



**Save the  
Children**



Photo Credit: SEEDS/Siddharth Behl

# **CHILD-CENTRED HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE, PLANNING AND ACTION FOR URBAN SETTINGS IN INDIA**





## Background

Increasing urbanization, rapidly worsening climate change realities and densifying living conditions have resulted in growing adverse impacts of naturally triggered disasters as well as human induced accidents across cities in India over the past few years. The consequences of natural disasters are clearly being felt more acutely due to gaps in urban planning and management, which increase levels of vulnerability in marginalized and lower-income households. Within these households reside stakeholders that are repeatedly considered as the backbone of the country's future and are widely recognized as the most vulnerable groups in any disaster as they are completely dependent on others for their well-being and sustenance, and that is children. Yet surprisingly, policy and disaster relief frameworks continue to lack representation of children's interests and remain largely oblivious to their specific needs and demands.



## Objective

In that context, this study mapped the terrain of the interaction between disasters and children, right from the impacts of calamities on children to their involvement in prevention and risk reduction. It discussed a framework for child-centric humanitarian responses to disasters that can help governmental and non-governmental bodies adapt their policies and actions to cater to the specific needs of Indian urban children, specifically those in low income settlements.



## Method

We adopted a mixed-methods approach to capture and triangulate the issues faced by children by supplementing quantitative data collected from surveys across five cities-Delhi, Patna, Kolkata, Pune and Hyderabad, with qualitative data through interviews, focus group discussions, and observations. This helped us identify broad patterns of challenges and opportunities, as well as specifically understand their nuances through the qualitative data.







## Key Findings

Rapid urbanization is a feature of global societies, and India is no stranger to that phenomenon. The past few decades have witnessed rapidly increasing urbanization, rural-urban migration, and expansion of peri-urban areas in cities. The challenges of these peri-urban areas are unique as they are not fully equipped with the amenities of urban living, nor do they often have access to traditional and social networks that characterise rural living. In that context, these are among the most vulnerable communities in urban spaces. Children in these areas are even more vulnerable. We find that a large proportion of them do not have access to public amenities, and do not feel safe in their neighbourhoods.

In the worst affected locations, children feel extremely unsafe in their neighbourhoods due to the threat of accidents, traffic, alcoholism, and eve-teasing. The lower access to infrastructure and services, along with massive population density and poor infrastructures, massively increase the vulnerability of people living in sub-standard housing across slums, squatters, urban villages, regularised colonies and peri-urban areas to any disasters. This is evident by the fact that one of their major concerns is waterlogging and localised flooding, which need not make headlines as urban floods, but even though it is a low-intensity event it creates a significant impact over time due to its high frequency of occurrence.



As a consequence of the combination of heavy rainfall and poor drainage facilities, this may be seen as a local issue till a major flood occurs, but to the community, this still is a stress that leads to sustained losses. Such issues are local vulnerabilities and often go unaddressed in the state, national, and city-level disaster management plans.

Further, the challenges of urban and peri-urban areas are exacerbated by the fact that most governmental and NGO frameworks have been developed in the context of rural areas, and there is little understanding of how to adapt them to urban challenges. NGOs also face issues concerning perception gaps with on-ground actors including local leaders and volunteers, wherein those who have to implement NGO actions and policies often don't fully align with what issues are to be addressed as the most crucial.

There is a greater need for on-ground interaction to resolve gaps in perceptions of NGOs through processes including the formulation of clearly aligned strategies, operating procedures and capacity building. Further, while NGOs driven interventions mostly reach older children through awareness programs in schools, their interaction with children in primary schools and younger age groups remains abysmally low. Seen across the spectrum, even with strategies of reaching such children through intermediaries including parents and caregivers result in a much smaller coverage than direct interventions do with older children.

Disaster relief remains an ad-hoc process where NGOs arrive in a community after a disaster strikes to provide some relief. It would be much more beneficial to establish a common framework with a policy, strategies and operating procedures, to be followed up with capacity building processes that can enable a robust and sustained process of engagement. Through this NGOs who are interacting with the communities regularly and are aware of their needs and challenges, will be better enabled to not only make the communities prepared for disasters but more aptly respond to any calamities if and when they happen, and do so in coordination with other organisations.







## Conclusion & Policy Recommendations

To strengthen and build the capacities of NGOs involved in children's welfare and disaster relief, including Save the Children India, it is necessary to formulate a comprehensive child-centric plan for humanitarian assistance which will inform disaster relief work so that it is well planned, coordinated across agencies, and prioritizes children in a clearer and better-organised manner.

It is also important to understand that disasters in the future are going to be exacerbated to a significant degree by climate change, and any framework of Disaster Risk Reduction must also address sustainable practices and adaptability to this challenge through the inclusion of the principles of resilience building, namely improved anticipation, investment in capacities to absorb shocks and stresses, and establishing systems to learn from successive events so that response and preparedness systems can be calibrated to changing trends like disaster events.

Content which focuses on these aspects and using it for informing children will be invaluable in making children more aware of climate change, which will be one of the most pressing challenges for their generation. The pedagogical approach for this can ride on school safety programmes already being implemented by government-run or government-backed initiatives so that the capacity of trainers, teachers and media already built can be capitalised upon.

The humanitarian relief framework needs to be more consciously developed to aptly represent the interests of every community. The study reveals that the spectrum of such interests is wide, ranging from concerns around physical risks such as those from flooding to nuanced risks of feelings of insecurity as children move around their neighbourhoods or travel between their homes and schools. It is crucial to understand the context in which they are operating, including the infrastructural, economic, and social realities of the community and then prioritize marginalized and vulnerable groups such as children for disaster relief programs. Through this process, disaster relief frameworks can be made more equitable and representative of children's needs.



Further, such frameworks must incorporate and stress upon the practice of local involvement in decision making, involving children in all stages of disaster management, understanding children's perspectives and needs, and utilizing approaches, networks, and actions that are beneficial to the local communities. Children need to be seen as leaders of disaster management who can represent their interests and not just victims of calamities.

For NGOs in India, including Save the Children, some innovative practices that can be immensely beneficial are the use of gamification to disseminate information among children in the primary school age group and below. This works for both younger and older children, but as younger children are less likely to directly interact with NGOs, information can reach them using parents as intermediaries. A majority of community groups expressed support and willingness for training and awareness programs, with an expressed desire to be better prepared for disasters. It may be noted that this study was conducted in the immediate aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, and carries impressions and lessons from the experience, that children and adults both expressed.

The study identifies specific groups, including fathers of the children in question, and Resident Welfare Associations or equivalent groups within the communities as intermediaries and partners who will enable outreach to all children, including the primary school age group more effectively. The choice of fathers comes directly from our observation that they are more likely to be concerned about children's safety while mothers were more concerned about their education.

Overall, it emerges that NGOs need to prepare for humanitarian action through a multi-pronged approach that involves strategizing, and establishing operating procedures and building capacity. The convergence of such actions with the mainstream urban management systems of municipalities is critical and needs to be covered both through the community route that leads to the urban local bodies via the elected representatives, as well as a direct connection with the executive dimension of the municipalities through the operating procedures. It emerges that bridges between the desired child-centric programming and existing urban policy framework need strengthening, and targeted plans and procedures are required for addressing the needs of children.





This study helped us understand the realities of children-centric humanitarian relief including what children's needs are, the mechanisms that exist to cater to them, and where existing policy frameworks are sorely lacking. The increased incidence of disasters, the challenges of peri-urban areas, and children's vulnerability to calamities mean that child-centric humanitarian work is immediate and necessary, and this report is a step towards creating a disaster management framework that addresses these issue and prioritizes children.





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