PADF)***

Created in 1962 through a unique agreement between the Organization of American States (OAS) and the private sector, the PADF is an independent non-profit

organization which builds public-private partnerships to assist disadvantaged people in Latin America and the Caribbean. The PDAF has worked throughout the entire region and joins forces with community groups, non-governmental organizations and national, local and municipal administrations as well as the private sector in order to implement viable solutions for sustainable development. Through these alliances, it strives to develop programmes to create economic opportunities, promote social investment, empower communities and civil society and respond to natural disasters.

The Hyogo Framework for Action, as the main universal reference point when confronting natural phenomena, and other international documents related to this subject, do not specifically address the attention and care of children in these situations. One of the aspects in this area on which the States placed the greatest emphasis was the need for specialized information and supporting instruments dealing with children in disasters, which would make it possible to face the problem decisively and comprehensively and to give it priority in the area of prevention and in the entire disaster cycle.

### 3) CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Changes and progress in international and regional frameworks for action have been accompanied by conceptual adjustments and clarifications which make it possible to see the complexity involved in addressing this subject through public policy and the challenges faced by States affected by disasters. These impact different areas of national life (such as roads, the production and distribution of food, access to safe water and electricity, access to schools, and housing), with different consequences, depending on the social segments and the different conditions and vulnerabilities associated with gender and age.

#### Historical approaches to disaster

Disasters caused by natural phenomena which affect human settlements in different ways, *“are as old as time, but the way society confronts them, and how they are studied, are relatively recent”*<sup>19</sup>:

- 1) Initially, disasters were perceived according to a *“military”* model, according to which efforts focused on care provided once the phenomenon which produced the disaster had occurred; that is, intervention in reaction to an emergency.
- 2) Another perspective, viewed as a *“medical”* approach, identified factors linked to vulnerability, in which intervention focused on the return to *“normality”* immediately after the disaster had taken place.

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<sup>19</sup> *Enfoques teóricos para el análisis histórico de los desastres* (“Theoretical approaches to the historical analysis of disasters”), Arturo Carrillo Rojas, Clío, 2002, Nueva Época, vol. 1, number 26

- 3) A third, “*economic*” approach favoured the “cost-benefit” relationship of disaster-risk analysis, focusing on the monetary cost of losses, but neglecting the human and social cost of disasters.
- 4) At present, according to the *sustainable development*<sup>20</sup> perspective, we must understand disaster as a cyclical process with successive phases which should be analysed in order to counteract its effects: ***preparedness, prevention, event, response, recovery and back to preparedness***. Although they are listed successively, it should be borne in mind that these phases are inter-related and integrated, since they constitute the perspective of disaster, and some are mutually inclusive, as the following chart shows.

Analysed from this viewpoint, the process turns risk management into a “virtuous circle”, as opposed to the approaches mentioned above, in which efforts focused on immediate rehabilitation and reconstruction, neglecting the concept of process and failing to bear in mind the causes and variables which lead to disaster, in order to mainstream prevention and preparedness into the cycle, as well as mitigation and prevention strategies in the recovery itself.

#### *Vulnerability / Risk / Impact*

In the new conception of risk management, *there is emphasis* on the fact that disasters are not ‘natural’ and that they are not caused by natural phenomena. The outbreak of a disaster is complex in terms of the multiplicity of factors which provoke it. According to UNISDR’s publication on “Terminology on Disaster Risk Reduction”<sup>21</sup>, at present we understand a disaster to be the outcome of the combination of:

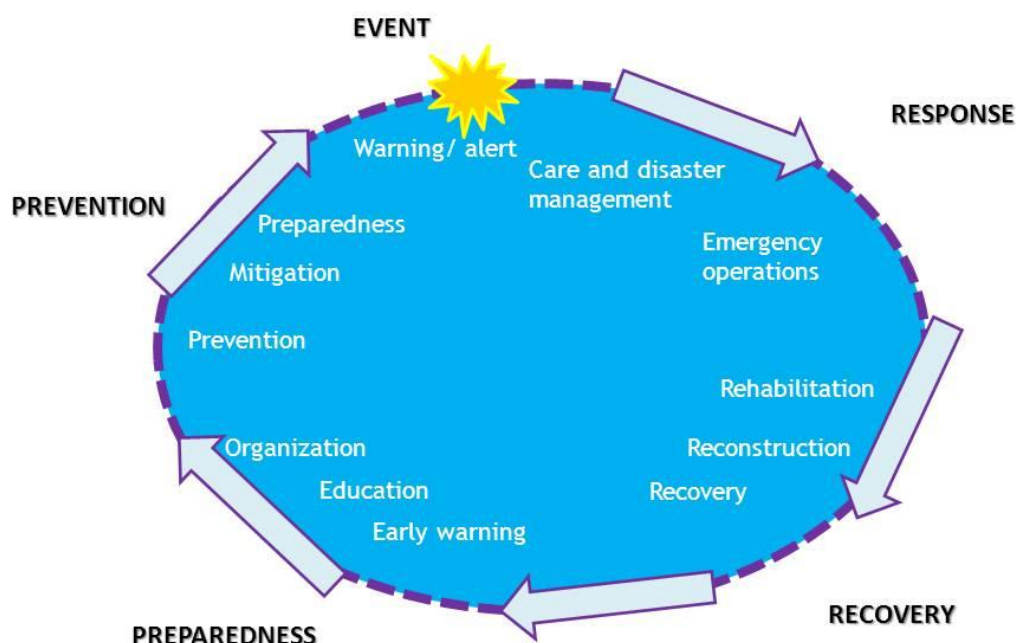
- 1) *The exposure to a hazard*
- 2) *The conditions of vulnerability that are present*
- 3) *Insufficient capacity or measures to reduce or cope with the potential negative consequences*

