



# "Watermarks"

**Child Protection During  
Floods in Bangladesh**



**Save the Children**  
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UK

# "Watermarks "

Child Protection During  
Floods in Bangladesh

*"Children have the right not just to survive,  
but to survive with dignity."*

**Save the Children fights for children in the UK and around the world who suffer from poverty, disease, injustice and violence. We work with them to find lifelong answers to the problems they face.**

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# Preface

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As disaster is a regular event and part of life and livelihood in Bangladesh, more or less all the development agencies working in this largest delta have gained significant experiences and competence in disaster mitigation. Many of them are working efficiently in reducing the impacts of hazards by promoting disaster-proof infrastructure, early warning system and associated awareness raising programmes as well as improved logistic arrangements and human resource management. As a result, significant developments are now apparent in the field of emergency responses starting from search and rescue to relief distribution and rehabilitation.

Now there remains no space left for debating whether disasters affect different categories of people differently. But unfortunately, we are still struggling in addressing the special needs of the people by age, gender and disability differentials.

Lack of interest in understanding the special and strategic needs of the affected children result in putting the children in a situation where they have to compete with the adults to get their share of assistance in the event of an emergency. Furthermore, disaster response initiatives, sometimes, put additional deprivation or burden on children. For example, schools are used for sheltering disaster-affected people and draft animals or the families send their children to work to offset their losses.

Keeping this in mind, with the help of a group of likeminded agencies working in Bangladesh and their local counterparts, we initiated a review study to understand the children's special and strategic needs in emergencies which will help all the relevant agencies in designing their respective emergency response policies in a more child sensitive way. The objective of the review study is also to appraise experiences of Save the Children's disaster response efforts in meeting children needs. We also planned to identify options of improving scope of emergency response plans in meeting the needs of children in emergencies through consulting them and their caregivers.

In consultation with the cooperating agencies, it was decided that initially the study should concentrate on the flood and focus on relevant protection issues and then move to understand the children's situation and protection needs in other disasters like cyclone/ tidal surge etc.

This publication is the outcome of our Study of Child Protection Issues during Floods in Bangladesh. We believe this will aid all relevant actors in developing and planning more child sensitive emergency response strategies.

We are grateful to Jennifer Morgan who took the responsibility to coordinate the study. No doubt she has done a brilliant job.

I would also like to express my gratitude and sincere thanks to all of those one thousand children and their caregivers who really helped us in understanding the children's need and scope to render emergency response more child sensitive.

Our special thanks to David Humphrey, Programme Director, Save the Children, Bangladesh programme for his support and guidance.

Gawher Nayeem Wahra  
Head of Programme, Programme Support Unit  
Save the Children UK, Bangladesh Programme

# Acknowledgements

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Heartiest thanks are due to the large number of people who volunteered their time to be interviewed for this study. The majority of the interviewees were children from many different locations and backgrounds, and thanks are also due to the parents/care-givers and other key adult stakeholders, such as the members of civil society who participated in discussions for this study.

We are grateful to the organisations for time and interest of their staff who facilitated the focus group discussions : Association for Community Development, Child Brigade, Dustho Shastha Kendra, Manab Mukti Shangstha, Nari Moitree, PRODIPAN, Solidarity, UDDIPAN, and Disaster Forum, Unnayan Sohojogi Sangstha.

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David Humphrey’s (Programme Director, SCUK) support for this study was greatly appreciated, and special thanks to Nayeem Wahra (Head, Programme Support Unit) for his advice, guidance and time.

Thanks are also given to UNICEF and Save the Children Sweden-Denmark for their financial contribution to this study.

Jennifer Morgan  
Chief Author and Study Co-ordinator  
Save the Children UK, Bangladesh Programme

**THIS REPORT PRESENTS THE FINDINGS OF THIS STUDY ALONE. THE VIEWS AND OPINIONS EXPRESSED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT THOSE OF THE ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED.**



# Acronyms and Abbreviations

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BELT	Bangladesh Emergency Liaison Team (Save the Children Alliance)
DERG,B	Disasters and Emergency Response Group, Bangladesh
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GoB	Government of Bangladesh
INEE	Inter Agency Network for Emergencies
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
NGO	(national) Non-Governmental Organisation
ORS	Oral Re-hydration Solution
Plan	Plan International, Bangladesh
RAB	Rapid Action Battalion (Special law enforcement force)
SCUK	Save the Children UK
SCS-D	Save the Children Sweden-Denmark
SCAUS	Save the Children Australia
SCUSA	Save the Children USA
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

# Executive Summary

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1. Child Protection is an area of humanitarian work that has perhaps been largely overlooked by relief agencies over the years, but is now gaining increasing attention. Whenever there is a natural or man-made disaster, children face a wide range of threats. These may include the risk of abduction or sexual abuse, or the more familiar needs of food and shelter. Greater attention needs to be paid to these particular problems that children face during times of disaster. In recognition of a clear gap in understanding of children's experiences during natural disasters in Bangladesh, this study has aimed to capture children's specific protection needs during floods.

In this study over 1000 people took part in interviews focusing on the dangers that children face during floods. The vast majority of the interviewees were children. Parents/caregivers, community leaders and civil society members were also consulted. A questionnaire guide was developed with the help of the Study Steering Committee and finalised after field-testing. Facilitators who carried out the focus group discussions (FGDs) took part in orientation sessions, and gained awareness of potential key child protection areas, such as risks associated with flood shelters, separation, evacuation, abduction, relief distribution, health care, education, hazardous work, and psycho-social distress. Care was taken to consult children and other stakeholders from a range of different backgrounds, for example, working children, students, unaccompanied children and children from ethnic minorities. Interviews were also spread across areas affected by different types of flood, viz.; slow onset urban floods, rural flash floods, rural slow onset floods. Patterns of similar experiences were looked for regarding children from particular groups, backgrounds and locations.

Preliminary analysis of the findings were shared with the Steering Committee, Non-Conventional Organisations, NGOs and International NGOs and considered with reference to a desk review of relevant literature, policies and plans. The main conclusions drawn from this study are articulated below.

2. Many children are repeatedly affected by floods in Bangladesh. It is imperative that organisations working on flood preparedness and flood response

engage with children. When an organisation talks of 'providing relief to the flood affected population' or 'consulting with the community about their needs during floods', they must recognise that roughly half of that population, half of that community is under the age of 18. These children have specific capabilities and strengths to offer; they have a role to play before, during and after floods. They also have specific protection needs. Traditionally, it has been assumed that the core elements of a typical disaster response (food, water, shelter and health care) have children's main needs. Any further issues outside of this limited response are often viewed as too specialised and challenging for organisations to address in an emergency context.

This study argues that it is not possible for relief agencies to 'opt out' of engaging with child protection issues. The reality is that all emergency responses have the potential to significantly affect children's protection needs both positively and negatively. Indeed, all organisations implementing flood response programmes in Bangladesh are already exerting impact on children's protection needs; the challenge now is to be aware of these needs and seek to engage positively with children.

3. Child protection issues cross-cut emergency and non-emergency phases because children's physical and social development continue regardless of changing circumstances. Child protection, therefore, cannot be put on hold during floods in Bangladesh. It is not something to be considered only when the 'more pressing' issues of food, water, shelter and healthcare have been addressed. It is not acceptable to take the view that children's needs are not a priority and that they can wait until we have more stable times. Such an approach is never acceptable, but in the case of Bangladesh it is particularly critical that this common attitude is avoided because floods are not a rare occurrence, and on the contrary, affect many children in most years for extended periods of time.

4. It is important to remember that children have rights, as well as needs. These rights are enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), to which Bangladesh is a signatory. Similarly, most non-governmental organisations have signed up to the Sphere



Standards. The vast majority of issues raised by children during this study can already be found in the UNCRC or the Sphere Standards. This report is not asking flood response actors to take on any new responsibilities, but instead to implement the standards to which they have already agreed. Efforts must be made to uphold children's rights during times of flood when they are most vulnerable.

5. Issues of child protection in natural disasters must be separated from the grouping of 'women and children' as this categorisation frequently has a negative effect on both parties. It is clear that the needs of women and children together with the strategies for meeting those needs are very much inter-linked, but it is nevertheless important to consider children's needs separately too, when required. The particularities of child protection needs in natural disasters risk being overshadowed by this conflation of their requirements with those of women. Increased attention to the specific needs of each group is warranted in flood response.

In addition, there needs to be greater recognition that children are a highly heterogeneous group with varying needs. When carrying out needs assessments, as many children as possible should be consulted in groups differentiated by sex, age and background. Furthermore, children's needs are not static, but change throughout the flood period; therefore it is important to keep talking to children and reassessing needs. In addition, it is vital that needs assessments are in fact needs assessments and not merely damage assessments, as they sometimes appear to be.

6. There needs to be greater acceptance among flood response actors in Bangladesh of the potential for adults in positions of power and trust to abuse children during periods of natural disaster. Verbal, physical and sexual abuse, as well as neglect of children, appear to be all too common occurrences during floods. Many children interviewed for this study identified the risk they face from shelter organisers, rescue workers on boats and relief distributors. In other cases, the abuse came from another member of the public, but children still criticise adults associated with flood response efforts for failing to protect them. Particularly notable was the frequency with which sexual abuse of boys by people in positions of power was discussed by children. In contrast, there is a notable reluctance to acknowledge the abuse of

children by adults in these positions, (in particular the sexual abuse of boys) by members of the flood response community. The Government of Bangladesh, donors, INGOs and NGOs who directly or indirectly employ adults in positions of power, must take greater responsibility for limiting the potential opportunities for abuse to take place.

Linked clearly to the issue of abuse are the problems associated with bathing and sanitation in flood shelters. Virtually, every child and adult interviewed commented on the lack of adequate bathing and sanitation facilities. Often flood shelters have no facilities, or they are inadequate for the number of people needing to use them, or indeed, adults prevent children from using the facilities at all which forces children to go outside. This not only causes great physical discomfort and mental anguish, but also puts children at greater risk of abuse and abduction. Furthermore, many children are unable to stay in flood shelters and their bathing and sanitation needs are rarely acknowledged or addressed.

7. The extensive protection needs of unaccompanied children demand greater recognition. This group of children faces huge discrimination in a disaster environment and they are clearly one of the 'most at risk' groups. Their vulnerability is exacerbated by the fact that they are 'invisible' to many aid organisations. This is largely because unaccompanied children are often refused entry to flood shelters, the places through which most organisations channel their relief efforts to the affected population.

This also raises the wider issue of children from any background who do not, or cannot, stay in recognised flood shelters. Many flood affected people camp out on roofs, roads, embankments or bamboo structures etc. Children in these situations are extremely vulnerable and are less likely to receive assistance than children in flood shelters as they are harder to identify and harder to reach.

8. Methods of relief distribution have been highlighted as often undignified and discriminatory. To go house-by-house or room-by-room in shelters is seen by NGOs to be too time consuming and not cost effective. However, it should be recognised that this is the established best practice and efforts should be made to distribute relief in this way whenever possible. It must also be acknowledged that to calculate food relief on a household model excludes unaccompanied children who are outside

the family unit. Furthermore, greater effort must be made by those providing food relief to include food that is appropriate for babies and infants.

9. A key issue to be addressed is the risk of insufficient communication and coordination between actors at Government, donor, INGO and NGO levels during a flood response. There also appears often to be a knowledge gap between the head offices of large INGOs and the field offices or local NGOs who are actually implementing the emergency responses. It can often be the case that staff in 'head office' write a project proposal that is sensitive to child protection and aware of the Sphere Standards, but the capacity to actually carry out the intervention in this way is missing at the implementation level.

10. There needs to be greater recognition of the experience of floods on the short and long term

survive, often leads to increased family tension and increased levels of domestic abuse. However, the vast majority of children interviewed placed great emphasis on staying with their family, even if that means living in worse conditions than those available in a relative's or friend's house.

11. Greater importance must be placed on enabling play and education to continue throughout floods. It is apparent that children's mental well-being is significantly improved if they are able to process and release stress through structured play. There are clearly many practical obstacles to overcome in order to facilitate education and play during floods, but the first obstacle to overcome is perhaps to change flood response actors' attitudes towards education and play and give these key areas higher priority during emergency flood response programmes.

### Study findings in a nutshell

- Children face deprivation because of adults' attitudes/biases.
- Children suffer from starvation, thirst, dirtiness, abuse, even death because of poor planning and inadequate provisions.
- Children suffer from loss of dignity because of bad methods of relief distribution and maltreatment by aid workers.
- Children experience neglect and abuse because of aid workers' lack of accountability, 'fake aid workers' and parent/care giver's reduced capacity to protect them.
- Children face denial of services because of flaws in the targeting procedure.
- Children experience family separation because of haphazard and unplanned evacuation and lack of preparedness.
- Children face anxiety and fear because of inappropriate models of response (of both parents/care giver and aid agencies).
- Children face difficulties meeting their special needs, such as education and play, because of inappropriate interventions.

well-being of children. The vast majority of children interviewed as part of this study described feelings of anxiety, frustration and depression dominating the duration of the flood period. Difficulties faced through day to day living in extremely difficult conditions leave many children feeling dejected. In addition, many children interviewed described specific traumatic events they had experienced which have had a lasting effect on them; for example, if a sibling drowned or was abducted. Many children live each minute of the flood period with the constant fear of something terrible happening to them or to someone they care about. This prolonged fear and anxiety itself is detrimental to children's mental health. Many children commented that the heightened levels of stress caused by the difficulty of trying to

12. The overwhelming majority of children interviewed asserted the need for a change in attitude towards children during floods in Bangladesh. Children want to be respected, to have their views listened to and their ability to participate constructively to be appreciated. Treating children with respect is the cornerstone of child protection.

Related to this is the way in which flood response actors interact with children and their communities. Some children and adults interviewed commented that it had been very frustrating for them to give up critical time out of their day during a flood, when their primary focus is on survival, to answer questions from many different NGOs, and then to receive no aid or see no marked improvement in their living conditions in return.

## Summary of main policy recommendations for the Government of Bangladesh:

- Review all relevant documents in the light of the UNCRC and Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), particularly the ‘Standing Orders on Disaster’.
- Involve children in decision making about issues that affect them.
- Review formal and informal attitudes towards unaccompanied children; take steps to provide better care for these extremely vulnerable children during floods.
- Increase security in flood shelters, including having a child protection and whistle-blowing policy for staff. Develop a code of conduct for the police and other officials involved in rescue work and sensitize them about children’s protection needs during floods.
- Reconsider the education calendar with the months of flooding in mind.
- Strive to establish effective early-warning systems in all areas where flash floods recur.

## Summary of main policy recommendations for all:

- Signatories to the UNCRC and Sphere Standards should review their policies and operational procedures accordingly.
- Treat children with dignity and respect. Before, during and after the floods, seek them out, listen to them and act upon their opinions.
- Include children’s protection needs in assessments and continue to carry out needs assessments throughout the flood period.
- Make special efforts to identify and protect the most marginalised and vulnerable children, for example, street children, unaccompanied children, orphans, children with disabilities, and

children from minority ethnic and religious backgrounds.

- Seek to ensure children’s opportunities for recreation. Children need time to play in safe spaces with supervision. Relief packages should contain playing and educational items.
- Be aware of the potential for adults in positions of trust (such as shelter organisers, rescue workers, relief distributors) to abuse and neglect children. Develop a child protection and whistle-blowing policy for all staff who are



*Photo : UNICEF Bangladesh/Mufti Munir*

working with children. Relief workers should carry identification and be professionally accountable.

