

# Youth, Gender and Climate Change: Moving from Impacts to Agency

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## Introduction

This framing chapter offers an introduction to the intersection of international development, young women and girls, and climate change.<sup>72</sup> In doing so, it highlights three overarching messages for building inclusive societies in a changing climate.

First, tackling climate change is a question of justice, not just hitting targets. The imperative for profiling young women and girls in the climate change arena comes not just from instrumental concerns around achieving development goals or sustainable economic growth. It is also driven by the fundamental ways that it challenges social justice and at the same time presents opportunities for a more equal, fair and just world.

Second, the vulnerability ‘race to the bottom’ may be misguided. Highlighting the vulnerability of young women and girls to climate change impacts on the assumption that this will ensure their interests and needs will be taken into account is not enough. The race to the bottom to be the most vulnerable group is based on the false assumptions that these lists alone guide decision making and resource allocations.

Third, we need to refocus efforts to realize the agency of young women and girls in our response to climate change. This relies on:

- Opening procedural spaces for their participation and representation within the growing initiatives on climate change and disasters, from the United Nations to community level;

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- Initiatives to enhance child participation, with sensitivity to the different ways that women and girls experience climate change but also how they conceptualize the risks and opportunities it poses;
- Tailoring information and initiatives on climate change impacts and responses that reaches these groups in ways that fit these different conceptualisations.

## **Children and Climate Change: A Question of Social Justice**

Much of the framing of the climate change issue in a childhood and development context focuses on its impact on child poverty and on the achievement of poverty targets, including the Millennium Development Goals. These instrumental concerns link the impact of extreme events and slow onset climate change on child health, hunger and nutrition, and on livelihoods, migration and education (Bartlett, 2008; UNICEF, 2008). For example, the nutritional impact of the Bangladesh flood of 1998 and its aftermath was shown to impair growth of children in exposed households (Del Niño and Lundberg, 2005). With projected reductions in agricultural productivity and stressed water resources, welfare impacts will be gendered, accentuated by the dominance of female domestic roles in water collection and agriculture, and lower domestic investment in girls' healthcare. Girls are also often the first to be pulled out of school during emergency periods in order to support domestic activities or income generating work (Save the Children, 2008).

Underpinning these instrumental concerns, however, climate change presents a challenge of equitable development opportunities and social justice (Adger et al, 2006; Page, 2006; Roberts and Parks, 2006). Climate change represents a global problem created by the older and richer sections of society across the world but with impacts felt most severely by poorer and younger members who have contributed least to the problem. There is therefore a moral imperative to redress this injustice by richer people accepting the burden of action to both achieve a stable atmosphere and compensate the youngest, poorest and most vulnerable victims through new and additional finance and technical assistance for adaptation (Tanner and Mitchell, 2008). Girls and young women in developing countries find themselves at the intersection of low responsibility for the problem and high vulnerability to its impacts. However, to date, most international climate change programmes remain largely blind to the dimension of age, and relatively few specifically address gender issues.

These dimensions underpin a child rights approach to climate change which stresses intra- and inter-generational justice. This is commonly applied to the international climate change negotiations (UNJFICYCC, 2009), but can also be applied at the national level, where national climate change policymakers are not routinely considering children and gender specifically, and actors working with child rights are not considering the implications of climate change. At the local level, research with children, adults, and policymakers in drought and flood prone regions of Kenya and Cambodia has shown how children link their local development issues related to changing climatic conditions in terms of their rights and the constraints they face (Polack, 2010).

Climate change therefore presents a fundamental social justice issue. Intergenerational justice must be central to our response at international, national and sub-national levels. A child rights-based approach provides both a normative and legislative basis on which to realize intergenerational concerns (Page, 2006; UNICEF, 2008).

## **Moving Beyond Vulnerability**

Children and girls are often portrayed as the most vulnerable group to the impacts of extreme events and climate change; even the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) negotiating texts have recognized the specific vulnerability of children. However, it is also instructive to consider whether this is universally true, and whether it is useful to frame children and climate change issues in terms of vulnerability.

As noted above, this relative vulnerability of girls is attributed to a combination of their gendered role within the domestic environment, where they are likely to be responsible for more climate-sensitive activities such as household food and water security, and gender disparities in access to education, skills and healthcare. Examples highlight the higher death rates in disasters among females than males, well documented in Bangladesh cyclone events (Chowdhury et al, 1993; Cannon, 2002; Neumayer and Plümper, 2007).