In this respect, it can be added that the consequences and impact of disasters are also closely linked to environmental degradation. The deterioration of the environment can alter the form and frequency of natural hazards and thus increase the level of vulnerability of communities. It should also be pointed out that the increase and escalation of poverty, together with existing levels of social inequality, are also factors which significantly affect the increase of vulnerability.

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<sup>20</sup> It is from this perspective that ecological, economic and social dimensions are identified in order to enable balanced development to take place without harm being caused to the activities of one area by those of another.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.



**Risk Management Cycle**

### *Disaster Risk Management*

As shown in the chart above, four phases can be distinguished in the cycle, each of them with its own sub-phases. These phases do not develop statically; as we mentioned above, each is the result of a combination of factors, which can develop in different ways depending on the combination of components which, together, lead to a disaster (hazard + vulnerability + capacity to cope).

- Preparedness: early warning, education and organization.
- Prevention: prevention, mitigation and preparedness.
- Response: warning/alert, care and disaster management, emergency operations.
- Recovery: Rehabilitation, reconstruction and recovery (of livelihoods and productive, reproductive and community operations in the system)

It is important to understand this phenomenon *as a process* in which specific intervention can be provided at each phase, but without losing sight of the inter-connection which exists between them. It is possible to link different actions and interventions with regard to the event (disaster), as we shall see below.

### **Preparation and prevention:**

*Change the risk situation in order to: avoid (prevent) and/or reduce (mitigate) the disaster and be prepared.*

- Map hazards and socio-economic infrastructure and evaluate its vulnerability.
- Evaluate the vulnerability of population segments, according to generation, gender, and ethnic group, and evaluate their different capacity and conditions.
- Identify and evaluate risk.
- Develop campaigns and socio-educational action tending towards consolidating a prevention culture.
- Design and implement early warning systems (including systems for the observation and monitoring of natural phenomena, community organization, preparation of contingency plans, simulations, etc.).
- Build physical resilience: territorial legislation, construction codes, training and instruction, etc.
- Build institutional capacity, Governance.

**Response:**

*Provide emergency services and assistance immediately after the event, in order to mitigate the negative effects on persons, habitat, productive resources and infrastructure.*

- Coordination between civil protection systems, the community and the different public actors, leading to the immediate execution of rescue and emergency tasks.
- Implementation of effective action in order to ensure the operation of basic services, differentiated according to the characteristics and needs of age, gender and other groups (shelter, food, transport, physical and mental health, etc.)
- Guarantee the establishment of and access to health care systems. Have additional means of response available in order to enhance existing services, with trained technicians, resources and safe infrastructure in order to act in the case of disaster.
- Enable the activation of information systems which will make it possible to render an account of the situation of the population, at least by age and by sex, as well as of the infrastructure and communications.
- Rehabilitation of means of transport in order to allow the movement of persons in danger zones and the smooth development of response tasks.
- Coordinated deployment at all levels (local, departmental, national, as appropriate) in order to carry out emergency operations.
- Coordination of the distribution of humanitarian aid according to needs detected and differentiated according to requirements.
- The activation of special emergency committees with the participation of the different stakeholders involved in following up and monitoring response tasks.

**Recovery:**

*Restoring installations, livelihoods, infrastructure and basic conditions to guarantee the rights of the population.*

- Analysis and evaluation of the effects of the disaster.

- Critical analysis of the interventions carried out and of the response model, in terms of its effectiveness, in order to provide feedback to the disaster management policy and make the necessary adjustments.
- Rehabilitation and reconstruction of the productive system's infrastructure.
- Reorganization and reinstallation of socio-productive activities.
- Activation of means to guarantee the operation of schools and the appropriate conditions to provide assistance to children.
- Development of health care programmes to aid the recovery of the population affected. Particularly, mental health, psychological support and other programmes.

From this perspective, it is also necessary to direct care and intervention with an emphasis on actions which can reduce, mitigate or even avoid risk whenever possible.