- Seek to distribute relief in a fair and dignified way; ideally, following a house-by-house, or room by room pattern in shelters. Distribution registers must include all children, and feeding unaccompanied children should be a priority.
- Appropriate food must also be provided for very young children and babies.
- Flood shelters should be organised in a way that members of the same family can stay together and families that know each other can share rooms, when necessary. There should be greater security and provision for child care in shelters.

# Chapter One :

## Study Introduction

### 1.1 Rationale

Disasters occur frequently in Bangladesh. Nevertheless, the country has noteworthy capacity to respond. In addition to the significant capacities of the Government of Bangladesh (GoB), there is a heavy presence of NGOs and interested donors, and over the years, these actors have gained



Photo : Save the Children UK

significant experience and competence in disaster mitigation and management.

In general, the above actors' approaches to disasters seek to reduce casualties, protect assets and meet immediate survival needs, such as food, shelter and medical care. For example, chief elements of disaster preparedness plans are aimed at reducing impact of hazards through establishing disaster-proof infrastructure, early warning systems and associated awareness raising programmes. They also include improving response capacity through better logistic arrangements and human resource management. The disaster relief interventions concentrate on providing food, health care, water and sanitation, shelter, employment generation and agricultural support.

Disaster mitigating agencies have a good understanding of vulnerabilities of communities to

various hazards. They recognise the fact that disasters affect different categories of people differently. Nonetheless, their preparedness plans tend to focus on the 'whole community' and their response plans tend to target 'family units'. In short, they may be weak in actually addressing the special needs of the people by age, gender, disability and other differentials. **In particular,**

**there is marked gap in understanding children's experiences during emergencies and their special protection needs during and after disastrous events.** In the response plans, children are counted usually as members of families only. Therefore, they often have to compete with their adult counterparts for their share of relief and assistance. Children's special protection needs during disasters are rarely recognised or met. Furthermore, sometimes the disaster response initiatives can themselves place additional burdens on children. For example, schools

are often used to shelter disaster-affected people and in the process, children are deprived of their education and safe spaces to play.

In order to identify the specific protection issues which affect children in Bangladesh during disasters, and in order to identify the 'protection gaps' in our disaster responses, there is a felt need for an on-going, comprehensive dialogue directly with the children. This study has provided a valuable opportunity to have consultations with children and discuss the different challenges they face during natural disasters.

### 1.2 Objectives

The purpose of this study has been to gain a greater understanding of children's protection needs especially during the floods in Bangladesh, and the scope of disaster response plans to meet those needs.



The objectives were to:

- identify the difficulties that children face during floods
- identify the assistance children need in order to cope with the floods
- outline whether and how the current disaster responses meet children's special protection needs during floods
- identify ways of improving the emergency response plans in order to meet children's protection needs during floods

## 1.3 Methodology

The methodology consisted of:

- Desk review of relevant laws and guidelines, policies, plans, proposals and reports of emergency responses of humanitarian actors operating in Bangladesh.
- Consultation with disaster mitigation actors at the local and central levels.
- Extensive consultation with over **one thousand children and concerned adult stakeholders** in different flood prone areas, in the form of focus group discussions and individual case studies.
- Input from a Steering Committee comprising focal emergency staff from Plan, UNICEF, Save the Children-USA, Save the Children-Aus, Save the Children-SD and Save the Children-UK. It is hoped that the formation of this committee has helped to forge stronger links between these child-centred organisations, providing a firm base for future shared work, cooperation and communication, especially during disasters.

## 1.4 Scope and limitations

**Natural disasters in Bangladesh:** At a meeting between many disaster response actors in Bangladesh on 06 July 2004<sup>2</sup>, it was suggested that studies should be carried out to identify specific child protection needs during all types of recurring natural disasters in Bangladesh, such as cyclones, cold waves, earthquakes etc. This study can be seen as the first contribution, focusing on floods in Bangladesh. The research has taken place in areas that experience different types of flooding recurrently:

- slow onset urban floods
- rural flash floods

- rural slow onset floods

(Coastal floods have not been included in the scope of the study.)

**Interviewees:** This study builds on the significant experience and expertise of many actors involved in flood responses in Bangladesh. There have been many valuable consultations with children and other stakeholders regarding the problems faced during floods. This study has sought to take this learning further by providing the unique opportunity to consult with over **one thousand stakeholders** specifically on the issue of child protection during floods. The majority of people consulted were under the age of 18, but parents, care-givers and other relevant adult stakeholders, such as, the community leaders and civil society members were also consulted. This number of people has not been consulted before on this topic in Bangladesh.

"In order to improve protection for children in emergencies, it is important to [...] elicit the active and meaningful participation of children themselves in all programmes. This helps to ensure that interventions do not cause further harm or make children more vulnerable, and that they meet the specific needs of different groups, covering protection gaps as best as possible."<sup>3</sup>

Children were interviewed in groups differentiated by age, sex and background. This is important because children are likely to feel more comfortable talking about difficult issues with other children who have shared similar experiences. For example, young girls who have been sexually harassed in flood shelters may not feel comfortable discussing this in the presence of teenage boys. Interviewing children in differentiated groups helped us understand which child protection issues tended to be 'cross-cutting' and which affected specific groups of children. Special effort was made to consult with children from marginalised groups, such as street children and orphans. Admittedly, this can be a rather crude way of grouping children; people always have multifaceted identities and it may prove to be useless to group them into simplistic categories. However, in terms of this study, it was felt that the children in these groups were living in particular areas and in particular circumstances which would have direct bearing on the types of problems that they face during floods.

### Examples of variable factors in categorisation of groups of children interviewed

Girls, boys, mothers, fathers, community leaders, members of civil society
Experiencing slow onset urban floods, slow onset rural floods, or rural flash floods
Age group (for children) 6-10 years / 11-14 years / 15-18 years
Students or wage earners, or children who beg, or a combination
Children who stay in flood shelters, relative's house or other place of shelter
Accompanied or unaccompanied by an adult

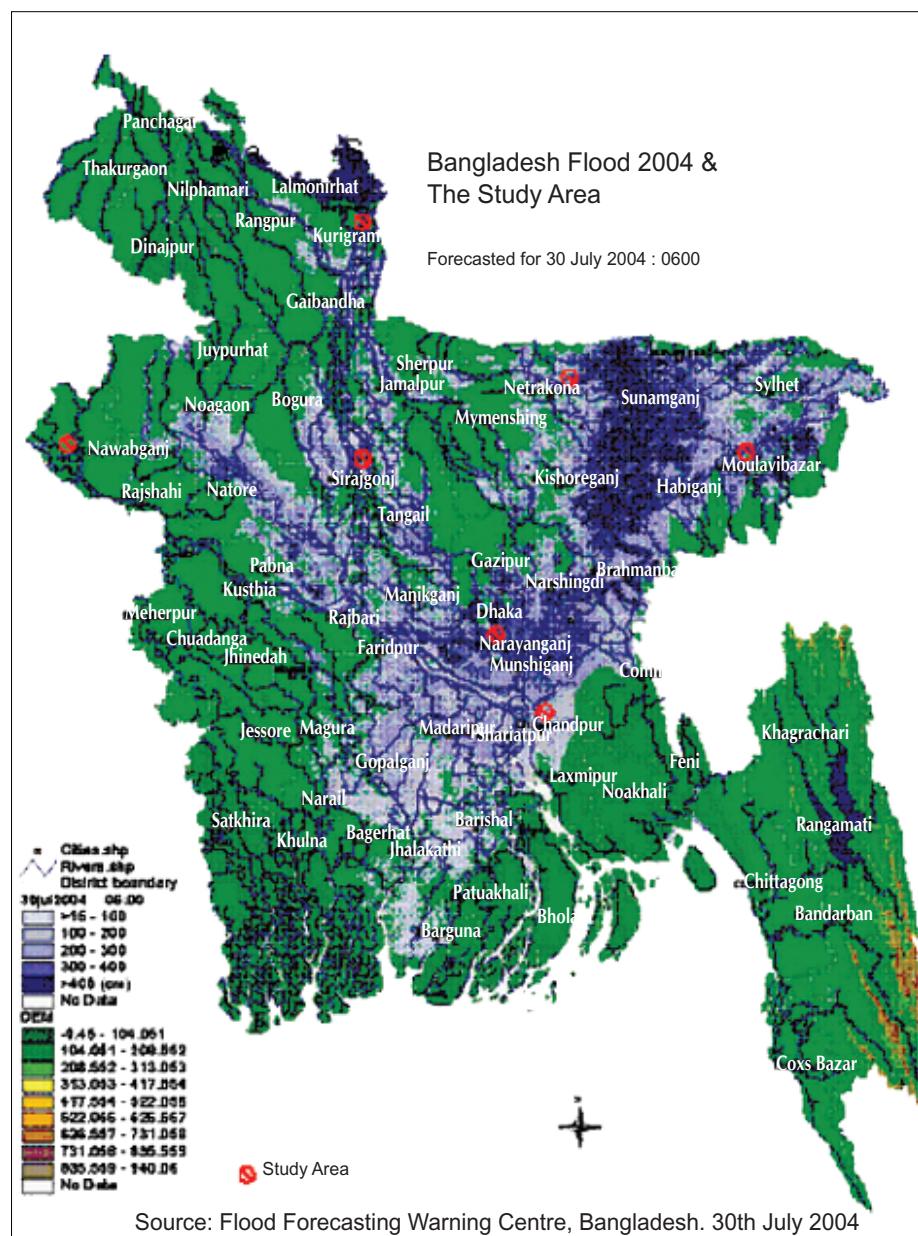
- Prodipan : *Dhaka city area—Bashao, Rajarbag, Kamrangir Char, East Goran and South Bashabo.*
- Solidarity : *Upper Brahmaputra / Sirajganj area*
- Uddipan : *Kochua, Chandpur*
- Unnayan Sohojogi Sangstha (USS) : *North east / Moulovibazar area*

Six of these organisations paired up and switched their usual working areas. It was expected that children and other participants would thus feel free to talk about sensitive issues with facilitators who do not live in their own communities. It was also an opportunity for national NGOs to share their best practices and different approaches to

### Organisations and areas:

Nine NGOs carried out the FGDs in different areas across Bangladesh. These areas are all considered to be highly flood-prone and the inhabitants of these areas have been repeatedly affected by floods, most recently, the severe floods in 2004.

- Association for Community Development (ACD) : *Shibganj, Chapai*
- Child Brigade : *Dhaka city area —Lalmatia, Mohammadpur*
- Dustho Shastha Kendra (DSK) : *Netrokona and Dhaka city area—Kamlapur, Gulshan, Kamrangirchar and Durgapur*
- Manab Mukti Shangstha (MMS) : *Mid-Brahmaputra / Kurigram area*
- Nari Moitree : *Dhaka city area—Rajarbag, Kamrangir Char, Shahidnagar, Lalbagh*





Consultation & Feedback	Workshop with Urban Local NGOs 8 Dec. 2005, Dhaka	Workshop with Rural Local NGOs 12 Dec. 2005, Gaibandha	Workshop with INGOs & National NGOs 19 Dec. 2005, Dhaka
Organisation Participated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Child Brigade, Dhaka</li> <li>✓ DSK, Dhaka</li> <li>✓ Friends In Village Development Bangladesh (FIVDB), Sylhet</li> <li>✓ Nari Moitree, Dhaka</li> <li>✓ Prodipan, Dhaka</li> <li>✓ USS, Moulovibazar</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ ACD, Rajshahi</li> <li>✓ Gono Unnayan Kendra (GUK), Gaibandha</li> <li>✓ Manab Mukti Shangstha (MMS), Sirajgonj</li> <li>✓ Rural Society Development Association (RSDA), Kurigram</li> <li>✓ Samaj Kalyan Sangstha (SKS), Gaibandha</li> <li>✓ Solidarity, Kurigram</li> <li>✓ Uddipan, Chittagong</li> <li>✓ Unnayan Shangha, Jamalpur</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ ActionAid</li> <li>✓ Care Bangladesh</li> <li>✓ Islamic Relief</li> <li>✓ NIRAPAD</li> <li>✓ Plan Bangladesh</li> <li>✓ Proshika</li> <li>✓ Save the Children Australia</li> <li>✓ Save the Children Sweden-Denmark</li> <li>✓ UNICEF</li> </ul>

work through greater interaction with each other.

The questionnaire guide was developed with input from the Steering Committee for the study, pre-tested and finalised. The FGD facilitators from the national NGOs then took part in an orientation programme. An additional ‘orientation day’ was held for the facilitators who conducted interviews focused on children’s psycho-social distress during floods.

After the FGDs were completed, two consultation workshops were held in Gaibandha and Dhaka with local NGOs operating in rural and urban areas respectively. This offered an opportunity to compare our initial findings with those organisations’ experiences who had conducted the interviews, and also to hear what the flood response organisations had to say, who were not directly involved in the study. Another workshop was held in Dhaka with the INGOs, with a view to sharing and discussing the initial findings.

### Limitations /constraints:

- The relatively large size of this study was both a strength and a limitation. Maintaining communication and consistency between many different organisations across the country was a

challenge. The brief time frame available for the study and the fact that the month of Ramadan (when majority people religiously fast throughout and pace of even otherwise hectic activities slacken) fell during the study period also posed unavoidable challenges.

- It was intended that children would be interviewed in specific groups differentiated by factors such as their age, sex and background. Eventually, several partner organisations found it difficult to interview children in these particular differentiated groups. For example, many of the older working children struggled to find time to be interviewed. Whenever a mixed group of girls and boys would manage it to come together for the purpose, the concerned partner organisation would grasp the opportunity to interview them together. Similarly, street children preferred to be interviewed along with those that they were familiar with; these children sometimes spanned a wide age range, which explains why it was not always possible to attribute a particular information with regard to their experiences to a specific group of children.
- Many children are used to learning ‘by rote’ at school, and most working children and street

children are not used to having their opinions sought. Thus the children taking part in the study sometimes felt daunted or shy during a group discussion where, of course, they have always been encouraged to express their views freely. The success of the FGDs depended largely on how the facilitator would be able to put children at ease and draw out different opinions. In addition, many interviewees were required to reminisce about the floods of 2004 while they discussed the problems they faced during flood time.

- Again, the children's views were first recorded by many different facilitators, each following their respective notions and perceptions of child protection needs in floods, and then this documentation was translated from Bengali into English. Some information and certain nuances were most likely lost or altered unawares in the process.
- Literature on children protection in natural disasters is limited. The majority of child protection literature focus on conflict situations.

In addition, it was very difficult to obtain any recent and reliable statistics concerning many of the children's issues in Bangladesh.

- The study focused on identifying the protection issues that children face during floods, with the ultimate aim of improving the flood responses. However, a related area of future research would be to map out more explicitly the different children's groups' varying strengths and coping strategies during floods.

## 1.5 Structure of the Report

This report is organised in the following manner: it first provides some background discussion of the concept of 'child protection' in emergencies and proposes an analytical framework for assessing the findings of the study. Observations from the desk review of relevant flood response plans and literature are then discussed. The main findings from the extensive consultations held with children and other stakeholders are then presented, grouped into nine thematic areas. The findings are followed by an analysis and policy recommendations.



