

CHILD PROTECTION

A NEGLECTED ISSUE IN THE DISASTER MANAGEMENT

In emergency situations, quite naturally, effort is focused in rescue attempts and in providing relief to the population, and the current disaster in Pakistan is no exception. Given their vulnerable position generally and the fact that their principle carers may be missing or dead, children are at increased risk of harm. For this reason it is essential to ensure that measures are put in place both to protect children from further harm and abuse, and to ensure that the effect of the trauma itself and the further consequences of it are minimised. For this reason it is essential that specific measures be adopted in order to ensure that children are adequately protected. It seems obvious that children's basic needs – such as shelter, food, water, sanitation and medical care – should be addressed as a matter of urgency, and in relief situations attention is normally given to this. However, these needs must be met in ways that are appropriate to the child's age and development (such as provision of appropriate food and nutritional levels). It is important to ensure that where there are only children-headed households remaining after the disaster, that they are also able to access emergency assistance. Careful assessment of children's needs is important to ensure that these needs are met. However it is recognised that in the immediate aftermath of a disaster this may be virtually impossible to carry out systematically. Nevertheless, following on from meeting basic survival needs, a number of specific measures should be taken in relation to children:

The most convenient way of ensuring that these needs are met is to establish a number of 'CHILD FRIENDLY SPACES', areas within which the wellbeing of children can be promoted. These are not places for the children to live necessarily, but place where children can come on a daily basis. In addition they can serve as a network / communication point for relevant NGO / agency responses by having an adult who is able to report on the situation for children using that particular Child Friendly Space.

It is essential that children be registered – especially if they are orphans/unaccompanied. Basic information (such as name, age, height etc) should be recorded together with family details. This information may be difficult to obtain, especially where a child is non-verbal either because of age, disability or trauma. Photographs can be useful as can information from any accompanying adults who are not necessarily related to the children.

Ideally such information should be shared between agencies, and a central register established so that children can be reconciled with family members as they are identified. This central register will also help in identifying whether 'disappearances' of children are occurring. There is anecdotal evidence that such disappearances have already started in the disaster zone. One can even find people visiting the quake-hit areas in search of adoption of children. It is essential to ensure that if people present themselves as being family members and wish to take children with them that this is verified. Unfortunately unscrupulous adults can use emergency situations to gain access to children.

Regardless of where children live, or even if a child is looked after by a family member, there needs to be a system in place to ensure that children are being looked after adequately and that people know where they are. Identifying one or two people to act, as a 'link' for each child can be a way of ensuring that monitoring of the child takes place, as the adults can be more familiar with the child's individual situation.

We need to ensure that there are measures in place to prevent accidental separations of children from family members at points where they are likely to occur (e.g. loading points for transport, health facilities, distribution or registration points).

There should be a process established to ensure that if a separation does occur then 'lost' children can be quickly reunited with their carers. For example, this could be reporting to a 'Child Friendly Space' if nearby, or identifying a specific location as a meeting point.

Many children may be orphans/unaccompanied and may need care. The principles for quality substitute care are that it should be, wherever possible, community based. Children should be cared for within their extended family wherever feasible. Where this is not possible children should ideally be looked after in small groups. All such care arrangements, apart from return to parents or established family members who are able to provide safe and suitable care, should be deemed as *temporary* until relief and recovery operations are complete (this may take some months). Formal adoption should not be considered for any child for at least one year as it may take many months for relatives to be located if people are dispersed.

Children find an enormous amount of reassurance in routine and certainty. As quickly as possible re-establish as many 'normal' aspects of the child's life as possible (such as attendance at classes etc) with, ideally, adults already known to the children (such as teachers). Where this is not possible establish routine to create a sense of safety (e.g. lunch at a certain time, followed by a particular activity).

Remember that children had lives before the disaster struck, and they need opportunities for lives (although changed) to continue. Education and recreational facilities, appropriate to the age and development of the child, should be provided.

We should help promote children's own resilience (that is their ability to cope and thrive) by giving them a sense of control over their situation. Wherever possible include children in decisions that affect their lives, although do not burden children with the responsibility for making decisions that are inappropriate for their age and development as this can leave them feeling even more help.

Distress and disorientation following trauma is normal. Many children will not need specialist help in coming to terms with their experiences, and it is not necessary to provide psychological services immediately for all children. Instead, allow children the space to share what they are feeling and thinking, without putting them under pressure to do so. This is best done with adults that are already known to the child and can speak the child's language.

Wherever possible, links with the community should be maintained. Children need to feel secure about their place in the world, and maintaining connections with people from life before the disaster (including friends) can be reassuring and comforting.

The risk factors of sexual abuse to children following an emergency are substantial. Young separated girls are at particular risk, though boys are sexually abused as well. Risk flash becomes higher if there are inadequate relief services in pushing children to prostitute themselves in order to get food and other services. Women and girls may be particularly vulnerable when and where they have to move in relatively isolated, unprotected or dark surroundings (such as when using sanitary facilities).

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