Equally, slow onset climate changes such as changing distributions of rainfall or temperature could affect women and girls responsible for collecting water, and for ensuring domestic food and health. In many societies of the developing world, parents invest less for girls' education, training and healthcare, limiting their capacities to prepare for and respond to climatic extremes and changes (Save the Children, 2009).

There are a number of possible explanations for the dominance of these vulnerability narratives (Mitchell et al, 2009). First, they act as advocacy instruments to call attention to and direct resources towards the specific needs of children, highlighting the injustice of impacts felt by those with little say in determining their causes. This is increasingly linked to strategic questions around action and resources in light of international financial flows linked to climate change. Second, it reflects the dominance of top-down adult-led expert information flows on climate and disasters information, with scientific institutions at the top and the public at the bottom (Wisner et al, 2004). The third possible explanation relates to the commonly held belief that parents should make the decisions about the acceptable levels of risk their children face.

Outlining specific vulnerabilities of girls and young women and then assuming that decision makers will act in their best interest is unconstructive for three reasons:

- First, while there are empirical cases that back up these generalizations, we need to unpack the specifics of vulnerability and capacities to take action in different societies and cultures. In some disaster events for example, more men have been killed than women, for example where gendered roles have cast males as risk takers and life-savers (as was the case in Hurricane Katrina, for example).
- Second, within global climate change politics, there is little evidence to date that the vulnerability discourses used to attempt to push certain groups' interests to the top of the list of priorities in tackling climate change has resulted in changed behaviour, decision making or resource flows. It requires a constant effort to lobby and sensitize, without necessarily transforming the same structures that have reinforced gender and age inequalities. Achieving social justice to tackle child poverty in a changing climate instead requires use of rights frameworks to enshrine normative, legislative and procedural aspects of decision making around responses to climate change.
- Third, the use of vulnerabilities as a framing rationale for action reinforces a view that children and girls are incapable of taking action themselves. Instead, they require adults to take action on their behalf as passive victims of the impacts of climate change. A growing body of evidence is emerging that challenges this view, particularly in a development context. This challenge is underpinned by the capacity of children to act as agents of change in their own communities and globally.

## Unlocking the Agency of Girls and Young Women to Act on Climate Change

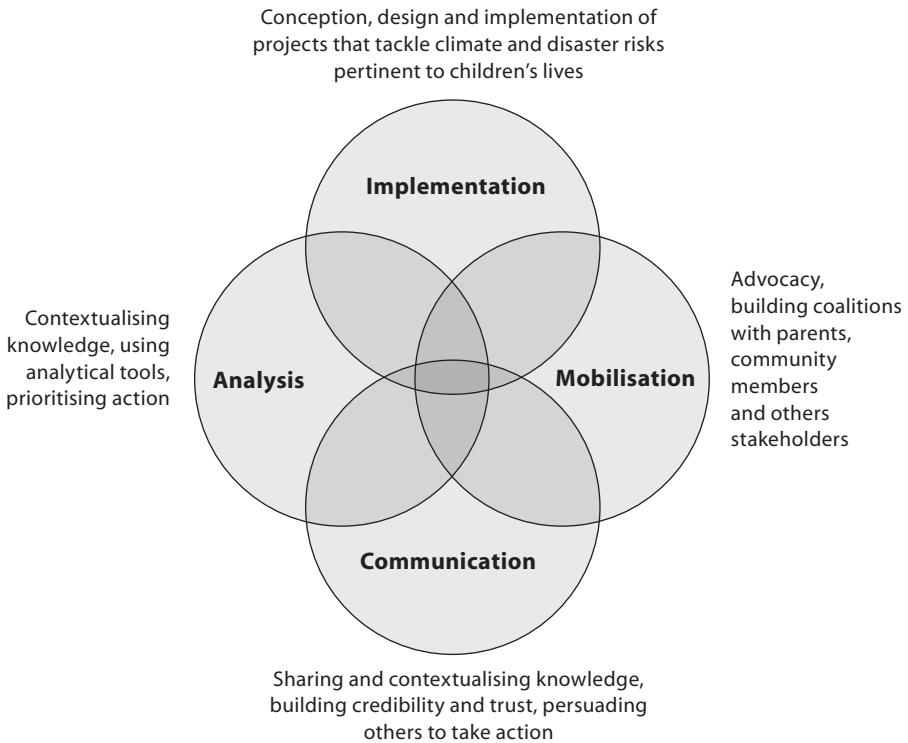
In contrast to vulnerability discourses, there is growing evidence of children's potential agency to respond to climate change. In richer societies, this has tended to focus on mobilising communities to lower their carbon footprint and on lobbying politicians for national action and a global deal to stabilize greenhouse gas emissions. In developing countries and poorer communities, the urgent and immediate need is enhanced capacity to adapt to the changing climate, albeit underpinned by global efforts to stabilize greenhouse gas emissions and prevent dangerous levels of climate change (Tanner and Mitchell, 2008).