*Photo : Save the Children UK*

## Chapter Two :

# Children's Protection Needs

## 2.1 Child protection as a concept

While discussing child protection needs, it is helpful to consider first why children need protection, who should be protecting them and when.

*Why do children need protection?* It is widely accepted that in general, children are more vulnerable to adversities than adults, and that this vulnerability increases during times of crises or disaster; “due to children’s particular vulnerability to illness, malnutrition and abuse, their uniquely dependent social status, and the susceptibility of their physical and mental development, they require special attention in the design and implementation of any humanitarian response.” <sup>4</sup>

Save the Children UK’s definition of ‘child protection’ is:

“Action to prevent or address situations where harm is caused to children directly or indirectly through the action or inaction of third parties, (...where) harm means suffering, ill treatment or injury which threatens survival and/ or development.” <sup>5</sup>

Thus child protection as a concept covers a broad spectrum of issues. That it seeks to both ‘prevent possible harm’ and ‘address existing harm’ is significant. Times of disaster can affect children’s ability to realise their rights and also threaten their immediate survival needs. Child protection, as a term used in many different contexts around the world, can be understood as concerned with both long-term empowerment through realisation of child rights and also meeting very immediate protection needs such as the threat of abduction.

“The best protection measures prevent violence and abuse from happening in the first place.” <sup>6</sup>

*Who should seek to engage with child protection issues?*

Save the Children UK believes that all flood response actors in Bangladesh at community, district, national and international level, need to consider the impact their relief interventions have on children. Children (under eighteen years of age)

make up approximately 42% of the population of Bangladesh which is a significant proportion of any community targeted for relief during floods. <sup>7</sup> Whether an agency is child-centred or not is irrelevant in the sense that their flood response will have an impact on children and their protection needs.

“Save the Children UK believes that the protection of children is a collective, societal responsibility exercised at family, community, civil society, state and international levels.” <sup>8</sup>

*When do children need protection?* Child protection is an area of work that is often viewed as not critical



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during an emergency response. However, the terms ‘emergency’ or ‘disaster’ should not be used as a reason for child protection issues to be ‘put on hold’. Indeed, child protection needs invariably become more acute during times of disaster, and children’s social and physical development continues whatever the circumstances. <sup>9</sup> Furthermore, when the disaster is a naturally recurring flood, it is important to view child protection as an ongoing issue which cross-cuts what are traditionally thought of as ‘normal’ and ‘emergency’ phases. Indeed, for many people in Bangladesh, floods are an expected and anticipated almost annually occurring phenomenon, not any aberration from the norm at all.

It is hoped that the specific meaning of ‘child protection’ in the context of floods in Bangladesh is illuminated by the findings from the children’s interviews contained in this report.

## 2.2 Children's definition of protection

"Discovering what help children need starts with listening." <sup>10</sup>

Approximately, fifty of the children interviewed were also asked to try to define what 'child protection' meant to them. The children selected were from areas of slow onset urban flooding, slow onset rural flooding and rural flash floods, and spanned the age groups 6-10 years, 11-14 years and 15-18 years. Care was taken to reach children from as wide-ranging backgrounds as possible. It should be acknowledged that some of the children interviewed had taken part in similar work with Save the Children before and were, therefore, perhaps slightly more articulate than their peers. In addition, there is always the possibility for children's views to be influenced by the facilitators of the discussion.

### What is child protection?

The majority of children described 'child protection' as protection from physical harm such as drowning and abduction, physical and sexual abuse, protection from emotional abuse and neglect, and the provision of necessary material items too meant 'child protection' to them. Some children also saw child protection as providing children with the opportunities to earn money, to study and of course, to play. Many children spoke of 'child protection' as associated with adults having a respectful attitude towards children.

"Treating children with respect; not to make them feel ashamed or to speak to them as if they know nothing; to look at them as equals." <sup>11</sup>

"To allow children the freedom to express their own opinions." <sup>12</sup>

"To give children fundamental rights is child protection." <sup>13</sup>

"To ensure security and protect them from physical harm during floods."

"Anwar, a three-year-old drowned in the flood water. Another child named Monir also drowned while trying to save Anwar. These children needed protecting."

Comment by participant in FGD group of girls aged 15-18, Dhaka.

## Why do children need protecting?

Many children stated that they consider themselves to be much more vulnerable than adults, both in terms of being weaker physically and in terms of having less social status. Some older children asserted that they themselves could act as child protectors and that they had the potential capacities to cope with disasters, but they eventually were ineffective as the adults undervalued them.

"I am trying to keep my family and its belongings together. I want to support the family members well by providing them with nutritious foods during the flood. I want to avoid going to bad places and taking food from unknown people. This is child protection." <sup>14</sup>

"Children have the right not just to survive, but to survive with dignity." <sup>15</sup>

"If children are protected as they (we) grow up, then our homes, our societies and our country will get beautiful citizens." <sup>16</sup>

### Which children need protecting?

The children interviewed felt that protection is needed for all children; but special care should be taken of some children such as orphans, infants and the disabled. It was also mentioned by some that children in areas prone to fast-onset flooding have particular protection needs.

"Protection of fundamental rights is like bringing daylight to a child's life." <sup>17</sup>

"Children need protection at all times as poverty is their regular companion." <sup>18</sup>

"We, the children of char areas, need proper protection to survive." <sup>19</sup>

"More protection is needed for the poor, non privileged and physically challenged children." <sup>20</sup>

"In the future, when we have children, we shall try to give them rights and protection, so that they can have a prosperous life. We will try not to engage our future children in hazardous work." <sup>21</sup>

### Who should protect children?

The majority of children pointed to parents/care-giver and adult family members, and then the local government bodies and NGOs as people they depend on for protection. With particular reference to floods, many children identified flood shelter organisers, people manning evacuation boats



and people involved in food relief as adults who should provide protection. Some older children, especially boys, claimed that they themselves acted as 'child protectors'.

"People in the area should come together to face the dangers. Parents should be conscious and a committee with teachers, employers and government officials should be formed."<sup>22</sup>

"Children of the same age groups in the area should gather together to play regularly."<sup>23</sup>

## 2.3 Analytical framework for the assessment

The approach to analysing the findings of this study has been based on the viewpoint that 'child protection' is not a distinct 'fifth or sixth' element of relief work but an integral part of all emergency responses. It is not something to be considered only after the 'more pressing' issues, viz. food, water, shelter and healthcare for the whole communities and families have been addressed. Instead, child protection is to be regarded as inseparable from these areas of relief, which actually extends beyond these areas too. While seeking to meet children's protection needs during floods means addressing specific 'child-centred' issues such as trafficking, early marriage and hazardous child labour, it is also concerned with ensuring that children have access to relief items that are appropriate to meet their needs and for which they are not to compete with adults. In order to address these varied issues, it is necessary to start with identifying the main problems they are faced with and also finding which groups of children are particularly vulnerable and why.

Another vital facet of this study framework is the importance attached to children's own perceptions of the predicaments or dangers they face during floods, along with their own suggestions with

regard to overcoming such difficulties. The term 'child participation' is now familiar as it is widely used everywhere, but there is still ample space for the current flood response actors in Bangladesh to further evaluate and mainstream children's input. From its extensive experience gathered both in Bangladesh and around the world, Save the Children has learnt that adults may not necessarily know the needs of children fully; the children themselves should be able to highlight their needs best and suggest relevant possible solutions too, when asked.

"We did not know our children knew so much and we found that the children are so articulate in expressing their views."

Comment by a parent during consultations with flood affected children in Kurigram.<sup>24</sup>

Although this study has focused on children's protection needs during floods, it need not be presumed that children are rendered completely helpless victims then, reliant solely on adults for protection. On the other hand, children have been found to have amazing capacities of coping with emergencies and playing active roles in handling disasters. This study values greatly whatever the children had to say about their problems and therefore seeks to capture the practical suggestions offered by the victims themselves, especially with regard to how they would like to be assisted in overcoming their protection issues.

Finally, while this study has been primarily concerned with capturing children's understanding of their specific protection needs during floods, it aimed chiefly at contributing towards the improvement of future flood responses. Thus the practical implications of the children's views have been considered during the analysis of findings and forwarding policy recommendations.

## Chapter Three :

# Observations from desk review

## 3.1 Laws, frameworks and policies:

“...a world that is often hidden and neglected – a world of vulnerability and exclusion. [...] all of us need to speak up for the rights of children and to act on behalf of those who need our protection”.

Kofi A. Annan.<sup>25</sup>

The international community, including the United Nations, governments and non-governmental organisations, is committed to ensuring and protecting children's rights in all circumstances. There exists a considerable number of documents which testify to the international community's intentions to strive for child-inclusive and child sensitive interventions in both development and emergency contexts. For example, international humanitarian law, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and additional protocols, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Sphere Standards. Most development actors' policies and strategies fully support the rights of children and recognise children as important stakeholders who can make positive contribution to the policies and programmes that directly affect them. This section briefly highlights some of the existing frameworks for protecting children in disasters.

### International law and the UN CRC

International law recognises that people affected by disaster (man-made or natural) are entitled to protection and assistance. It places legal obligations on states or warring parties to provide such assistance or to allow it to be provided, as well as to prevent and refrain from behaviour that violates fundamental human rights. These rights and obligations are contained in the body of international human rights law, international humanitarian law and refugee law.

The UNCRC provides a comprehensive framework of children's rights, as well mechanisms for accountability. The Convention recognises children's right to be free from abuse and neglect,

sexual exploitation, trafficking, abduction, torture, deprivation of liberty, and other forms of maltreatment at all times, and highlights the need for special protection during times of emergency.

### The Millennium Development Goals

UNICEF's report on the State of the World's Children 2005 highlights the importance of achieving the MDGs in order to transform the lives of millions of children. Each of the MDGs is connected to the well-being of children; they aim to help spare children from illness and premature death, to escape extreme poverty and malnutrition, to gain access to safe water and decent sanitation facilities and to complete primary schooling. However, the slow progress towards achieving these goals means that children around the world continue to suffer.

Natural disasters can very much exacerbate poverty levels and thus impede progress towards attaining the MDGs. As children in developing countries rarely grow up without facing any natural or man-made disaster, it is important that the MDGs are considered in the context of disasters. For example:

- Disaster-hit families often fail to send children to school, while schools may be closed down due to earthquakes or floods (MDG 2).
- Disasters leave women and girls – including mothers – with heavier responsibilities and workloads and often, poorer health. Disasters have also been associated with increased domestic violence and sexual harassment (MDG 3 & 5).
- Children are in greater danger in floods and drought, facing deaths by drowning, starvation and disease (MDG 4).
- Disasters cause diseases and damage to health infrastructure directly, while indirectly lowering disease resistance by aggravating poverty and malnutrition. They may also lead women and girls to resort to sex work and risk HIV infection (MDG 4& 6).
- Disasters can increase rural-urban migration, and in cities, affect slum dwellers adversely (MDG 7).<sup>26</sup>



## **Child Protection and Disaster Management in the Bangladesh PRSP (Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers):**

The Bangladesh PRSP explicitly enunciates the importance of both disaster management and protection of children in order to attain pro-poor growth and poverty reduction. The PRSP provides two separate 'Policy Matrices' on disaster management and child right issues. One of the strategic goals for Comprehensive Disaster Management towards Poverty Reduction and Growth is to ensure "social protection of women, children, the elderly, people with disability and other vulnerable groups against vulnerability and risk."<sup>27</sup> To achieve this goal, the PRSP policy agenda for financial year 2005-2007 reads like this: "Emergency support should serve the needs of the vulnerable groups."<sup>28</sup> In addition, the policy Matrix on Child Advancement and Rights in the PRSP more specifically identifies the government's plan to ensure child empowerment and protection of children from abuse, exploitation and violence.

### **The Sphere Standards:**

The Sphere Standards identify children as one of the seven cross-cutting issues, viz. children, older people, disabled people, gender, protection, HIV/AIDS and environment. The Standards recognise children's particular vulnerability and highlight the legal responsibilities of states to guarantee children's rights to protection and assistance. They also provide guidance for child sensitive emergency interventions. For example:

"Special measures must be taken to ensure the protection from harm of all children and their equitable access to basic services. As children often form the large part of an affected population, it is crucial that their views and experiences are not only elicited during emergency assessment and planning, but that they also influence humanitarian service delivery and its monitoring and evaluation. Although vulnerability in certain specificities (e.g. malnutrition, exploitation, abduction and recruitment into fighting forces, sexual violence and lack of opportunity to participate in decision-making) can also apply to the wider population, the most harmful impact is felt by children and young people."<sup>29</sup>

The Sphere Standards also emphasise obligations of NGOs and INGOs to protect populations affected by disaster:

"Assistance and protection are the two indivisible pillars of humanitarian action. Humanitarian agencies are frequently faced with situations where human acts or obstruction threaten the fundamental well-being or security of whole communities or sections of a population, such as, to constitute violations of the population's rights as recognized by international law. This may take the form of direct threats to people's well-being, or to their means of survival, or to their safety. The form of relief assistance and the way in which it is provided can have a significant impact (positive or negative) on the affected population's security. This handbook does not provide detailed descriptions of protection strategies or mechanisms, or of how agencies should implement their responsibility. However, where possible, it refers to protection aspects or rights issues – such as the prevention of sexual abuse and exploitation, or the need to ensure adequate registration of the population – as agencies must take these into account when they are involved in providing assistance."<sup>30</sup>

In summary, a desk review informs us that policy documents such as the UNCRC, MDGs and the Bangladesh PRSP do indeed refer to children's rights, their capabilities, their particular vulnerabilities and the need to consult with children. The following section illustrates, however, that literature that would indicate all-out implementation of such approaches is virtually non-existent.

## **3.2 Literature review**

The previous section reviewed the frameworks for child protection in disasters that are laid out in various international and national documents. However, it is clear that literature on actual child protection in disasters is extremely limited. The majority is concerned with conflict situations, and much of the literature that does focus on responding to natural disasters tends to fall short of dealing with child protection issues. As this section will demonstrate, existing literature at the most offers some brief references to children's needs for food, health care, shelter, education and protection from drowning during a flood. This raises the

question as to what extent the clearly established frameworks for protecting children in disasters are currently being followed in the field. More positively, there is an emerging body of literature that reports the significant gap in our understanding of child protection issues in disaster planning and response, which calls for greater attention to be paid to this area.

Amer Jabry describes the three typical areas that children occupy in disaster literature as being grouped with women as a blurred category, seen through a ‘medical’ lens focusing on psychological issues, or represented as passive suffering victims in the media.<sup>31</sup> Disaster responses themselves tend to focus on meeting “the physical survival needs of children” and fail to recognise or address children’s other vital needs such as “protection from abuse and harm, education, rest, privacy and the right to participate in matters that affect them.”<sup>32</sup> However, some of the existing literature on child protection in natural disasters does express a movement away from a traditional, simplistic view of emergency relief to recognise that children have needs beyond the provision of material goods.<sup>33</sup> This said, literature on disasters still needs “to give much greater consideration and attention to the needs and views of children,” as they are often the most affected group while being the most often overlooked.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, disaster responses need to recognise children’s specific vulnerabilities, capacities and the value of their participation in needs assessments. For example, the Bangladesh DER 2004 Monsoon Flood Draft Assessment Report acknowledges that “protection is an issue that needs to be addressed throughout all stages of relief and rehabilitation,”<sup>35</sup> but the needs assessment section, which lists all the needs of the flood affected population that various organisations have identified, does not mention any child protection needs.<sup>36</sup>

“Consulting children helps identify problems unanticipated by the adults, and as a result, helps to protect children and ensure their rights to survive, develop and participate following a disaster.”<sup>37</sup>

A review of available literature about child protection in natural disasters yields documented knowledge of some specific areas of protection, and also suggests that more intensive research is

needed in this sector. Some ideas about current deliberations on child protection in natural disasters are rendered below.