**Risk management**<sup>22</sup> implies recognizing the causes of disaster both in the phenomena which trigger natural events, as well as in the underlying threats associated with the action of human beings. *It is necessary to strengthen the capacity of institutions and persons, since they are determining factors in reducing risk. Risk management should therefore be strategically mainstreamed into local, national and regional development policies and programmes.*

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<sup>22</sup> "The scope of this Framework for Action encompasses disasters caused by hazards of natural origin and related environmental and technological hazards and risks. It thus reflects a holistic and multi-hazard approach to disaster risk management and the relationship between them, which can have a significant impact on social, economic, cultural and environmental systems,..." (HFA – ISDR, 2005)

#### 4) CHILDREN AT RISK AND IN EMERGENCIES

The international community's concern regarding child rights became more evident in the context of the disasters caused by World War I. It was Eglantyne Jebb<sup>23</sup> who first spoke of the need to draw up a code which acknowledged the universal rights of children, after the significant work she had carried out amongst child war victims. Her proposal was taken up by the League of Nations, which issued the Declaration of the Rights of the Child in 1924. This was the gateway for the United Nations to adopt the Universal Declaration of Children's Rights in 1959, which was formalized as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, CRC, in 1989.

It is not by chance that the drive and concern regarding child rights should arise from the devastation caused by the Great War. The disaster phenomenon emphasizes the vulnerability of children, increases impact and intensifies the effects of failing to fulfil their rights. At present, the CRC constitutes the fullest framework with which to interpret and work on the situation of children. It has been signed by 191 States, and for the countries in the region it has represented very substantial progress, as well as a great challenge – which still persists – involving its implementation. When applied to disasters, both in risk management and in acting during emergencies and rehabilitation, the human rights approach becomes particularly meaningful.

Taking the best interest of children<sup>24</sup> into account in public policy implies that in decision-making, programmes and/or public policies and in any action or strategy, alternatives which are most convenient to children should explicitly prevail. Consequently, there should be an appropriate response for each stage of children's development: early childhood, school age and adolescence.

In the context of risk and disaster – situations which affect the whole of the population – the needs, rights and interests of children should be given pride of place, and this must be reflected in action taken for prevention, response and recovery.

This perspective entails not only approaching the problem holistically over the entire process and at its different stages, but also developing means and protocols which focus on and address the special features associated with children. This should begin with differentiated information systems, in which their needs or rights are specifically included, in order to increase the effectiveness of intervention and post-disaster follow-up (the rehabilitation and recovery phase).

##### ***The impact of disasters on children***

The effects of disasters on children and adolescents are linked to the vulnerability associated with their level of development and the protective resources commensurate with their age. The consequences for their bio-psychosocial

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<sup>23</sup> British activist who founded Save the Children (1876-1928).

<sup>24</sup> Article 3, Convention on the Rights of the Child.

development are considerable and can lead to enduring disruptions even some time after the event. Although the specific type of effect can vary according to factors such as individual characteristics, the capacity of the environment to provide containment (families, communities, States), the type of disaster (duration, impact, intensity) and the capacity of communities and institutions to provide a response, it is extremely probable that there will be interruptions to the “normal” course of daily life. These alterations, therefore, can have different consequences and effects on children, causing more or less severe impacts.

Amongst the most frequent effects are vulnerability and an overall propensity to suffer health-related disorders (infectious diseases, injuries, hypothermia); and a special latent risk for the nutritional status of children, because these hazards tend to become worse as a result of the disaster’s incidence on the process of supply and access (loss of the family’s means of livelihood, impact on food habits, damage to access routes, sickness) and on the population’s nutritional condition.

During and after a disaster there is frequently an evident and general decline in quality of life: reduced access to health care, food, housing and education; often including a particularly noticeable lack of specialized care for the specific situation of children in services catering to the general population.

A variable which has captured the attention of different institutions and technical areas involved in children’s issues are the psychological effects caused by grieving, the modification of habits and customs, uncertainty, and fear and/or trauma brought about by the catastrophic experience. These are often also marked by the loss of significant adults and loved ones and the disruption – partial or complete – of their daily routines. Witnessing tragic events – the effects of the phenomenon itself, as well as its ensuing consequences – can cause emotional damage and leave sequels which are hard to overcome.

In addition, it may happen that children are forced to stop attending school, either because it is no longer operational or because it is being used as a shelter. Or even because the family may decide they can no longer afford their children’s education.

A further risk which has been detected is the increase of the probability of suffering from different kinds of violence, particularly in the case of children who have been separated from their parents or family. This includes sexual abuse (mainly amongst girls and female adolescents), ill-treatment, abduction and the potential increase of child labour. Sometimes, over-crowding and degrading conditions lead to an increase of violence. It is an urgent priority to focus on children who are bereft of parental care, as well as mainstreaming the gender approach in policies designed for risk and emergency management for children, in order to bear these risks in mind and warn about them. Acting in consequence implies acknowledging that effects are not only different according to age and capacity, but also according to sex.

The family’s loss of goods, property and source of livelihood, which in turn brings about significant changes on their habits and routines, has important repercussions on

children's well-being and rights. Furthermore, these events also have an impact on the community and its culture. Children's sense of belonging and familiarity with the environment, which are so important for their development, may be altered or interrupted. This produces indirect effects which in the long term may increase poverty and vulnerability, including the loss of jobs by significant adults; greater degradation of the natural environment and a higher cost of living; weakening or destruction of support networks; family disintegration; changes in the distribution of property or the availability housing and others.

