

# Protecting children's rights in humanitarian crises

Humanitarian crises, including natural disasters and complex emergencies, compromise children's rights to survival, development, protection and participation. Complex emergencies can undermine primary health care systems and physical infrastructure, jeopardising child nutrition and health. Education, too, suffers; of the estimated 101 million children of primary school age not attending primary school, nearly 60 million live in the 33 countries currently affected by armed conflict.

The disruption to the social order caused by emergencies heightens the potential for women and children to be exploited for economic and sexual purposes. Sexual violence may occur as a byproduct of the social disruption or may actually be employed as a weapon of war, and can leave its survivors with severe and long-lasting trauma, sexually-transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies. Recent studies in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and northern Uganda found that children born from sexual violence are often identified with the perpetrator and consequently discriminated against or neglected.

## The changing environment for humanitarian action

In the two decades since the Convention was adopted, the landscape in which humanitarian action takes place has evolved. Climate change and the burgeoning global population are increasing competition for limited resources, including access to water, and raising concerns about food security. Conflicts are increasingly characterized by protracted intra-state hostility, with a significant impact on civilians, including extensive internal displacement. About 50 per cent of the estimated 26 million people currently displaced by armed conflicts and violence are children. Disregard for the protected status of civilians introduces

further risks to children, as does the alarming increase in violence against humanitarian aid workers working in complex emergencies of recent years.

## A framework for child rights in complex emergencies

The Convention provides a strong legislative framework for realizing child rights in humanitarian crises, particularly articles 38 and 39, and the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict. Other international norms for protecting children in emergencies have also been strengthened considerably, with a number of UN Security Council resolutions, notably resolutions 1612 and 1820, aimed at ending the abuse of children and civilians in the context of war. The International Criminal Court has launched procedures to investigate and try those alleged to have committed genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes; the first such case heard by the court concerned the recruitment of child soldiers.

A set of core commitments to child rights in complex emergencies and post-conflict situations has emerged to restore access for women and children to adequate nutrition, disease prevention and control, clean water and decent sanitation as soon as possible. Recent examples of such humanitarian action involving UNICEF in 2008 include a measles campaign reaching children in Myanmar after Cyclone Nargis damaged most of the country's health facilities, and provision of safe drinking water and gender-sensitive toilets for 320,000 children in 500 schools in Afghanistan, along with training in hygiene, sanitation and health for 2,500 teachers.

Inspired by the Convention and its Optional Protocols, child protection has become a priority in emergencies. Humanitarian action now includes establishing child-friendly spaces,

mobilizing communities for child protection, integrating child protection into disaster preparedness, and advocacy and communication. Ensuring that national disaster preparedness plans include child protection has become a priority in certain countries prone to natural disasters, such as Nepal. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, more than 18,000 survivors of sexual violence – a third of them children – have benefited from medical and psychosocial care, legal counselling and socio-economic reintegration programmes.

Restoring access to education in emergencies has become an increasingly important component of humanitarian action over the past decade. Enabling children to return to school in communities devastated by violence, war or natural disasters helps reestablish normal routines and gives them a place to learn and play. An even greater challenge is rebuilding education systems in the wake of disaster or conflict and in countries with generally low capacity. In Somalia, which is struggling to re-establish a functioning government after a long period of collapse, 190,300 of the country's estimated 534,000 schoolchildren, including more than 140,000 children in emergency-affected locations, have benefited from renewed distribution of school supplies.

Post-crisis recovery presents an opportunity for societies to build more equitable public institutions to realize the rights of marginalized groups. The international community is now accelerating the development of tools and approaches that address not only the immediate crisis response, but also recovery and preparation for new emergencies. These efforts provide an opportunity to ensure that child rights are secured as early as possible.

*See References, pages 90–92.*