**Flood shelters:** During the particularly disastrous floods occurring in 2004, there were approximately 3,979 temporary shelters operating in Bangladesh.<sup>38</sup> Although many more of the flood-affected people are compelled to live outside such flood shelters, it is important that steps be taken to improve the level of care offered to those that happen to be sheltering in such camps.

The issue of security in shelters needs to be understood in terms of both the threats faced from the outsiders, such as potential abductors, along with the threats such as, physical and sexual abuse coming from the people who happen to be inside the shelter. As a UNICEF report notes, “in a large scale emergency situation, children become more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse of their rights, in the absence of any protective environment there. Violence against women and girls is already high in Bangladesh and the disruption caused by the floods places them at higher risks of abuse.”<sup>39</sup> The DER 2004 Monsoon Flood Draft Assessment report also recognises that repair or reconstruction of damaged houses is “vital for ensuring household security, particularly for women and children, amongst all the categories of flood victims.”<sup>40</sup> Save the Children reports from previous flood interventions in Bangladesh note the benefit of having some form of ‘child care’ in shelters, enabling adults to be happier about security when they go to work: some parents/care-givers said, “we had no worry and tension while our children stayed back during daytime in the centre, while we could manage to work outside and earn a little.”<sup>41</sup>

Some literature about child protection in natural disasters highlights other key child protection issues in shelters, such as, the need for privacy and adequate sanitation. Jabry notes,

“...the importance that privacy holds for children, even in an emergency situation. The simple hanging of a plastic curtain on the door of the latrine, or separating toilets and shower rooms for men and women, is an important measure that allows children and youths to maintain their privacy, which, in turn, contributes to their sense of dignity. Privacy and certain separate arrangements also help to prevent sexual abuse against children.”<sup>42</sup>

A Save the Children report on the Gujarat earthquake also points to the value of consulting children about their bathing and sanitation needs in shelters; “it was quite revealing that the children wanted latrines in their centres despite the fact that it was not regarded by many NGOs to be a priority of the communities.”<sup>43</sup>

There is serious lack of research into the protection needs of children who happen to be living outside the organised flood shelters and have to shelter, for example, on a roof, a road, an embankment or a bamboo structure.

**Drowning:** The danger posed by fast-onset flooding and the risk of drowning is recognised in the literature about floods in Bangladesh, like elsewhere. Care-Bangladesh’s report on the 2004 floods depicts how quickly flood waters can rise, putting children in danger of being swept away: “the children looked terrified as they feared that they might as well be swept away [...] The water had risen quickly and four homesteads got washed away within an hour.”<sup>44</sup> Similarly, a study of floods in the Mekong Delta and Central Vietnam notes that, “during flood seasons, the risk of drowning is ever present, whether children are playing or working. There is a sense of fear, particularly in people whose friends or relatives have drowned. Children report craving for more care and attention from the adults.”<sup>45</sup> The report recommends that steps be taken to train children how to swim, and also for training adults and children in the techniques of administering first aid for drowning children.<sup>46</sup>

**Unaccompanied children:** It can be asserted that the “impact of disasters is most experienced by children who are already marginalised.”<sup>47</sup> Unaccompanied children are one of the most vulnerable groups during non-emergency periods, and it is evident that their vulnerability increases during floods. The distinction between an accompanied child and an unaccompanied one can be quite slight. Some children are completely without familial care at all times; other children may be ‘unaccompanied’ for large periods of time, perhaps begging on the street with other children while their adult-carer is working elsewhere; and some children may be seen as ‘unaccompanied’ by authorities if they go to collect relief without an adult or seek medical attention at a health clinic

without an adult.

Some flood response actors in Bangladesh are perhaps unaware of the numbers of ‘full-time unaccompanied street children’ and the problems they face, as most organisations operate through flood shelters and most unaccompanied children interviewed described being refused entry to flood shelters. These ‘invisible’ unaccompanied children are, therefore, likely to be deprived of any relief or services that organisations provide to the more ‘visible’ flood affected population. Similarly, needs assessments are most often carried out at a ‘household’ level; but this method fails to identify the needs of children who are living outside the family unit. There is some recognition in child protection literature of the need to “work to reduce the morbidity and mortality of street children by developing protocols with disaster organisations to increase their accounting of, and accountability to these children.”<sup>48</sup> Indeed, it can be suggested that there is a growing concern about the numbers of unaccompanied children in disasters, “the increasing population of the abandoned street children in urban areas around the world require attention in disaster mitigation and response in order to address their risks and to deal with the increases in their number that are likely to occur after a major disaster.”<sup>49</sup>

**Early marriage:** Early marriage is a recognised ‘coping mechanism’ used by a minority of parents/care-givers during times of extreme stress such as natural disasters, both as a means of seeking to protect girls from abuse and of reducing the financial pressure on families.<sup>50</sup> A UNICEF report asserts that “poverty, protection of girls, family honour and the provision of stability during unstable social periods [are all] significant factors in determining a girl’s risk of becoming married while still a child.”<sup>51</sup> Extensive quantitative and qualitative information about the relationship between floods and early marriage in Bangladesh is lacking, but anecdotal evidences suggest that this is a significant issue.

**Education:** There is substantial literature advocating education to be a priority in emergencies. For example, a report by the Inter Agency Network for Emergencies (INEE) states, “education in emergencies [...] can be both life-saving and life-sustaining. It can save lives by protecting against exploitation and harm and by disseminating key survival messages [...]. It

sustains life by offering structure, stability and hope for the future during a time of crisis, particularly for children and adolescents. Education in emergencies also helps to heal the pain of bad experiences.”<sup>52</sup>

This view is echoed by Jabry who argues, “enabling children to express themselves in a safe place and re-establishing the routine of school is also vital, if they are to recover from trauma.”<sup>53</sup>

Education also provides supervision of children, which is crucial during flood time where unsupervised children face increased risks of drowning, abuse and abduction, for example. This relates to a study carried out by Save the Children in Vietnam which looked at patterns associated with children drowning. The vast majority of children died during the day time when they were left to themselves, unsupervised.<sup>54</sup>

However, the many obstacles to maintaining education programmes during natural disasters are also recognised in relevant literature. The DER report of the 2004 monsoon floods in Bangladesh reports that 42,000 educational institutions suffered direct losses (rendered useless) due to the floods and a further 2,000 were used as temporary flood shelters.<sup>55</sup> It would not be an easy task for the national education system and individual families to recover from such devastation. A report on the prospect for continuing education after the Orissa cyclone in India comments,

“the devastation of schools and textbooks has disrupted normal school routine, and it may take some time for the teachers and students to cover the syllabuses set out for the year. Loss of livelihoods will also compel children to drop out of school in search of work, and having to help folks at home in the case of increased migration of older family members.”<sup>56</sup>

Indeed, it is widely recognised that natural disasters such as floods cause increased school drop out rates.<sup>57</sup>

While acknowledging these obstacles, the importance of education in emergencies cannot be overlooked. Like so many other child protection issues, “education cannot remain ‘outside’ the mainstream humanitarian debate, but must be seen as a priority humanitarian response.”<sup>58</sup>

**Play:** Children’s need to play in order to cope with the disaster situations is well documented. Children need safe spaces in which to play, playing

equipment and the time to play (i.e. not being compelled to work). However, it can be difficult to achieve these conditions during natural disasters. One obstacle is lack of respect for children which can hamper the aid organisations’ efforts to organise and facilitate vital play time for children. Literature emerging after the 2004 Tsunami reveals that relief items can often end up being in the wrong hands. “In some villages, children have received play materials. They find it useful to play with that; but the adults have captured some of the play items.”<sup>59</sup>

**Hazardous work:** The issue of work can create protection risks for children in different ways during floods in Bangladesh. For example, some children are forced to drop out of school and take up hazardous employment. Whereas other children who usually work may find their working conditions becoming more hazardous, or they may suffer loss of income during floods. A report on the floods in August 2004 (Lalbagh, Dhaka) records: “here hundreds of children from the poor families depend on their own earning for themselves or to contribute to their families. Most of the small factories children worked in were closed and they could not earn any money.”<sup>60</sup>

The past flood interventions undertaken by Save the Children have helped to confirm the importance of ‘child care’ or ‘supervision/recreation’ programmes, especially “those that [...] help to protect children from temptations of illegal employment.”<sup>61</sup> During the 2004 floods in Lalbagh, Dhaka, one elder commented, “if this facility (child care) was not arranged for the protection of children, they might become involved in illicit activities and be used by ‘the bosses’ for illegal work.”<sup>62</sup>

#### **Community information and organisation:**

Literature emerging from natural disasters highlights the importance of community organisation and information sharing too. A Save the Children report of the Orissa cyclone in India in 2000 records how a number of people “stressed that the key needs were not money and materials, but moral support, motivation, mobilisation and community building.”<sup>63</sup> Similarly, flood affected people in Bangladesh have stressed the importance of information sharing and awareness raising about key issues, “some people appreciated raising awareness of child protection using loud speakers and through distributing leaflets; it was new to



them and they said: ‘it was not only the flood affected people who benefited from these messages, but the whole community became aware of these issues in the process.’<sup>64</sup>

**Poverty/vulnerability:** In the context of recurring floods, it is important to identify the most vulnerable children and communities. Specific vulnerabilities before floods directly relate to specific needs during the floods. In Bangladesh, poverty is intrinsically linked with the impact that floods have on any given segment of the population, and its influence can be seen as crosscutting all thematic protection areas discussed in this report. For example, poverty can force people to live in char areas (sand banks / islands in rivers) which are likely to be submerged by water during the monsoon season. People suffering from extreme poverty are often forced to make ‘choices’ that are not real choices. For example, many parents/care-givers interviewed described their uneasiness of leaving their children unattended during the day to go to work due to risk of abduction, but lamented that they had to go to work in order to arrange food for their children. Similarly, children themselves talked of being aware of the very real risk of abduction, but they were forced by circumstances to go with strangers who promised work, as they were so desperate for food and any income.

### Psycho-social issues:

“Exposure to a disaster is a traumatic experience for any person, but particularly so for a child. Childhood is a unique development period when an individual’s main physical, mental, emotional and social development and growth take place. Damage at this stage often cannot be mended later.”<sup>65</sup>

Emergency responses seeking to meet children’s needs after a natural disaster must go beyond their physical needs. To simply ensure children’s survival falls short of ensuring their emotional well being during this critical developmental phase of childhood. However, focusing on children’s psycho-social needs does not mean regarding them as helpless victims, but rather as recognising children as active agents. This approach is increasingly being mentioned in the current child protection literature. As Boyes notes, “perceiving the child as a vulnerable victim may have powerful emotional

appeal for adults but can be detrimental to children. It renders them helpless and incompetent in the face of adult decisions that may not be in their best interest.”<sup>66</sup> Boyes goes on to suggest alternative approaches focusing on children’s capabilities; “treating children’s views and perspectives as a source of strength and not weakness; accepting and recognising children’s competencies in coping with adversities and contributing to family and community welfare [...]; promoting an active role for children in the decisions and processes that affect them.”<sup>67</sup>

“Exposure to natural disasters has a devastating impact on the psychological and social well-being of children, adolescents and adults. It is now widely accepted that early psycho-social interventions that help to mitigate the effect of trauma, alleviating psychological distress, and strengthen their resiliency must be an integral part of humanitarian assistance. In the case of children and adolescents, psycho-social interventions also aim at maintaining or re-establishing their normal development process.”<sup>68</sup>

The area of ‘child trauma’ is often viewed as being highly specialised. However, there are many simple measures that flood response actors can take to help relieve children’s distress. A basic approach would include establishing a routine for children, ensuring that they are able to play in a safe environment, and adults listening to what they have to say. As the American Red Cross argues, “children depend on daily routines: they wake up, eat breakfast, go to school, play with friends. When emergencies or disasters interrupt this routine, children may become anxious;”<sup>69</sup> the re-establishment of routines is very important. At a practical level, during floods in Bangladesh, this may take the form of providing boats to take children to school so that this routine activity can continue, or sharing information with children in flood shelters about when relief items will be delivered and asking them to choose from different meal options so that they feel some level of control over their lives. This is particularly true for adolescents who benefit from being involved in decision making and having a role to play.<sup>70</sup>

Some emergency response actors find it strange that recreation and play for children should be a priority during floods, but it is important that

children have safe areas in which to play during these difficult times. Playing can help children to make sense of what they are experiencing and to deal with the stress of the flood situation.

Literature arising from the December 2004 Tsunami outlines best practice in terms of addressing children's mental and emotional distress caused by natural disasters:

- Re-unite the children with their (extended) families
- Start providing psycho-social support as soon as possible; do not wait until all the emergency needs are met
- Re-establish daily routines and activities
- Identify severely traumatised children who need special care and attention <sup>71</sup>

For example, after the main embankment of Kobadak and Sakbaria rivers collapsed in October 2003 in Bangladesh, Save the Children organised structured play for children in thirteen recreation centres. It was found that the "recreational activities; songs, music, dance and drawing were helpful for them to get out of the distressing mental conditions." <sup>72</sup> Children also benefit from having a role to play in recovering from disaster. It is widely accepted that "actively engaging children and youths in family and community disaster responsibilities is an important therapeutic strategy." <sup>73</sup>

A negative change in children's relationships with their parents/care-givers or adult carers can disrupt their emotional wellbeing, and times of crisis often

place increased levels of stress on family relationships. An Oxfam report of the 2004 floods in Bangladesh notes: "crisis situations are often said to aggregate the threat of violence faced by women within and outside their homes," <sup>74</sup> and the increased threat of domestic abuse towards children during disasters also needs to be recognised. A report on child protection issues after the 2004 Tsunami states, "women are also finding it difficult to cope with the stress. Sometimes they are beating their children to prevent them from asking for additional food or money for entertainment – they claim that they never used to do that before." <sup>75</sup> Similarly, an internal SC UK report following the 2004 floods in Bangladesh notes, "beating of children by their parents/care-giver in the house takes place for minor reasons, children said, due to mainly stress and frustrations caused in them (elder family members) by the flood." <sup>76</sup> Of course, many parents/care-givers show greater affection and care for their children during floods; but it is very distressing for those children who do find their parents/care-givers to be a source of violence instead. <sup>77</sup> There is a need for disaster response actors to deal further with this difficult issue; "most disaster planning and response does not sufficiently anticipate that symptoms of individual and family psychological and emotional stress, including woman and child abuse will accelerate during disasters and that appropriate social services should be part of all emergency planning." <sup>78</sup>



## Chapter Four :

# Summary Findings and Field Recommendations

This section summarises the main protection issues raised by the children and adults interviewed for this study. These findings are grouped into nine main themes and also include the interviewees' suggestions regarding ways in which these problems can be overcome.

As the study is very much a qualitative one, care has been taken, therefore, to represent the views of the children interviewed precisely as they were expressed, in order that the flood response actors can best understand the children's experiences and needs during floods. Annex 1 of this report describes the details of the findings.