**In general terms, there is a worrying tendency during disasters for the rights of children to be violated, often widening and perpetuating previously existing gaps and inequities. Once a disaster has occurred, children who are left alone are exposed to abuse, violations, trafficking, migration or enforced recruitment, amongst other risks. There is therefore a need for the immediate deployment – as soon as the disaster has taken place – of care and response mechanisms for their protection. The most successful experiences tend to be those in which there is coordination between States, cooperation agencies and civil society.**

### ***The implementation of action***

#### **PREPAREDNESS**

Preparedness refers to the capacity developed or acquired by governments, technicians, civil servants, professionals, agencies and organizations for the provision of response, communities and persons, to foresee, respond to and recover from possible impact associated with a specific hazard. The strategy of preparedness should include a specific strategy to prepare and care for the rights of children and guarantee their well-being, as well as ways in which they can become involved in this stage.

Understood as an action within disaster risk management, its objective is to handle every aspect (coordination, infrastructure disposition, the establishment of response criteria and responsibilities, budget allocations, public information and training, amongst others) in order to plan effectively an immediate and coordinated response to emergency and recovery. There must be close links between the development of institutional capacity and the capacity of the communities themselves, as well as at different levels of the system, in order to favour and enable coordinated response.

As regards children, this stage should contemplate an information system which includes knowledge of their situation, as well as their different needs. Part of preparedness implies the consideration of resources available and what resources it would be necessary to deploy in order to guarantee the well-being of children, as regards both input and infrastructure. Knowledge of what human resources are available should not be neglected.

#### **PREVENTION**

The stage for the prevention of disasters includes the concept of avoiding the potential adverse impacts by taking action beforehand. It will probably not be possible to prevent the full extent of the potential impact of disaster, but it should be attempted to diminish considerably the intensity and/or severity of these effects through preventive tasks and strategies.

At this stage, it is essential to heighten awareness and circulate public information regarding what measures to take, actions to carry out and persons responsible in case of an event occurring. This information should be aimed both at the population and at institutions responsible for protecting rights and addressing the needs of the different social segments.

It is advisable for those responsible for disaster risk management to include children in prevention tasks and that communication policies should be designed specifically with children in mind, so they can understand them, with levels of information suited to their ages and levels of understanding. Measures for emergencies should be taken inclusively and children should be informed of them and assigned roles. In addition, they should be aware of the responsibilities of other stakeholders, as a form of being regarded as citizens, with rights and responsibilities. A way of promoting their rights is to generate strategies that prepare them for emergencies, that they should assimilate these strategies and feel safe and protected. Without losing sight of the fact that their well-being and development go hand-in-hand with the well-being and capacity of their families.

The family is the first institution responsible for the care, socialization and containment of children, and as such, should be provided with the necessary conditions to be able to offer this security and receive the necessary support to fulfil their responsibilities. In emergencies, it is essential to keep children with their families, seeking and guaranteeing family reunification as soon as possible when the withdrawal of this care occurs.

Resources devoted to the prevention of natural events are usually the best investment. Prevention and how natural phenomena are confronted differ in every culture and show what importance a society attaches to values such as solidarity and collective, rather than individual, welfare. **It is suggested that member states should emphasize and promote a culture of disaster-prevention at school, which is children's socialization area.**

## RESPONSE

There should be a clear and shared route, with roles assumed by and familiar to the stakeholders involved, which will enable efficient and timely performance regarding the care and protection of child rights; the key being a focus on the continuity of development processes and their activities in society in the short, mid and long term.

*"In an emergency intervention, in which it is usually necessary to prioritize activities and more highly vulnerable groups, it is essential to maintain the view that human rights, including, particularly, the rights of children, are*

*indivisible and inter-dependent. Although it is necessary to prioritize intervention sectors in order to speed up and streamline activities, the targets should remain holistic and wholly include the human rights of children, bearing in mind that these rights are not transitory, and that extreme situations often make gaps which existed before the emergency more evident and acute.”<sup>25</sup>*

## **RECOVERY**

The immediate reestablishment of habits and customs is a substantial factor in the return to “normality” in the lives of children. In this respect, going to school becomes a key element in their sense of containment and security. It is also necessary to have psychological care plans and programmes in place, since sequels tend to be far more serious in children, owing to their dependent relationships.

In addition, it is important for them to be able to assimilate what has taken place, even use it as an opportunity to be alert, aware and sensitized with regard to existing dangers and ways to prevent any possible impact and project strategies which tend to increase their resilience.

### ***Child participation in risk management***

Devoting strategies and resources to setting up and promoting means of participation for children implies, amongst other things, strengthening local capacity in the context of disaster. Their participation may be key in such tasks as awareness-raising, the production of risk maps, identifying and promoting a care system for emergencies, the dissemination of information and the promotion of a culture of rights.

They are active citizens who should be borne in mind as such, in keeping with the principle of progressive autonomy<sup>26</sup>; demands and expectations with regard to their place in the community and/or society should be consistent with their capacity according to their age and level of evolution.

Frequently, opinions or recommendations which children make are disregarded in decision-making or programme design. In the context of risk and disasters – often under the pressure of urgency – decisions and analyses made by adults are intensified, and the fact is disregarded that children are a part of society and have an enormous potential to contribute in emergencies, such as the role adolescents can play in these circumstances.