In contrast to emphasising vulnerability, unlocking the agency of girls and young women to take action in developing countries is vital to meeting the climate challenge. A recent stocktake of the evidence of child-centred disaster risk reduction and adaptation from around the globe shows how initiatives tackle related spheres of knowledge, voice, and action; action including their potential to enhance protection measures, to influence change, and to lead to transformational changes in the risks facing children's lives and future livelihoods (Back et al, 2009). We can therefore identify the multiple modes of the participation of girls and young women in reducing disaster risks and adapting to climate change (Figure 1).

The first route to unlocking the agency of girls and young people lies with opening procedural spaces for participation and representation within the growing initiatives on climate change and disasters, from the United Nations, through national governments, and down to community level. Experiences of the *Children in a Changing Climate* coalition of supporting children's global advocacy indicate there are both direct and indirect opportunities for them to influence climate change policies. Attendance at meetings such as UNFCCC and the Global Platform on Disaster Risk Reduction appear most effective when underpinned by prior consultations with country delegations and media engagement to sensitize policy makers (Walden et al, 2009).

Experiences from Bangladesh show the value of actively targeting the participation of girls in community disaster management planning where previously they were not considered as an important or visible part of the community. Not only has this empowered girls and young women to take preventative actions, it has also led to a procedural channel for women to challenge the fatalistic attitudes of many adults to

Figure 1: Multiple Participatory Modes for the Children, Disasters and Climate Change Interface (from Tanner, 2010)



disaster events (Qulsum Nipun, 2010). In El Salvador and the Philippines, research has shown how bringing children and young people's disaster coordination committees together with formal adult structures has resulted in a greater joint understanding of the risks and capacities of the local community (Tanner et al, 2009). In some cases the actions of the children's groups have provided the impetus for the adult groups to come together rather than exist only on paper. In others, children's groups have merged with adults groups to strengthen community response and lobby political leaders for support in managing and reducing risks (Mitchell et al, 2009).

There is also growing sensitivity to the different ways that children of different ages and genders not only experience climate change but also how they conceptualize the risks and opportunities it poses. Experiences using risk, vulnerability and capacity toolkits in places like El Salvador show how children's groups are able to explore what climate change means for their lived experience, placing climate risks in the context of a wider spectrum of social, economic and environmental risks. For example, children may highlight social risks such as drugs or a lack of household cohesion as crucial in the capacity to respond to disaster events, where conventional assessments may have simply emphasized infrastructure protection (Tanner, 2010).

Often the gender differences reflect prevailing social norms, with girls more concerned with household-related risks such as health and boys prioritising risks related to agricultural production or income generation. Importantly, however, these gender divides, while recognizable at the community level, differ across communities, cultures and nations. Improving our understanding of these different conceptualizations of risk and opportunity is central to our ability to tailor information and initiatives on climate change impacts and responses that reach these groups in ways that fit these different conceptualizations (Pennings and Grossman, 2008). This can be crucial to infrastructure as well as social interventions, for example in UNICEF's work on gender and child-sensitive disaster resilient school design in Bolivia (Back et al, 2009).

Finally, there are broader multiple benefits of focusing on girls and young women in climate change responses, in addition to their protection from potential impacts. The achievement of reduced risks from concrete actions implemented by children is often the participatory goal that is most frequently highlighted in advocating for child-centred or child-led approaches to climate change and disasters. However, there are significant co-benefits including educational and developmental learning, empowerment and the potential for coherent approaches to tackling risks from household up to national scale.

Climate change adds to the urgency of building inclusive societies that recognize the needs and agency of adolescent girls. In doing so, rights, justice and equity must underpin our responses. Understanding their differential vulnerability to climate-related impacts must be used as a means of refocusing our effort towards unlocking the agency of girls and young women to shape and enact those responses within a supportive enabling policy and institutional environment.

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