## 4.1 Child protection issues associated with temporary flood shelters/places of shelter

- In every FGD, everyone commented on the problems related to general lack of space in the flood shelters, sharing rooms with strangers and lack of privacy, especially for girls.
- Children of all ages and many adults reported stress due to staying in flood shelters because of lack of space to play, entertainment and meeting friends.

"There was always a long queue for the bathroom, and children were often pushed out of the queue. One day, two children took a dip in the flood water for bathing, but they did not know how to swim and drowned eventually."

Comment by participant in FGD group of parents/care-givers, Balur Matth slum, Kamlapur, Dhaka

- All the interviewees mentioned repeatedly that they faced problems due to lack of toilet and bathing facilities in the shelters; the girls felt especially humiliated due to such discomforts.
- Boys and girls, especially of the age group of 10-18 years, told about their experience of verbal and physical abuse and also sexual harassment.
- Adults and many children of age groups 10-14 years and 15-18 years complained of not being

involved in making decision or even being excluded from sharing key information, lack of justice and fair dealing and nepotism.

"My mother died eight years ago. My father is a beggar. I have a brother and no sisters. My younger brother works in a rich man's house. When I think about my younger brother, I miss him badly.

During the flood we took shelter in a school. All the people who took shelter there misbehaved with my father and called him a thief and shouted at him. They called me 'son of a thief', or 'son of a beggar'. They beat me and forced me to run errands for them.

A wicked man had sex with me every night under the cover of a rug and gave me 10/15 taka in the morning in exchange. I felt severe pain in my rectum and wept. When anyone would ask me why I was crying, the 'bad guy' would say I had hurt my hand."

Rafiq (\*name changed) 11 years old, Dhaka.

- Children and adults were refused refuge in shelters: especially the very poor; street children, unaccompanied children and people from ethnic or religious minorities were amongst such victims.
- In shelters, lack of security, fear of theft and abduction threats were felt strongly by majority of children and adults interviewed.
- Both in designated flood shelters and other places of refuge, hazardous environment e.g. unprotected roofs, naked electric wires hanging around people and sharp objects etc were reported by sheltering children and parents/care-giver.

'One baby of 18 months died when she fell off a bed into knee-deep water. There was no room in the shelter, so the mother and the baby had stayed back in their slum dwelling. The mother had gone into the kitchen to cook, when her baby had fallen into the water and drowned and the corpse was found floating there afterwards.'

Comment by participant in FGD group of boys aged 6-10, Korial slum, Gulshan, Dhaka.

- Majority children and adults reported lack of safe drinking water; inadequate and inappropriate food; lack of cooking facilities and medicine etc.

## Recommendations by FGD participants :

- All children consulted wanted space to play, and toys, books, games or music for entertainment. Older children asked for some organised activities and games, along with some structured educational sessions.
- All mentioned that relief workers should be friendly and kind and not discriminate against children or abuse them.
- More in number and bigger shelters were a common demand, so that their whole families could stay together. It would be better if families who knew each other could share rooms.
- Sufficient number of separate toilets and bathrooms for men, women and children were a crying need. They should be kept clean and privacy should be ensured. Adults suggested introducing different bathing times for men and women for convenience and privacy.

'We found it very hard to get shelter anywhere. We were not allowed in the temporary shelters. If we took shelter on the roads, the police would chase and beat us.'

Comment from participant in FGD group of male and female street children aged 8-11 yrs, Dhaka

- Adults and children should all be involved in the running of the shelters. Shelter committees, including children, should be established to manage different aspects of life in the shelter.
- Medicine and medical treatment should be provided for everyone, including visits by paediatricians.
- Enough food relief should be provided for everyone, including cooking equipment. Foods were to be appropriate for children of different ages. For example, infants who were no longer breastfed but not till then introduced to solids, needed special food prepared for them.
- Provision should be made for safe water for drinking, bathing and cooking, especially in

arsenic affected areas.

- Bedding and warm, dry clothes, should be provided. In addition, some mothers asked for provision of cots for babies.
- Increased security to protect children and their belongings are required, especially at night. Some children expressed a lack of confidence in the police and suggested 'community policing'.
- Strangers should be kept from entering the shelters. Wicked people and drug addicts should be kept in a separate space. There should be lights in the shelters at night.
- Shelters should be kept clean and tidy to avoid accidents.
- Children asserted the need for a better atmosphere and practicing demonstration of better attitude towards children; elders should not behave roughly with children. Parents/care-giver also talked of the need to recognise the child rights and treating children with priority. Parents/care-givers also discussed the importance of showing that they were caring about children and demanded arrangement of games for them to help them forget about the living conditions.
- There should be income-earning opportunities by organising making of handicrafts.
- There is great need for day-care services for the working mothers.
- Livestock should be kept in a separate place.

'Durga\* took shelter with her family in a shelter in Rajarbagh area. Her family was living side by side with another family. There was a young boy who often harassed her. When everyone went outside to work, the boy would touch her. He threatened Durga saying that if she told anyone about that, he would throw acid in her face. When the girl informed her parents/care-giver of this, they sought justice from the committee members of the shelter. But the girl's family being a Hindu one (religious minority), and the Muslim boy bribed the committee members and got away unscathed.

Durga (\*name changed), age 17, Dhaka

- Arrangements should be made for space for offering prayers.

"I took shelter in a school building during flood. There was no supply of drinking water or latrine facilities in the school building. Some people made me bring alcoholic beverage and marijuana for them. If they'd find a girl who'd be willing to do 'things' with them, they'd give her more food. I got only flattened rice for food. I didn't get rice and there was no arrangement for cooking there."

"I am the older brother; I have younger brother and sister. When the young ones are crying for food, I feel much distressed. I wanted to study during the flood but could not. People who take shelter in a flood shelter are illiterate. People should run educational sessions in the shelters and provide us with adequate food. The smell of liquors or marijuana harm us, so addicts should not be allowed in the common shelters. There should be police or RAB posted in every shelter."

- Boats should be available to take people on trips outside the shelter—to help them with a breath of fresh air for a change.
- In slum areas, where people are unlikely to get access to proper flood shelters, NGOs should organise raising the bathrooms and latrines temporarily above the flood water level, providing separate bathrooms etc for men and women.

## 4.2 Protection issues associated with evacuation / rescue

- Risk and fear of drowning, separation, injury and snakebites, losing hobbies and treasured and passionate belongings.
- Tension between parents/caregivers and children; verbal and physical abuse by parents/caregivers.

"As I am too young, I cannot carry heavy loads of goods and that's why I am scolded. I have to carry much too heavier loads than I'm supposed to at my age."

Comment by participant in FGD of boys aged 6-10, Dhaka

"Children are crying and shouting from fear and parents/care-givers are treating them as a burden."

Comment by participant in FGD group of mothers, Dhaka

- Rescue workers are liable to discriminate: e.g. not allowing street children, children from minority groups, poor children etc onto boats.
- Rescue workers, or people posing as rescue workers, harass or sexually abuse children, especially teenage girls.
- Many children, especially of the age groups 10-14 yrs and 15-18 yrs complained of a lack of planning and preparedness: not knowing where to go / if a rescue boat was coming at all etc

## FGD participants' recommendations

"During floods, we care for our children even more. As we are not able to give them enough food then we have to compensate by showering them with more care and affection. Once I was staying with my two children on a bed that had been elevated due to the flood water entering inside our room. Suddenly the bed collapsed and all our belongings including the television fell down. Instead of trying to save the expensive television, I tried and kept my children safe by holding them firmly with my hands."

Comment by participant in FGD group of parents/care giver in Kamlapur slum, Dhaka

Children's recommendations for improving the evacuation process were primarily concerned with the attitude shown by relief workers and as well as the family members towards the children. It was generally felt that children should be respected most in such crises. They should be rescued first as they are the most vulnerable. Children felt that care should be taken to avoid accident/injury and to ensure that children are not lost in any case. They argued that parents/care-givers should be aware of the needs of children, take care not to beat them and to control their anger. Many children wanted parents/care-giver to recognise that relocating is upsetting for children and that they simply cannot carry as much as adults. Children of all ages and parents/care-giver asserted, however, that if rescue work is done compassionately based on co-operation, then it should be easier for all.

In addition to these needed attitudinal changes, children identified a number of practical means of improving their situation.

- There should be sufficient number of large boats to transport everyone and their belongings.

Evacuation plans should be made in advance. Information about these plans should be shared with people in the community. Everyone should know who should come to rescue them, from where, when and in which boat etc. Everyone should know the address of the shelter well and the means of reaching there safely.

- The government should form a rescue team that should be kept ready to start work as soon as the flood occurs. Local NGOs and members of the local elite should help during the rescue.
- There should be an early warning system run by the government, so that people have time to shift their belongings. Children living in rural areas where flash floods occur especially stressed the need for a warning system to alert them in advance, so that they are able to move to the flood shelter before the waters rise quickly and submerge their homes.

"In case of a fast-onset flood, it is very difficult for us to get to the shelter with our belongings in time. At times, we fall into the snares of fake rescue workers, and we have to go with unknown men. We don't want so, but we have no choice as we must try and save our lives."

Comment by participant in FGD group of girls, aged 10-14, Dhaka



Photo : Save the Children UK

- Rescue workers should have proper identification. The rescue team could be made up of local community members.

- There should be campaigns conducted to raise public awareness of how to prepare for floods which would help to foster a spirit among neighbours to help each other.
- Drains and roads should be kept clear to allow floodwaters recede.
- Everyone should be taught how to swim.

### 4.3 Child protection issues associated with separation from family members

- Families are split between shelters due to lack of space.
- Children go missing or are drowned in heavy floods, often when parents/caregivers are out at work.
- Children go missing in the confusion of relief distribution.
- Children go missing when they venture far out to collect things.
- Children are abducted or trafficked.
- Children having a row with their family members or in cases of being abused by the family members often run away and get lost.

- In cases of death of parents/caregivers, children become 'heads of households'.
- Parents/caregivers engage children to do household work with another family for wages.
- Mothers put children into an orphanage as they are unable to raise them.
- Parents/caregivers even 'sell' children for want of food.
- Father/head of the family leaves home in search of work, may re-marry and do not return.
- Early marriage – due to extreme poverty/ to avoid increased risk of harassment or abuse of adolescent/ or "attractive" girls being more vulnerable during disasters.



"Family members should stay together through the flood. This should reduce sense of suffering and promote mental peace."

Comment by participant in FGD group of girls aged 6-10, Dhaka

- Some children, especially teenage girls, were sent to relatives. Some children had no problems but many talked of suffering from anxiety at separation from parents/care-giver; too much of domestic chores to handle; and also physical abuse / sexual abuse / neglect.

### Recommendations by FGD participants

- It was strongly felt by all children who were then living with their family members that families should stay together during floods. To try to avoid being separated, children proposed that families should store food in case of flood, so that they are not forced to take desperate decisions such as early marriage or sending children to work. Similarly, children thought that if jobs or cash-for-work schemes would be available for their parents/care-giver during floods, it would help decrease the financial pressure on their parents/care-giver.
- Children asserted that if there was enough space, security, food, water and medicine in the temporary flood shelters, then this would eliminate another reason why parents/care-giver might be inclined to split the family.
- Children felt that parents/care-givers should always keep their children near them and be aware and vigilant; they suggested that adults

"When I had to sleep on the veranda at my relative's house, I was always scared of kidnappers and ghosts (!). I felt very much unhappy to take shelter there during the flood, and thought of myself as a burden to everyone."

Comment by participant in FGD group of boys aged -10, Korial slum, Dhaka.

could be warned against splitting their families during floods (maybe through public announcements). Children thought that parents/care-givers should either keep their children with them at work, or there should be day-care facilities in shelters with additional

security measures to house them when parents would be away at work.

- Some of the older children recognised that their parents/care-givers thought they were keeping them in the safest place by sending them to stay with relatives or neighbours. However, they requested that their opinion was to be sought



Photo : Unicef Bangladesh/ 2004/Torlesse

and the decision of sending them out should be made jointly. Teenage girls asserted that the best thing for them was to stay under the care of their mothers. In cases when they would not have to go to relatives' / neighbours' houses, the girls should live together in a separate room, away from the men in the house.

- It is again worth mentioning that the orphans and unaccompanied street children interviewed were aware of their greater levels of vulnerability, and they argued that someone should make it their priority to care for them during the floods.
- Parents/caregivers suggested that Imams (one who leads mosque prayer sessions) should communicate messages through the mosque loudspeakers to make people aware of the need to keep children close and protect them during flood time.

### 4.4 Child protection issues associated with abduction / trafficking

- Many children and adults interviewed knew of children who were abducted in flood time.
- Virtually all children and adults interviewed had the fear of abduction during disasters viz. floods.

**"During the flood, we passed our time in fear."**

Comment from participant in FGD group of girls aged 8-11, Dhaka

- Desperation results in putting children in difficult situations; when a stranger tempts them with promise of food or work for wages, they feel compelled to go with them.
- Parents/care-givers felt worried about leaving children unattended in shelters while they had to go to work, but they hardly had any choice left.
- Children working outside, going long distances on errands or going to the toilet outside shelters—all such incidents put children in greater risk of abduction.

"My neighbour went to the Union Parishad office with her three children to collect relief. She told the children to wait outside the office while she went for the stuff. When she came out, her children were not there. After a lot of searching and wailing about, she learned that her children had been taken away by a man in a van."

Comment by participant in FGD group of 'Civil Society' members, Uttar Ujirpur, Ujirpur Union

- Street children are particularly at risk; often no one is watching them and no one looks for them.
- Parents/care-givers felt that children in marooned houses were more at risk of abduction, compared with those living in the shelters.
- Virtually all parents/care-givers and children commented on the lack of security in shelters.

## Recommendations by FGD participants:

- All people consulted expressed the need for increased security, through forming a local committee and establishing a form of 'community policing' for monitoring incidents of kidnapping and trafficking.
- Children felt that

parents/care-givers must take care not to engage them in work that increases their vulnerability, and that parents/care-givers should accompany the children on their journey to and from their workplace.

- Children felt that they could further avoid being abducted by holding group discussions so that all children would be aware of such dangers. They also recognised the benefits of moving around in groups, not staying alone and resisting the temptation of work, food or sweets offered by anyone unless it was approved by their adult guardians or some familiar and trustworthy elders.

## 4.5 Child protection issues associated with relief distribution

- Attitude towards children was perceived as a major problem; the overwhelming problem identified by the children were the seniors' lack of respect for the children; children getting beaten or pushed out of service queues; sexual harassment; food snatching; and offering them only the scraps at the end.

"We have to regard children's problems as our problems, and we have to stand beside them to assist them in overcoming the same."

Comment by participant in FGD group of Civil Society members, Uttar Uipur, Chapai



Photo : Save the Children UK



- Not enough food; bad quality/rotten food; same type of food for days (no variation in food items); irregular distribution.
- Many children described water as ‘the most precious thing’, and complained of a lack of purifying tablets or non-availability of usable tube wells above floodwater.
- Food not appropriate for children of different ages – especially babies
- Lactating mothers become malnourished, rendered unable to breastfeed babies adequately
- Children and adults complained of unfair/biased systems of distribution; unaccompanied children being overlooked; majority of street children discriminated against.
- Children and adults deprived of relief if they are at work.