Participation, understood as a process, as continuous learning and involvement in public issues, benefits the active incorporation of children in subjects which interest them generally and particularly. It therefore contributes to strengthening more democratic, fair and inclusive societies. In addition, during disasters it enables more

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<sup>25</sup> “Derechos de la niñez en emergencias y desastres” (Children’s rights in emergencies and disasters), UNICEF, 2007.

<sup>26</sup> “The issue of evolving capacities highlights the necessary balance between, on the one hand, children’s right to recognition of their increasing levels of responsibility in the exercise of their rights as they acquire the capacity to do so; and on the other, the need for protection in accordance with their relative youth and immaturity.” CRIN – online journal No.23, October 2009.

effective responses, fosters intergenerational encounters and reinstates the role of children and teenagers, positioning them as *agents of change*.

Disaster risk management involves many social, political and institutional actors within a framework of facilitation and coordination. In this new context of relationships it is important to mainstream the best interest of children, to make it visible and include it in all of the strategies of the disaster cycle, from the perspective of development, in order to contribute to the reduction of their vulnerability and minimize potential damage.

The advantages of child participation in disaster risk management strategies involve, on the one hand their capacity for resilience, and on the other, their potential as active promoters of awareness-raising in the face of disaster risk.

In connection with existing hazards, they can become involved, either through their schools, or in action coordinated in the community (by local leaders, for example), in the detection, identification and communication of risks. Developing a hazards and risks map in their immediate surroundings and identifying measures to prevent possible adverse impacts together with their families and schools, enhances the capacity for preparedness. This does not only involve identifying and communicating risk, but also adopting measures in their regard and taking a leading role in connection with attitudes and steps to diminish negative impact.

If child participation is to be guaranteed, it is essential for adults to devote their work and efforts to promoting it. It should also be conceived in all areas in a coordinated and coherent way:

- 1) In the family
- 2) At school
- 3) In communities
- 4) In government
- 5) In States

Promoting participatory opportunities enables the enjoyment of rights and is closely linked to the concept of citizenship. Ideas, needs, demands and opinions are expressed which, in the case of risk and disaster, become indispensable. It is, in short, a recognition that children are specifically immersed in a problem, but also that they are the possible promoters of its solution, as *agents of change*.

It should be noted that child participation in decision-making with regard to designing and monitoring public policies is highly recognized and appropriate. Participation is not only a fundamental principle, as stated in Article 12<sup>27</sup> of the Convention on the Rights

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<sup>27</sup> Article 12: 1) States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

of the Child, but also a means to guarantee the enjoyment of all of their rights. Including their opinions on impact, and even their recommendations with regard to care in approaches to development and assistance, increases the probability that their needs will be covered and fosters their potential for incorporation as active citizens of society.

### ***Challenges faced by governing bodies***

One of the major challenges that this problem poses for governing bodies involves their capacity to **lobby for positioning child care as a comprehensive priority** in national strategy to address disaster risk management.

Apart from some exceptional cases, there are no specific plans in the region catering to the special features of this population in disaster and emergency risk. The majority of the States do have so-called “national systems” to address emergencies and disasters, under various names or formats, depending on the country: operational committees, operation centres, national commissions, etc. In them, it is attempted to coordinate actions and stakeholders who have a say in these contexts, but few show any explicit focus on children.

This priority should be reflected in legislation, plans, programmes and protocols which guide State agencies so that they can proceed relevantly and effectively with regard to children, but, above all, respecting and guaranteeing their right to intervention and prevention strategies.

### ***Joint responsibility***

These efforts should involve all stakeholders and institutions involved and they should all undertake to bring them about: State agencies, local governments, civil society reference points, the private sector, organizational networks, the community itself, families.

### ***Cultural diversity***

A further issue for concern mentioned by the authorities of governing bodies in the region involves the consideration of cultural diversity when designing public policies for children. This is not only rhetoric in demand of the fulfilment of rights, but also a way to address the different conditions of vulnerability, by recovering ancestral and traditional knowledge, in order to encourage efficient and effective risk management.

Peaceful coexistence in the framework of respect and the promotion of human rights should be based on the recognition of diversity and the fostering of strategies for inclusion. These principles – ethical imperatives, in fact – should be borne in mind to an even greater extent in strategies designed for children with experience in living in territories at risk of disaster. The acknowledgement of inter-culturality should be present in general plans and programmes and particularly in educational policy.

## *Gender*

Although the gender approach and disaster risk management are two perspectives that are widely accepted in the public orbit, it becomes a real challenge to incorporate them in practical terms. It implies increasing understanding of matters involving gender specifically and how to incorporate this approach in disaster risk management strategies, as well as how to include it effectively in policy instruments (regulatory frameworks, laws, programmes, etc.).

Women and men of different ages perceive and experience risk and the effects of disaster differently. They may be exposed to disaster equally, but their levels of vulnerability, developed capacity and access to resources with which to face it are different. A recent study<sup>28</sup> carried out in 141 countries showed that more women die than men as a result of the disasters analysed and that in this case, disparities were marked by social inequality in terms of the more vulnerable socio-economic situation of women.

This is also linked to the social roles allocated and performed by men and women. For women, these roles often entail restrictions with regard, for example, to physical abilities (mobility, agility, skills) and the development of tasks for the protection and care of the basic needs of the rest of the family group. This often reduces their opportunities to become involved in preparedness and prevention tasks, which, for cultural reasons, are assigned to the men, and which causes women's distance from the knowledge, learning and involvement in matters related to risk management, thus increasing their vulnerability to hazards.

These roles are reproduced throughout childhood and adolescence. Girls and female adolescents are weighed down with the existing gender burden, which prevents or reduces their full incorporation into (and appropriation of) disaster risk management strategies. Warnings, information and communications regarding a status of alarm or danger, often fail to reach women, and when disaster is unleashed, they must face the situation without the necessary information and even have to take charge of other members of their families and watch over their immediate safety (children and the elderly) and protection. It has also been observed that girls and female adolescents tend to delay access to schooling when compared to boys and male adolescents. In short, they take longer to re-establish their routines and daily activities than men.

## ***Coordination and cooperation***

One of the most significant opportunities for addressing disaster coherently is coordination between bordering countries. This becomes essential when bearing in mind that the devastating effects of disasters frequently lead to the forced displacement of persons. Agreeing on criteria regarding the protection of children's

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<sup>28</sup> The gendered nature of natural disasters: the impact of catastrophic events on the gender gap in life expectancy, 1981–2002. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Neumayer and Plümper, 2007.

rights regionally, based on a platform of understandings, agreements and commitments would enhance the achievements of response and intervention.

In our region this aspect is of paramount importance. Despite extensive experience in cooperation and coordination, efforts for stimulating the exchange of experiences regarding the protection and promotion of children's rights in disaster situations must be stepped up. This mechanism will enhance knowledge of strategies, lessons learnt and effective practices for replicating and/or improving on actions and achievements in this field. The regions' diversity with regard to cultural, economic and social contexts means that a wide range of possibilities may be considered. Actions to enhance the sharing and understanding of these experiences are an excellent path for improving the conditions for the care and promotion of children's rights.

Furthermore, strengthening interinstitutional and intersectoral facilitation and coordination within the States is essential in order to provide guarantees, and for the smooth operation of the instruments established and/or reinforced. To this end, strategies can be designed through which to deploy actions focused on reducing the violations to which children are exposed. This perspective should be guided by national policies and those aimed at the regional and worldwide scene. Bilateral and regional cooperation through the exchange of information, resources and lessons learned strengthens the capacity and scope of intervention. This is even more important when risk and disaster affect territories which cut across borders.

Public policy designers involved in disaster risk management should be in close contact with State agents in charge of providing care for children, so that the rights-based approach and providing priority care for children can be mainstreamed across the relevant channels.

The complementary nature of care should be incorporated from the planning stage, with previously agreed and circulated route sheets, roles and responsibilities. The role of the governing body in this case is key, in order to take into account priority care and its manifestations at the different levels of organization of the issues and aspects of public order, in its different areas.

Response networks, at different levels, should be synchronized with the government's resolutions regarding the prioritization of child care. Information management in this respect becomes essential, so that all of the stakeholders have access to basic guidelines and directives for the protection of rights. Increased access to good quality information, which takes the special features of children into account, should go hand-in-hand with educational and awareness-raising policies which support existing mandates in this area. This leads to a further significant challenge; *the concept that the care and promotion of children's rights must be a cross-cutting strategy encompassing all policies and decisions which risk and disaster management entails.*

The complexity and diversity of the State and social stakeholders involved underscore the importance of coordination and the establishment of opportunities for political discussion; bearing in mind, moreover, that it is precisely the situation of disaster

which brings pressure to bear on institutional instruments and settings, as their plans have been designed for “normal” circumstances. The capacity of logistics and containment is frequently overwhelmed and for this reason, it is essential to guide intervention towards strengthening institutional capacity, coordination and the encouragement of complementary intervention and mainstreaming the priority care of children.

**Governing bodies should adopt a leading role on the stage of risk management, with clear directives and recommendations, in accordance with their responsibilities.**

These agreements and the routes designed should be objectively reflected in protocols and political instruments to guide action in every way.

It should be pointed out that the design of these tools can – and must – include the participation of children, in keeping with their capacity, so that they can give their opinions, recommendations and suggestions on how to operate in these circumstances, which directly affect them.

## 5) FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The unanimous consensus of the States through their governing bodies for children and the support provided by the IIN in its capacity as the Executive Secretariat of the Directing Council has made it possible to identify some considerations to bear in mind when addressing this problem.

In the first place, in order to sustain and mobilize action it is essential to consider the rights-based approach as cross-cutting all strategies, policies and decisions related to intervention in risk and disaster involving children.

Implementation depends on strategies aimed at interinstitutional coordination, actions which effectively make the priority needs of children evident, and the continuity of processes which include solid international partnerships to enhance and consolidate national capacity. International and regional agencies have an important role to play with regard to increasing visibility of this responsibility of managing disasters in a way that pays special attention to children.

The level of political agreement and consensus should be reflected in budget allocations and in the ability to position and maintain the subject on the public agenda. The involvement of the different actors should be increased through comprehensive policies which favour and foster coordination and facilitation between authorities, sectors, civil society, humanitarian aid agencies, communities, families and the children themselves.