### Recommendations by FGD participants:

- Relief workers should be honest and responsible. Relief should be given according to need--poor people should not be marginalised. Guards should be present during distribution to prevent the snatching of food.
- A separate list should be made for children, including orphans and street children. Feeding these children should be a priority.
- Relief should be distributed in a more orderly and participatory manner, with a system of registers and tokens, that is inclusive of all children, and this system should be adhered to.
- Many children felt that it would be better to avoid a single-point large-scale food distribution and instead preferred having food distributed house by house; or in shelters, room by room.
- Queuing doesn't work; when there must be queuing, then there should be separate queues for men and women, and another for children. This would decrease the chances of harassment and stop children having to compete with adults for their share of food.
- Several working children suggested that food should be kept for the people who are working outside the centre at the time of distribution.
- There should be more food of better quality,



Photo : Save the Children UK

more regularly. In addition, more child-appropriate food is needed, including special food for very young children.

- Distribution of children's clothes is also badly needed.
- Teenagers and also parents/caregivers suggested that relief should continue for about one to three months after floodwaters have receded.
- Teenagers and also parents/caregivers suggested that money could be given instead of food relief, where quality food should be available for buying at fair prices.

### 4.6 Child protection issues associated with access to education

- Children described being unable to attend school because : school was flooded; teachers could not get to school; school used as a flood shelter; children unable to travel to school; parents/caregivers need children to help them at

work or earn wages; children needed to run errands/take care of siblings etc.

- Educational materials ruined by flood cannot be replaced
- Wet clothes a problem, especially for teenage girls.
- Lack of access to school also means lack of safe spaces for children to play
- If not in school, children may have to be left unattended and are thus at greater risk of

#### **The relationship between education and child protection:**

It may at first appear strange to consider 'education' as an important child protection concern, but access to education is extremely important both for the children's short-term well-being and longer-term opportunities. Floods are often profoundly distressing for children. Flood response actors need to seek to address children's mental and emotional well-being as well as their physical survival. One way to do this is to ensure children's continued access to education, where they have the comfort of a routine service and the chance to make sense of their experiences through discussions with peers, while also furthering their long-term opportunities.

abduction/accidents

- Children who do return to schools described not doing well in exams because they were unable to revise the lessons they had learnt
- Many street children / full-time working children did not have the opportunity to go to school at all.

#### **Recommendations by FGD participants**

"We have the will to study, but there is no such scope in flood time."

Comment from participant in FGD group of girls aged 6-10, Dhaka

- Most children said that they wanted to go to school during floods. In order to do this, alternative buildings should be found for people to shelter in. Schools should also be built up on higher grounds so that they are less likely to be affected by flood water. Playgrounds should also be built up on high grounds to allow children

valuable space to play during floods. Children felt that adults should make efforts to keep schools open during floods, and provide free boats to take them to and from school.

- Children also suggested that food aid for children could be combined with education. They could attend classes and receive a meal and some food to take back to their family. Their families may then be more inclined to send them to school than to work during the flood.
- Children also raised the idea of accessing extended supervision in the school grounds to allow them to play there, while their parents/care-givers are working. Schools should also be guarded to protect children from potential abductors or other people who may harm them.
- Children preparing to sit for their public examinations strongly felt that the exams should be postponed for the flood-affected children who could not go to school or study. Teachers should also be aware of the difficulties that the flood affected children face and make allowances.
- Parents/care-givers and civil society members argued that there should be some form of education in the temporary flood shelters. Virtually, all interviewees stressed the need for educational and play items to be distributed in flood shelters.

"Nabil\* was forced to work to support his family after his father remarried. One day when he was sifting through waste materials, unfortunately he picked up a small bomb that exploded. Nabil was badly injured. Another rag-picker boy Zahid\* died being electrocuted."

Described by participant in FGD group of boys, aged 6-10 years, Balur Math slum, Kamalapur, Dhaka.

\*names changed.

- Many children felt that a change in attitude towards education was also needed. They thought that parents/care-givers and employers should value education more and encourage them to go to school.
- In addition, informal educational sessions on preparing for floods, health and safety issues were suggested for all adults and children in the centres.

- Roads should be built high on higher grounds so that when there is a flood, the children can still travel by roads to schools.

## 4.7 Child protection issues associated with hazardous work

- Examples of the types of hazardous work that children described they were doing during floods included: making brick chips, collecting waste, working as porters, plying heavy boats in dirty water and pulling rickshaws.
- Some teenage girls resorted to sex-work as a means of livelihood.
- Risks/hazards associated with these types of work that children identified: drowning; falling down drains sustaining bone fractures; snake bites; wounds from broken glass, sharp/jagged edged objects/rubbish in water; electrocution from contacting live wires in water or getting ill from spending time in water .
- Children, especially of the age group 6-14 years described being forced to run errands either for parents/care-givers or adults in shelters.
- Children and adults mentioned that wages decreased during flood period, despite work being riskier. Similarly, money-lenders too demanded higher interests during this time.
- Children who normally work are often unable to get to their workplace during floods and so lose their livelihood means.
- Some employers allow children to sleep in their places of work; such children stay in poor conditions and are vulnerable to abuse.
- Some desperate mothers start begging along with their children.
- Street children and children from minority backgrounds found it very hard to find work because of the stigma they faced; many people are looking for work in flood time without much hope though.
- NGOs reported that in some areas of Kurigram near the Indian border, children became involved in smuggling activities.
- short periods of time, if necessary. They should not be sent outside to run errands in the face of so many kinds of dangers. Many children thought it would be better if there was scope for 'handicraft work' or any other work that can be done in the relative safety of shelters or homes. Introduction of some kind of day-care system for children in shelters was also suggested, to enable parents/care-givers work outside without worrying about the safety of their children. Children thought that there were enough 'light work' that they could do indoors to help their parents/care-givers, such as taking care of their younger siblings etc.
- Some children pointed out that if there were better income opportunities for parents/care-givers, or adequate relief was provided, then their parents/care-givers would not be compelled to send the children out for doing hazardous work. Children commented that it would be better if parents/care-givers were able to save a little money considering the hard times viz. the floods.
- As with other thematic protection areas identified, many children felt that a change in attitude was needed regarding children doing hazardous work. Some children spoke of the need to 'protect their rights', the need for the employers to be more patient and understanding, and to make parents/care-givers more aware of the risks their children faced in some occupations. One child described an incident when he had been beaten by passengers who fell off his rickshaw into the water as he had been struggling to pull it through the flood waters; he said, "Rich men should treat us as human beings."<sup>79</sup>

## Recommendations by FGD participants:

- Children felt that they should do light work for

"While pulling a rickshaw through the flood water, if I asked passengers to get down so as to enable me pull the rickshaw through deeper water, they would protest saying 'why they should be alighting when they were paying him'. When I said that there was a big ditch there under the water and that I would not be able to pull the rickshaw through with the passengers, . they swore and hit me. Liberating children from such predicaments is child protection to me."

Comment by participant in FGD group of boys aged 15-18 years, Dhaka

## 4.8 Child protection issues associated with health and hygiene

- Almost all children and adults identified a general lack of adequate medical care as a major child protection issue: few or no visits at all by doctors; lack of female medical staff; lack of adequate help with regard to administering the medicine (if provided at all); lack of money to buy medicine; and at times, medicine being supplied to everyone with other relief materials.
- At the medical centres, children reported that they'd be pushed out of queues; unaccompanied children were often just returned without any help.
- Pregnant women faced lack of privacy: childbirths were handled with very little or no privacy under desperate circumstances; lack of relevant care.
- Unhygienic environment; lack of clean water and nutritious foods.
- Floods can interrupt vaccination programmes.
- Difficulty of burying or cremation of dead bodies when graveyards/ crematoriums were under water. Often corpses were floated which was very distressing for family members, exacerbating the otherwise unhygienic environment.

Some of the major medical conditions that children suffer from during floods:

- Diarrhoea, dysentery and dehydration
- Fever, headaches and coughs
- Pneumonia
- Skin diseases, sores and ulcers, ring worm
- Cholera
- Hepatitis
- Reproductive health problems, including sexually transmitted diseases
- Eye problems such as conjunctivitis and night blindness
- Mosquito bites; malaria and dengue
- Snake bites, dog bites, cockroach and ant bites

### Recommendations by FGD participants:

- There should be frequent visits by doctors or nurses who could provide sufficient medication

and issue clear instructions about administering medication.

- Committees including child members should be formed in shelters to address different issues such as keeping the shelter clean, distributing healthy food, securing medical treatment, etc.
- Some national NGOs suggested that there should be greater use of child-to-child methods for dissemination of important health and safety information.
- Adequate number of separate toilets and bathrooms for men and women that are kept clean and hygienic should be provided.
- A separate room for pregnant women, wherein doctors/ nurses can administer treatment, should be provided.
- Provision of adequate quantities of good food, cooking equipment for preparing food and clean water supply should be made.
- General health advice should be given, with specific information about key dangers such as proper treatment for snake bites, and provisions in place to get people to treatment sources as quickly as possible.
- Some key items such as soap, warm clothes, and sanitary pads or clean cloth pieces are a special need for the girls.

"I took shelter on the roof of our house. All my things got wet in the rain, and I got scabies from wearing wet and dirty clothes for days together. I was attacked by leeches. When I was struggling hard to get rid of the leeches, wicked boys were mocking at me. Somebody touched me with bad intention during nighttime, offering me food. Someone wanted to take me away and tempted me offering money and relief. I was forced to defecate and pass urine standing up in the floodwater and I wanted to commit suicide out of shame. I could not share all these with my parents as they were also stressed and intimidating instead of being sympathetic. During menstruation, I failed to maintain hygiene and stayed wet and dirty. . Please untie me from the sufferings of the flood; please untie all the girls of the char from the sufferings of the flood."

'Shiuly' (name changed), age 16, Dhaka



- Mothers should be able to eat well and take care of themselves in order to feed and take care of their babies properly.
- Local government bodies and rich men should come forward to assist with the health care of children.
- Teenagers, parents/care-givers and NGOs suggested that there should be programmes to raise awareness of HIV/AIDS and other STDs.
- Drug addicts should be provided with separate space in shelters.
- Provision should be made for people to enable them wash their hands before eating.
- There should be some arrangement for people living outside the flood shelters, e.g. on embankments or roofs or any makeshift structures to access health care services; information about such arrangements, if made, should be publicized using public address systems.
- Long-term vaccination programmes should be designed considering the flood season with possible alternatives.

## 4.9 Child protection problems associated with psycho-social issues

- Some children had pleasant things to share as regards the flood time experiences: e.g. they enjoyed more time spent with family; felt like an adventure, etc.

When asked what she remembered most about the 2004 floods, Ayesha\* described witnessing the death of a baby. She was staying with other people on the roof of a neighbour's house. One single working mother was also there; she would appeal to other people to watch her 18 month-old baby while she went to work during the day. One day the baby had crawled up to the edge of the roof, while others were busy doing chores. The bare roof had no railing around, and the baby fell off and died. Ayesha cannot forget this sad event even today. .

'Ayesha' (name changed) 13 years, Dhaka

- Most children remembered bad experiences of the flood-stricken days, e.g. miserable daily living

conditions (wet clothes/ little food). Many children suffered specific traumatic events (e.g. sibling died).

- Increased stress of flood time have negatively impacted the relationships between children and parents/care giver; increased verbal and physical abuse.
- Many children suffered from anxiety at being separated from family members.
- Many children talked of a constant fear of drowning / abduction / theft / sexual harassment.
- Many children were upset about losing treasured belongings, including pet animals.
- Street children find survival to be more difficult; they face more abuses.

**"In the flood time parents become strangers, I am worried and cannot sleep, and nothing looks good."**

Comment from participant in FGD group of girls aged 7-12 years, Dhaka

## Recommendations by FGD participants:

- Most children expressed a desire that the adult's attitude towards them should change, and asserted that this would have a huge impact on their emotional wellbeing during floods. "Nobody showed interest to listen to children's words. It should not be so."<sup>80</sup> It was stressed that families should stay together and that parents/care-givers should try to make a good atmosphere and give time and affection to children and try to entertain them. Some older children also suggested that some counselling or rehabilitation could be offered for family members who had experienced something particularly traumatic.

"Our mental condition was always very bad during the flood. We had to stay like a bunch of tied-up goats, kept by herdsmen. During that period, we had to stay very quiet and still. We could not sleep soundly due to shortage of space and bedding. We fought a lot amongst our brothers and sisters."

Comment by participant in FGD group of boys aged 10-14, Sirajgonj

- Having the opportunity to play was extremely important to all children. They spoke of the need to talk to friends, to play with toys/books/music, to be taken on an excursion somewhere, and to be able to study.

"Everyone bears the grievous memory of the flood period, the memory is always painful. We fear that floods will occur again and disturb our mental peace. One of my neighbours died from diarrhoea, it is a painful memory. That we couldn't play and that we couldn't use the latrine is in my memory."

Comment by participant in FGD group of boys aged 15-18, Lalbagh, Dhaka

- Children described many things that they do to try to feel better during the flood time. These included playing outside where it was possible, such as making a raft, swimming, travelling by boat, fishing from a rooftop or boat, or visiting relatives' houses which freshened up their minds. Other activities they tried to do indoors included talking to friends, sewing, entertaining younger siblings, singing, reading the holy Qu'ran, playing games such as four balls or ludo, or playing cards with their parents. Children also enjoyed taking care of surviving animals who had not perished in the floodwaters.

"During the flood we street children were very upset. We feel that there's no one to support us. Sometimes we think it is better to die drowning in flood water."

Comment by participant in FGD group of girl & boy street children aged 6-14, Chandpur

- The need for many changes to the physical environment of children during floods was identified. The need for enough clean food and water was stressed, and a more dignified 'house by house' distribution of relief was prioritised. Many children felt that they should not be sent to queue for relief. More clean bathrooms, with

"I think they should build a child friendly shelter based on children's opinions. There should be no mental or emotional sufferings there, only respect, affection and love."

Comment by participant in FGD group of boys aged 15-18 years, Lalbagh, Dhaka

separate facilities for boys and girls would improve their wellbeing to a large extent. The need for better health care was noted, and for boats to be provided to take people to doctors.

- Most street children asserted that they would feel better if they had the opportunity to work during flood time. Whereas other children said they'd better not be forced to go to work.
- Many children argued that better security is needed in shelter; <sup>81</sup> "Don't allow wicked people into the flood shelter." It was also asserted that relief workers, organisers of shelters and other adults should not be allowed to talk to children alone, as this puts them in a situation where they are vulnerable to abuse.

"Tears welled up in their eyes as they remembered the sufferings of the flood."

FGD facilitator after interviewing girls aged 15-18, Dhaka

- Some younger boys also commented on how they should try to behave in floods to improve the situation for their families; "it is needed for us to behave well with our family, we have to stay with our parents/care-givers and control our temper, and we should understand our parent's sorrows." <sup>82</sup>

"The mental condition was very much worse for all of us during the flood. In my mind I felt like I became a dry leaf that drops from the tree. I felt that I had lost all my good memories and just felt speechless. I lost interest to work or eat. I did not sleep because of fear of thieves. I became very angry over little things, and I felt like my parents/care giver were not my own folks."

Comment by participant in FGD group of girls aged 10-14 years, Sirajgonj

# Analysis

## 5.1 Analysis of findings

The analytic framework for this study established some main issues to consider during analysis of the findings:

1. The approach that ‘child protection’ is not just an element of relief work but an integral part of all emergency responses.
2. The need to identify the specific types of threats children face, and key groups of ‘children at risk’ during floods.
3. The importance of valuing children’s own perceptions of the dangers they face and their own suggestions for overcoming these problems.

*1. The approach that ‘child protection’ is not a distinct ‘fifth or sixth’ element of relief work but an integral part of all emergency responses:*

Child protection issues are evident in all areas of flood responses. Flood response actors must seek and meet children’s specific needs in every way that they interact with the flood-affected population. For example, it is vital that children’s varied needs are considered in need assessments, during relief distribution and in flood shelters. These are all examples of areas of work that the GoB or a non-child centred organisation might be involved with. These may be considered ‘general areas of work’ but flood response actors have the ability to positively or negatively affect children’s well-being while working in these areas.

The findings mentioned in details the various risks that children face in flood shelters which flood response organisations can seek to address. For example, many children and parents/care-givers expressed acute anxiety at the lack of security in flood shelters. Children faced the threat of abuse from people staying inside the shelters, the threat of being abducted by outsiders and the threat of accidents from the unsafe environment of the shelter. The plight of children outside the recognised flood shelters was also highlighted. Children camping on roads, embankments, rooftops or bamboo structures faced great threats

to their physical survival in terms of being swept away by floodwater or run over by cars while they are sleeping. They also face problems of theft, abuse and abduction. Children outside the flood shelters are also less likely to be able to access medical attention and food, because in those cases, it is more difficult for flood response actors to identify and reach these children.

The findings also revealed that children tend to be overlooked during relief distribution. Food that is appropriate for young children and infants is rarely included in relief parcels, and children are often ignored, treated harshly or given insufficient food during the actual distribution. The findings suggested that, ideally, relief should be distributed following a door-to-door approach, or in a shelter, room-by-room. This is much more dignified and less stressful as children feel that in this way, they stand a better chance of getting their share. In addition, some children pointed out that they were often at work when relief distribution took place. They questioned if it was possible to consider this information while making relief distribution plans, so as to enable them to collect their food at a time that was convenient for them.

Through consulting with national NGOs, international NGOs and donors, it seems apparent that there can sometimes be lack of communication and coordination between these levels. For example, regarding the issue of why food packages tend not to include any food that is appropriate for very young children, national NGOs said that their hands are tied as the contents of relief packages is usually decided at donor level; whereas donors said that their recommendation about the contents of a food parcel is based on the information they receive from national NGOs’ needs assessments. Evidently there is a need for flood response actors at all levels to work together as they consider how best to tailor interventions to meet children’s protection needs.

*2. The need to identify specific types of threats that children face, and key groups of ‘at risk’ children during floods:*

Through the extensive consultations with children of varied ages and backgrounds, significant types of

threats that children face during floods were identified. These specific areas of risk and external threat warrant attention from flood response actors if children are to be protected during floods.

**Sexual abuse:** Many teenage girls and their parents/care-givers pointed at the very real risk of sexual abuse of girls during this time of increased insecurity. As an Oxfam report of the 2004 floods mentions: “it was stressed that floods meant leaving the house and sleeping on embankments and roads by sharing the space with others. This posed particular problems for women and girl children, who have to be extra careful about their dress and sleeping postures.”<sup>83</sup> The findings support this view, but they also suggest that boys too are equally at risk of sexual abuse while sheltering in these insecure environments. The risk of abuse faced by boys in general is perhaps currently under-recognised. It is important to note that while it is traditionally accepted that girls are extremely vulnerable to sexual harassment and abuse, boys are also exposed to this same protection risk. This is especially true for boys of the age group 10-18 who are staying in flood shelters where sleeping facilities happen to be cramped and disorganised. NGO workers also asserted that boys are in danger of abuse during rescue/evacuation.

**Risk from supposedly trustworthy people:**

Significantly, many children identified protection risks they face from adults who are supposed to be caring for children. For example, many children described shelter organisers demanding money, shouting at them and beating children. They can also fail to protect children from risks such as abuse and abduction. Similarly, rescue workers who are supposed to help evacuate children are seen to be excluding children of relatively lower status (that is, more disadvantaged) from accessing the opportunity of getting rescued and they chase the helpless and unaccompanied children away from the boats. Rescue workers can also exploit children's lack of options during evacuation; once children have accepted a ride on a boat, rescue workers can take them somewhere else other than the promised flood shelter and abuse them. Problems associated with untrustworthy rescue workers are exacerbated in areas of rural flash floods where the need for children to be evacuated by whatever means is ‘immediate’. Furthermore, many children whose parents/care-givers sent them to the ‘safety’ of a

relative/neighbour's house found themselves neglected or abused--verbally, physically or even sexually at the end.

**Abduction:** There is an increased risk of abduction of girls and boys during floods as they are often outside the protection of houses or shelters; running errands, working outside or travelling to work. However, some children and adults interviewed also remembered children being abducted from inside the shelters; so it should not be assumed that flood shelters are necessarily more secure. Street children and other unaccompanied children perhaps face the greatest risk of abduction. They are attractive to abductors as there is no adult to watch out for them or come looking for them. Virtually, all the children and parents/care-givers interviewed said that they lived in constant fear of abduction during flood time, which is detrimental to the children's well-being in general.

**Hazardous work:** Many children ‘work’ during flood time; whether in the form of running errands for their parents/care-givers, doing domestic work in a relative's house, or earning wages. Many types of labour during the flood period expose children to protection risks. Working children interviewed described their worries about the difficult circumstances arising during the flood, which would cause them to lose their work, whereas children who were not working described how they disliked being forced to try hazardous activities during flood time.

**Mental and emotional well-being:** Many children experience specific traumatic events during floods such as a family member drowning, and the vast majority of children described living in constant fear of specific dangers such as this. This prolonged state of anxiety clearly affects their short and long-term mental and emotional wellbeing. In addition, many children experienced isolation, uncertainty, boredom, helplessness, frustration at loss of mobility and a desire for play and recreation.

Key groups of ‘at risk’ children needing particular care and attention from flood response actors were also identified through the study:

**Unaccompanied children:** In addition to the particular vulnerabilities faced by girls and boys, it is apparent that unaccompanied children of both sexes are one of the most ‘at risk’ groups during floods, facing all dilemmas posed by floods alone.



The findings suggest that unaccompanied children are more likely to be refused entry to shelters and pushed down from rescue boats. Wherever people are sheltering, in every situation, it is the unaccompanied children who are the least protected from all forms of abuse and neglect, and threats such as abduction. There is rarely an adult looking out for them to ensure that they get their fair share of access to relief or medical attention. Furthermore, unaccompanied children are often not included while the relief distribution registers record the names of recipients.

## **Children with disabilities or special needs:**

Children with disabilities or special needs are naturally more dependent on those around them, and during floods when the normal protective structures of family and home are disrupted, these children may find it harder to access everything they need. They are also at greater risk from abusers who can take advantage of the fact that they are often less able to communicate with others about the problems they are facing.

**Minority groups:** Children from the minority ethnic and religious groups, and also the very poor children often face discrimination in ‘normal life.’ During floods when competition for resources is fiercer, this discrimination is often exacerbated. Children from these groups who were interviewed described being refused entry into shelters, pushed down from rescue boats and generally treated as inferiors whose rights are not to be respected. Organisers and rescue workers involved in evacuation and shelter management were reported to be exercising nepotism and bias, and discriminating against the most marginalised conveniently.

In addition to these main concerns raised by children, many of the parents/care-givers interviewed stressed a lack of security for children, both inside and outside of shelters, as one of their main concerns during floods. Many working mothers were upset at having no other choice than to leave children unattended, or with people they didn’t trust. Many parents/care-givers also described their frustration with the lack of just systems of administration in shelters. They painted a picture of disorganization, little information sharing, bias distribution and an inability to seek ‘justice’ for any wrongs that they or their children faced. Many parents/care-givers pointed out that

they felt much happier and secure when families who knew each other were able to share rooms.

## *3. The importance of valuing children’s own perceptions of the dangers they face and their own suggestions for overcoming these problems:*

Crosscutting all thematic areas of risk identified by children, is the issue of the attitude shown towards them by adults. Lack of respect for children can be seen as the root of all protection problems they face during floods. Children of all ages and backgrounds described countless examples of being prevented from using toilets in shelters, shouted at by doctors, pushed down from boats by rescue workers and ignored by parents/care-givers. Not all adults showed such negative attitude towards the children, but the vast majority of children asserted that this was the biggest problem that they faced during flood time. Many children identified that when they are treated without due respect during floods, it both limits their chances of physical survival and damages their mental and emotional well-being. All flood response actors must seek out and listen to the children’s opinions; this was the clear message given by the vast majority of the children interviewed.

It is impossible to overstress the importance that children place on play and education during floods. This was a common need asserted by all children from all backgrounds. Many parents/care-givers, NGO workers and members of the civil society also noted that leading a regular life with some structured play and educational opportunities helped children to feel more optimistic and in control of their lives. Conversely, it appears that children who are unable to play during floods are more likely to feel depressed and such feelings of hopelessness stay with them even after the floodwaters recede. To continue education throughout the flood period means addressing many complex and overlapping factors, from replacing damaged educational materials to avoiding children being taken out of school to earn money. Indeed, one of the major obstacles to education is the fact that families cannot afford the ‘opportunity cost’ of children being in education, as levels of poverty tend to exacerbate during floods. Most children also asserted the need for many actors to change their attitude towards education during floods; for example, for the government to make allowances for flood-affected children who are due to sit for exams, for schools to not be used

as flood shelters, and for parents/care-givers to encourage children to go to school rather than work. Some children suggested that some food relief could be distributed at schools after class, thus providing an incentive for parents/care-givers to send their children to school during floods.

Many of the older children pointed to the need for preparing for future floods. For example, they argued that if their family were able to store some dry food or put aside a little money, then they would not be in such a desperate situation during floods and so not be forced to take drastic actions such as sending children away to become domestic workers, or arranging early marriages for young girls.

Many children highlighted the importance of sharing information within communities; for example, deciding about the buildings that will be used as flood shelters, the details of any rescue plans and information about relief distribution. Many parents/care-givers also stressed the need for flood early warning systems, especially in rural areas where flash floods occur. Children, parents/caregivers and members of civil society also stressed the benefits of local communities organising themselves. For example, forming local groups and committees which include children, to raise awareness of dangers such as abduction and trafficking, to monitor the security situation and to organise and maintain hygiene in shelters. In some areas where there was strong community organisation and awareness, parents/care givers noticed that there were fewer incidents of abduction. It is clear that information sharing is vital both in terms of helping people to survive during this difficult time and in terms of treating people with respect and dignity.

## 5.2 Conclusion

This study demonstrates the need for three sets of improvements:

1. More flexible models of intervention that are sensitive to children's needs. Whether distributing food, or carrying out medical visits, relief interventions must strive to be more responsive to the differing needs of the flood-affected population. Blanket responses, or 'one size fits all', must be avoided. Instead, the flood response actors should strive to make their interventions relevant, adequate, dignified and informed by children's

consultation and participation.

2. A greater level of awareness of the specific dangers that children face during floods, and consequently, specific steps taken to protect children from harm. Protecting children from all forms of abuse and discrimination must be an active component of stages of relief efforts such as evacuation, rescue and relief distribution.

3. The need to introduce 'recreation' as a component of relief packages and distributions. It is clear that providing space, time and materials for play and education can go a long way in combating children's distress and feelings of isolation, separation, fear, anxiety, helplessness and hopelessness.

Complementing these three specific goals is the assertion made by the vast majority of children interviewed, that adults' attitudes towards them need to change. Children need to be respected, listened to and involved.

## 5.3 Policy recommendations

All disaster response actors in Bangladesh including non child-focussed organizations, have an impact on children's protection during floods – knowingly or unknowingly, positively or negatively. This study calls upon all actors to consider how their particular areas of expertise or particular interventions can help to strengthen child protection measures.

The following policy recommendations are based on the findings of this study, and many were suggested by children themselves. For a more detailed understanding of the recommendations of children and adults interviewed, please see the points listed at the end of each thematic area in the 'Findings from Field Research' section.

### Policy recommendations for the Government of Bangladesh:

Review all relevant documents in the light of the UNCRC and PRSP, particularly the 'Standing Orders on Disaster'.

- Involve children in decision making about issues that affect them. For example, children members can be on the flood shelter committees and help in deciding about the best methods of relief distribution.
- Review formal and informal attitudes towards

unaccompanied children; take steps to provide care (such as shelter, food, medical attention and security) for these extremely vulnerable children.

- Develop a code of conduct for the police and other officials involved in rescue work and sensitise them to children's protection needs during floods. Increase security in flood shelters, including having a child protection and whistle-blowing policy for the staff.
- Reconsider the education calendar with the months of flooding in mind.
- Consider making allowances for the flood affected children who are due to take exams, and enable schools to hold extra classes after the floods in order for the affected children to be at par with the rest.
- Further develop existing curriculum taught in schools on disaster preparedness to strengthen awareness of the child protection issues.
- Strive to establish effective early-warning systems in all areas where flash floods occur often.

## Policy recommendations for all:

- Signatories of the UNCRC and Sphere Standards should review their policies and operational procedures accordingly.
- Treat children with dignity and respect. Before, during and after the floods, seek out, listen to and act upon their opinions. Seek to involve children in every phase of response: needs assessments, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

“Protecting children in crises must be a top priority in every stage of every emergency response.”<sup>84</sup>

- Include children's protection needs in assessments and continue to carry out needs assessments throughout the period of flooding.
- Seek to ensure children's opportunities for recreation. Children need to have time to play in safe areas with supervision. Include play and educational items in relief packages.
- Make special effort to identify and protect the most marginalised and vulnerable children, for

example, street children, unaccompanied children, orphans, children with disabilities, children from minority ethnic and religious backgrounds.

- Be aware of the potential for adults in positions of trust (such as shelter organisers, rescue workers, relief distributors) to verbally, physically and sexually abuse children, and to ignore or neglect them. Seek to limit the opportunity for this to happen by motivation, training and monitoring staff and investigate any complaints against them. Develop a child protection and whistle-blowing policy for all staff who are working with children. Relief workers should carry identification and be professionally accountable.
- Seek to distribute relief in a fair and dignified way; ideally, it should be a house-by-house execution. Distribution registers must include all children, and feeding unaccompanied children should be a priority. Appropriate food must also be provided for very young children and babies.
- Encourage community mobilisation through facilitating the formation of committees and sharing information about relief distribution, security, health and safety, for example, a 'child-to-child' model for disseminating information can be used very effectively.
- Provide child care and increased security in flood shelters.
- Flood shelters should be better organised so that members of the same family can stay together and families that know each other can share rooms.
- Programmes for teaching swimming skills should be established where possible.
- Donors should encourage organisations applying for funds to consider how their projects will affect children, and also encourage monitoring and evaluation of projects to be child-sensitive and child-participatory.
- Children's protection needs must be considered in their own right, independent of women's needs; while acknowledging that the two are often inter-linked.

# Annex-1

## Findings from Field Research:

The findings are grouped by theme into nine sections, each of which thrashes out the main protection issues raised by the children and adults interviewed for this study. The interviewees' suggestions regarding the ways in which these problems can be overcome are also presented in this way.

This is not a quantitative study. The value of this research is that it has captured the thoughts and opinions of over 1000 flood-affected children in Bangladesh. Care has been taken to represent the views of the children interviewed precisely as they were expressed, in order that the flood response actors can best empathise with the children's experiences during floods. The premise for this approach is the belief that in order to tailor flood response programmes to really meet child protection needs, it is first necessary to understand the perspectives of children.