The States' decisions and efforts towards the comprehensive incorporation of the rights-based approach for children in disaster risk management are justified not only because they are part of the States' own imperative law but also in the understanding that this perspective will lead to social and economic benefits in general. This action reinforces the concept of democratic governance as antithetical to situations of vulnerability and disaster. Children – bearing in mind at all times their capacity according to age – can provide innovative solutions, mobilize information and even give their opinions and assessment in order to prevent and avoid abuse or negligence with regard to their situation.

Defining children as a vulnerable population means that they are unfavourably situated to ensure that their rights are enforced themselves. Underlying this is the fact that although rights are enshrined and recognized in formal terms, in practice, conditions do not guarantee their effective enjoyment. When disasters occur, this intrinsic vulnerability is made more acute. Both physical (a greater propensity to disease, injury, damage) and psychological effects (shock, trauma, grief or separation from their significant adults and their habitats) lead to sequels which, at their stage of evolution, can have serious consequences for the rest of their lives, thus again increasing their vulnerability.

The focused and explicit protection of early childhood (recognizing the specific care due to this age group), the development of education strategies – awareness-raising

for school-age children which will allow them to reproduce the values of disaster risk management, tending towards a culture of prevention – and the incorporation of strategies to promote participation and the involvement of adolescents in the tasks of preparedness, emergency management and recovery implies protecting their rights and guaranteeing their well-being.

#### **TOWARDS THE DESIGN OF A POLICY FRAMEWORK**

One of the principal objectives in this area is to build, participatorily, a number of guidelines in order to provide a framework for the States to design national strategies (programmes, policies, protocols, legislation, instruments, etc.) which will guarantee the strengthening of handling and caring for children in disaster risk management.

Establishing a “*Policy Framework*” implies agreement and consensus regarding a number of directives and recommendations, in order to set up a suitable structure for the care of children at risk and in disasters, bearing in mind joint regional efforts to address these situations. It should be developed using mechanisms for exchanging information and experiences, through methodologies that enhance the kind of horizontal cooperation which is essential for progress in this area. To this end, all strategies based on the search for political and institutional commitment to these aims become indispensable.

#### **A COMPREHENSIVE VISION OF DISASTERS**

Action during the different phases and, specifically, intervention in disasters should be identified. Understanding disasters as a cycle and analysing them systematically through their phases (which are inter-related) will lead to better results. It is indispensable to make an analysis from the perspective of sustainable development, placing actions in the immediate, medium and long term, and distinguishing the phases which constitute the cycle before, during and after the natural phenomenon which triggered the event. There are four phases in which a variety of actions can be distinguished, aimed at disaster risk management:

- Preparedness: early warning, education and organization.
- Prevention: prevention, mitigation and preparedness.
- Response: warning/alert, care and handling the disaster, emergency operations.
- Recovery: rehabilitation, reconstruction and recovery (of livelihoods and productive, reproductive and community operations in the system).

In view of the complex nature of disasters, it is essential to analyse existing capacity in the region to address the situation of children’s rights, in terms of strengths and weaknesses. Levels of intervention are many and they must be fulfilled comprehensively and in coordination with the stakeholders involved, so that decision-making can make use of the variables and factors arising during the entire process. One of the main challenges faced by the States is the integration of risk management into their system of public policies, in order to go beyond those longstanding

references to individual health and education services that failed to enshrine it as a basic social policy.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF COORDINATION AND FACILITATION AT DIFFERENT LEVELS

In the face of this cross-border problem, in which impact affects one system or several at the same time, it is vital to install sustained bilateral and regional coordination and facilitation, in order to address the migration flows which may arise.

Concerted regional strategy underpins the position of child rights in risk and disasters. Generating and promoting a culture of rights, even in atypical situations such as disasters, entails the commitment of all actors – both public and private – and that they should be aware of the specific needs and capacity of children.

It is therefore necessary to reinforce mechanisms and instruments which take these special features into account, as well as train officials, provide information and coordinate response strategies in all areas: health, education, care, social benefits, the legal system and recreation. Migration control systems and the foreign ministries should be particularly included, in anticipation of and preparation for cases of children who must be displaced and who migrate as a result of disasters.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERNATIONAL TREATIES, STANDARDS AND PROTOCOLS FOR ACTION

Official documents which ratify commitments and report on agreed procedures direct and consolidate joint action for intervention in disasters. **Protocols for action must therefore be formalized, disseminated and adopted by the stakeholders involved, and resources must be allocated so that they can be put into practice effectively.** It is advisable to accompany the establishment of protocols by training and instruction so that civil servants can set them in motion and promote them.

In addition, in the case of both protocols and national regulations, we insist on the need to make explicit mention of considerations tending towards guaranteeing the priority care of children in disasters.

Internationally, consensus and coordination documents (frameworks for action, conventions, international protocols, and others) provide support for bilateral and regional coordination and action, through clear instructions and formal commitments which guarantee the work undertaken in this field and reflect the partnerships established to jointly promote improvements in addressing it.

In fact, the Hyogo Framework for Action, as the current universal reference point for confronting disasters, as well as other international documents, do not specifically address the protection and care of children in these situations. One of the aspects mentioned on which the States placed the greatest emphasis during the survey carried out in this area was the need for specialized information and supporting treaties, which would provide a background for international coordination. **An initiative which would benefit our purposes would be to include explicitly in forthcoming protocols**

**and international documents related to risk management, the need to provide priority and specialized care for children.**

#### **INVESTING IN RISK REDUCTION**

Investment in risk management has been effective in reducing the volume of losses and probable damage caused by disasters. In this respect, smoothly flowing financial channels should be provided, aimed not only at emergency and rehabilitation, but also at training, prevention and awareness-raising campaigns, coordination and facilitation opportunities, in all tasks related to preparedness and prevention. The implementation of public policies for the reduction of disaster risk and for the priority care of children at risk and in emergencies should be accompanied by economic devices which will effectively make these actions feasible.

A cost-benefit reading becomes a helpful aid when addressing risk, as a core support for public investment in disaster risk management strategies.

#### **COMMUNICATION AS A TOOL FOR RISK MANAGEMENT AND AWARENESS-RAISING**

**Information and communication management** is an essential component to bear in mind in any design for actions and interventions in the field of disaster risk management. Efforts to make information clear, to update data or recommendations, to identify official voices before, during and after the events, should be meticulously planned.

A communications plan which includes these aspects should contain a general strategy, agreed and adopted by all of the stakeholders involved. It is important to consider that this plan should not only be directed towards information management but should also include action to foster attitudes and behaviour which will contribute to consolidating a culture of prevention, closely linked to communication-educational strategies.

Together with this plan, there should be a specific scheme for coordination with the media as the promoters of a culture of rights, respectful of children, and as providers of channels of information and education for the immediate handling of crises and recovery. The media have the potential to promote messages and handle information in favour of risk management, to inform and train the population in terms of reducing risk and heighten awareness regarding action to take in the case of disaster, or in its aftermath.

Public policies should contain specific communications policy aimed at the population in general, but also including strategies focusing on information management aimed at children, with age-appropriate language and aids.

Channels which allow this relationship in both directions should also exist. Communications strategies specifically for children should be promoted; and, in addition, channels should be set up in order to establish a connection with them, their

opinions and their recommendations; in short, opportunities and settings for participation and discussion.

#### **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FOCALIZED INFORMATION SYSTEMS**

During the preparedness phase, it is advisable to set up appropriate information and prevention systems, which will not only warn about possible hazards, but also indicate what action and steps to take to be prepared once the warning is issued.

Also important is the permanent updating of specific data involving children, in order to ascertain the status of their rights in general and in particular cases. Differentiated information gathering according to age as well as gender makes it possible to be more assertive in the implementation of response and recovery. In the aftermath of disaster, it should be a priority to classify this information and identify specific unattended needs and requirements. In this respect, the IIN invites and encourages member states and cooperation agencies working in the same field to design and mainstream specific strategies regarding information systems for children in their programmes, international policies and protocols.

#### **CHILDREN AS AGENTS OF CHANGE**

The relevance should be noted of governing bodies lobbying for the consolidation and sustainability of participation opportunities for children in settings related to risk management, or their incorporation in public affairs. Such mechanisms should be designed in order to enable them to give opinions, and make demands and suggestions, so that they can be included in the design and implementation of policies and action. In this way, support is consolidated for fairer and more inclusive experiences which, in short, guarantee values and rights that together make for more democratic societies. Disaster risk management is successful when it includes community participation. Therein lies the importance of conveying the idea that child participation in the face of disasters is a guarantee that organizations will have specific areas for responding to children's needs and particularly to adolescent's expectations.

Child participation contributes to the strengthening of local capacity. The involvement of children in the field of public order determines not only that action is taken for the benefit of the collective good, but also increases the possibility that their opinions, demands, ideas and proposals will be taken into account.

It also means that all stakeholders acknowledge their role in society as rights-holders, active citizens and *agents of change*. A great many experiences have confirmed their ample capacity to carry out tasks involving preparedness, prevention, awareness-raising and the promotion of a culture of rights, according to their evolution, and are proof of the unique vision which only they possess regarding the way hazards affect their own lives. It has also been proved that their involvement in disaster risk management activities not only develops their own concept of citizenship, but also stimulates the rest of the community to recognize them as proactive members of society.

From an educational perspective, active participation in collective events enables the encouragement of commitment and involvement in subjects of common interest. In this respect, governing bodies and care systems for risk and disaster can tap into a powerful force by promoting the participation of children.

It is time to learn the lessons that recent disasters have provided with regard to their consequences and effects on children, made evident by existing gaps and challenges related to the provision of care for the violation of rights and ever-increasing inequities. It is necessary to regard these events as areas of opportunity, as the essential background to the commitment of all stakeholders in order to advance towards more inclusive and equitable societies, within a framework of guarantees for human rights.

Regional strengthening and consolidation on behalf of children in the face of risk and disasters and the implementation of protocols for action which focus on measures to provide priority care for children, has become an ethical imperative for the States, and for regional and international agencies.

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