This study seeks to understand the variety of factors that affect the lives of children and further to map the complex relationships between these factors which can result in children being put at risk during floods. For this reason, the different protection issues that children identified have not been ranked into isolated areas of importance and hence considered as inter-related.

### 1. Child protection issues associated with temporary flood shelters/places of shelter

**1.1** The most significant problem cited in every FGD was the lack of space in flood shelters. Some of the adults and children interviewed found there was no space available in shelters and they were forced to camp on roads, embankments, roofs, bamboo structures attached to houses, mosques or other buildings. Virtually all children who did stay in shelters recalled a desperate lack of space to sleep, forcing them to standing up all night or sleep in shifts. Often livestock were kept in rooms with people. Many children and adults expressed anxiety about strange men, women and children from different backgrounds, sharing limited space. Some mothers described problems with breastfeeding in shelters when they were forced to share rooms with

unfamiliar men without any privacy. Some groups of parents/care-givers mentioned that people felt more secure if they could share rooms with neighbours or people from the same community or background.

A further problem mentioned was the tendency among some shelter leaders to seek money in exchange for spaces in their shelters; "the organisers want money for staying at the shelter, they also want money for food."<sup>85</sup> Many children and adults also described being forced to leave the shelter before the flood waters had receded from their homes.

**1.2** All children interviewed were quick to identify lack of space to play and a lack of games and toys to play with, as a major problem. Many described feeling like prisoners trapped in a crowded shelter without the relief of being able to play. A few children interviewed were upset to find no space available in shelters for prayer.

**1.3** Many of the children and adults interviewed repeatedly stressed problems with sanitation in the flood shelters. Toilets and bathing facilities were often lacking completely, or too few and very unclean. Children from all age groups complained about the lack of privacy when men, women, boys and girls were forced to use the same toilets. This was identified by many interviewees as increasing the risk of sexual abuse for both boys and girls.

In some centres, adults did not allow children to use the toilets. Many children were forced to urinate or defecate in the open air, where they were again at risk of harassment. Children described their feelings of shame, embarrassment and loss of dignity arising from such situations. Some boys aged 6-10 years and 10-14 years recalled how they were able to bathe outside, but that their elder sisters found this much more difficult. During one FGD, a group of 10-14 years old girls mentioned that it was impossible for them to bathe at the shelter at all, so every few days, they had to go back to their homes through the flood water for the purpose.

**1.4** Both girls and boys of the age groups 10-14 years and 15-18 years identified an increased risk of sexual harassment and abuse while staying in temporary shelters. Girls and boys aged 6-10 years also alluded to being aware of the threat of sexual abuse although these interviewees were unable to



fully articulate this threat. It is important to note that many boys described the discomfort they suffered from unwanted attention; boys are as much in need of protection from sexual harassment as girls. Many children talked of not wanting to go to sleep for fear of abuse. Girls felt particularly vulnerable when they only had one set of clothes which they could not keep dry. The clothes clung tightly to their figure and they felt exposed to harassment from older boys and men. Younger boys described how in some shelters all the boys were made to sleep together in the same room; when this happened they faced sexual abuse from older boys. Parents/care-givers expressed their fear of children being abused by older people in the shelter. They were also worried about the fact that in an environment where teenage girls and boys are living closely together, often unsupervised, the children may also choose to have sexual relations with each other; where they would be at risk of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

**1.5** The majority of children and adults interviewed felt strongly that better security is needed in shelters. Many children described staying awake all night for fear of their few remaining belongings being stolen. In addition, some boys spoke about their experience of facing intense peer pressure to take drugs while staying in the shelter; “there were some bad boys who took drugs, and they pressured us to take drugs with them.”<sup>86</sup> The boys felt uncomfortable and thought that there should be more security in the shelters to prevent this. Children who were unaccompanied in the shelters continually stressed their fear of the insecure environment. These children were keenly aware that they did not have the protection of adults watching over them.

**1.6** Many interviewees were fearful of accidents such as falls from roofs, electrocution or cuts from sharp objects, occurring both in designated flood shelters and other places of refuge. Children also suffered from the unclean and inhospitable environment of shelters, viz. the cold, lack of bedding and being bitten by mosquitoes and other insects. Parents/care-givers described their compulsion to leave babies or young children unattended while they went out to work, which resulted in the children going missing or having accidents which in some cases led to the death of children. Some parents/care-givers mentioned incidences of maltreatment of children by adult carers in shelters which occurred while the parents/caregivers were at work and they failed to protest such misdemeanour.

**1.7** The majority of children commented on the

lack of safe water to drink, the lack of enough and appropriate food for children of different ages, and the lack of cooking equipment.

**1.8** Many children described the atmosphere in the shelters as disturbing. Parents/care-givers and elders were constantly shouting at children, and many children remembered being beaten, especially during distribution of relief; “the organisers of the shelter used to beat us too.”<sup>87</sup>

Many children were frustrated for not being involved in making decisions about how the shelters were run, or even to be informed of what decisions had been made by adults; “there should be a proper flood shelter management plan and child participation is a must in the preparation of the plan. Children should involve themselves by forming groups or by joining the organising of the shelter.”<sup>88</sup> Many children interviewed highlighted the absence of any discussion or counselling provided about protection, safety and health issues.

Many parents/care-givers described being treated without any respect by people organising the shelters, which left them feeling humiliated and angry. They complained that there seemed to be no system or rules. They were concerned with the lack of security, and the lack of anyone to complain to if something bad happened. Shelter leaders reportedly exercised nepotism and favouritism; “the food distributor always gave more food to his friends and family.”<sup>89</sup> Some parents/care-givers commented that the influential men could treat other people with impunity.

**1.9** Many children pointed out that they had actually been turned away from shelters. The reasons given for this were varied and included; lack of space, discrimination against children from particular ethnic and religious backgrounds or because the children were unaccompanied. Male unaccompanied children appear to be particularly likely to have been refused entry.

In other cases, particularly in rural areas, there were no buildings that could be used as shelters. Children who had taken shelter on embankments, roads, roofs or bamboo platforms largely identified many of the same problems as those recognised by children staying in temporary flood shelters. Chiefly, these were: no space to sleep, no bathroom, no security, being disturbed by thieves or sexually harassed. Children staying on open roofs also complained of being exposed to the elements and talked of the detrimental effect this had on their health. Children taking shelter on roads told how they were afraid of vehicles trampling them, especially at night when they tried to sleep. They

expressed their desire for a shelter with a roof, safe drinking water, food and medicine, and to be able to stay together with their family and friends.

**1.10** Some groups of street children who were interviewed described the discrimination they experienced at the flood shelters; “as we are street children, nobody likes us. Nobody wants to give us place for sheltering.”<sup>90</sup> Many street children and other unaccompanied children said that they were turned away from shelters; that there was a policy not to admit children without an accompanying adult.

Those that were allowed to stay found themselves neglected and ostracised. They mentioned that even other would not be willing to talk to them. They received little or no help, and the tail end of the relief, if any. Several children also recalled how they were blamed for stealing and thrown out of shelter. Many of the unaccompanied street children interviewed asked if in the future they would be rescued during floods and be kept together. They strongly expressed that they wanted to live together with their friends so they could look after each other. They also asserted that attitudes towards them need to change; “the conscious persons of the society should think about street children, and not show ignorance or hate us or neglect us.”<sup>91</sup>

## **2. Protection issues associated with evacuation / rescue**

**2.1** Evacuation can be a time of real stress and anxiety for all, but it is particularly upsetting for children. They not only suffer the stress of having to leave suddenly, of carrying heavy loads and going somewhere unknown, but they also have the fear of drowning, of being abducted, of falling down in drains and being injured, or being separated from their family.

**2.2** Many of the children interviewed painted a traumatic picture of their evacuation experiences. They remember being pushed and shoved, of falling down and dropping their belongings, of being beaten. Children felt one of the most distressing things was to lose their treasured belongings. Lots of children had a particular attachment to their family’s livestock. Some spoke of being responsible for a particular chicken, goat or cow, which they loved as their pet. It was very upsetting for children to lose their animals either through ‘distress selling’ during the flood period, or watching them get swept away in flood water.

**2.3** Many children also remembered that they were not the primary concern of their parents/care-givers and this was very upsetting. It was their

feeling that parents/care-givers cared more about saving possessions than saving the children. Parents/care-givers often shouted at or beat their children to make them hurry. Children spoke of feeling sick and cold but there was no time or inclination for showing any affection by their parents/caregivers. However, some parents/caregivers asserted that their children were their first priority during evacuation. They recalled the family working together to rescue everyone and their belongings and shift to roofs or other places of shelter. They described evacuation as a positive experience with families overcoming adversity together with the help of the children.

**2.4** Several children spoke of their siblings or friends who fell into the flood water and drowned. Many children interviewed had a lasting fear of drowning. Children had also experienced down drains, being bitten by snakes, being wounded from sharp objects or being electrified in the water. Children who had no direct experience of such events had a clear fear of them.

**2.5** Rescue workers manning boats were themselves identified as a potential protection risk. Many were reported to be harassing children and behaving aggressively with them. Children who were unaccompanied and especially who were poor were often discriminated against and not allowed in the boats. Teenage girls and parents/care-givers raised the specific concern of rescue workers seeking sexual gratification, especially from teenage girls; as one girl commented, “the rescue workers take advantage of the children’s innocence and propose to have sex with them.”<sup>92</sup> Many teenage girls and parents/care-givers also spoke of the danger of people posing as rescue workers and then luring children away, especially girls; “girls are usually at risk. Fake volunteers offer to take them to shelters but they take them elsewhere.”<sup>93</sup> Children are sometimes forced between going with a man who they do not know, or risk drowning in flood water if they stay.

In addition, some parents/care-givers expressed a fear of “fake rescue workers who are just thieves.”<sup>94</sup>

**2.6** Very poor children, street children and orphans felt that they were treated particularly badly by rescue workers. These most vulnerable children found it hard to get accepted onto the rescue boats and into shelters; “no one came forward to rescue the street children. We have to find shelter by ourselves. Everybody thinks about their own children, no one is there for us. When we tried to get up into the boat to go to some shelter, they pushed us down from the boat.”<sup>95</sup> These children recommended that social workers and NGOs

should come forward specially to rescue the street children during the flood.

**2.7** In many cases, there were no rescue boats available and children or their families could not afford to hire a boat, so they were forced to make a hazardous journey wading through flood water to seek shelter.

**2.8** Children and adults were killed and injured when buildings collapsed under the pressure of flood waters.

### **3. Child protection issues associated with separation from family members**

**3.1** Not all children interviewed were separated from their family members during the floods. But most highlighted that separation from families was a protection issue. Many children felt that they would be more vulnerable outside the protection of the family unit; and those who were living without familial care voiced many difficulties that they faced. Many children expressed anxiety at the proposition of being separated from their family, anticipating the insecurity and lack of affection and support that they would experience.

**3.2** Looking at the issue of ‘separation from family’ tends to imply that the norm is for children to be within a family unit. However, it is important to bear in mind that for many of the most vulnerable children in Bangladesh, the norm is to be outside the traditional family unit. Thus when they are affected by floods, such children are already in an increased state of vulnerability.

**3.3** Early marriage is also a reason for separation, and an issue that was identified by children as a real protection risk. Many children knew of girls, some as young as 10 years old, who had been married due to extreme poverty during the flood period. Some parents/care givers recognised that early marriage can be unfair for children, but explained that they felt compelled to take this course of action in order to avoid other problems such as attractive girls being sexually abused. Some parents/care givers spoke of their concern of young children falling in love and getting married during this time, suggesting that it may not always be the parents/care givers who are pushing for marriage. Girls of the age groups 10-14 years and 15-18 years spoke of the related problem of pregnancy at a very young age, following an early marriage. These pregnancies often have severe health risks for mother and child.

A few children also reported men trying to

forcefully marry young girls, and of ‘false marriages’ where the men would sleep with the girls and then send them back to their parents/care giver after a short period of time.

**3.4** Separation of children from family members is a protection issue because it is both very distressing and damaging in terms of their emotional well-being, and it also drastically affects their chances of obtaining all the physical things they need for survival, such as food, shelter and clothes. The interviews brought forth several case studies where the only parent or wage-earning parent died during a flood, leaving children in a dire state of poverty. Most orphaned children were forced to drop out of school and seek employment, often away from their remaining family members, and struggled to survive; “I am now providing for my family, though I am only twelve years old. I am the older brother and my parents/care giver died in the flood.”<sup>96</sup> Child-headed households are often not recognised in flood response plans, for example, in terms of relief distribution. One NGO worker stressed the need for “VGD cards to be given to child-led families.”<sup>97</sup>

**3.5** Many of the children interviewed were sent to stay with relatives during floods. It appears that girls aged 14 years and above are most often sent, but some boys and some younger children were also sent to their relatives’ houses. Parents/care givers appear to see this option as ‘sending children to a safer place’, and indeed some children said they experienced no problems at their relatives’ houses. However, many children identified protection issues while they were in this situation. They described their stay there as unhappy; facing scolding, arguments and embarrassment. They felt that they suffered from a lack of esteem, they were not respected. The majority of children had to do a lot of domestic work to ‘earn their keep’, yet felt that they did not have enough food to eat and were not able to ask for more when they were hungry. They were unable to move about freely or to play. Some children reported facing sexual abuse. Children also felt upset to be separated from their family in this way, and remained worried about their family.

### **4. Child protection issues associated with abduction / trafficking**

**4.1** In many FGD groups, participants knew someone who was abducted or trafficked during floods. Virtually, all the children said that they feared being abducted during this time. Some children expressed anxiety about not knowing exactly what happened to children that were taken.



They speculated that the children were either mutilated and forced into begging, made to work as sex workers, peddling drugs, killed for their body parts (such as lungs, kidneys and eyes), or trafficked abroad to work, perhaps as camel jockeys in the Middle East. In rural areas, it was feared that children were kidnapped to be sold in towns for engagement in different types of work such as domestic labour or sex work. A couple of case studies told of children being kidnapped and money being demanded for their return. The children have no way of knowing for certain what happened to children that went missing, but these were the fears that they expressed.

**4.2** Many children described the different ways they know about abductors trying to tempt children. Luring children away with the promise of work or food was reportedly the most common method. Some children described being so desperate for food, or for work to obtain food, that they were often compelled to follow up offers of assistance however dubious. It was also thought that kidnappers used drugs to overpower children, such as by placing a cloth soaked in solvents over their face. Some children described women with their faces covered coming into shelters and taking children; both men and women were seen as potential abductors.

**4.3** Girls expressed going to the bathroom to be a time of particular fear of abduction. With most flood shelters having inadequate or no toilets, they are forced to go outside into the open, and seek out remote areas far away from other people for privacy. Many mothers also cited abduction and trafficking as something they worried about all the time during the flood. In addition, street children have a particular fear of being abducted during floods. Their state of vulnerability is increased during flood time as they often become separated from their normal group of peers which normally affords them a slightly higher level of protection. Street children lamented that if any of their friends went missing, no adults would try to search for them and rescue them.

**4.4** In some areas, there were no first-hand cases of abduction. Indeed, many children simply go 'missing' during flood time. It is difficult to say if they have actually been abducted or have simply got lost or had an accident. However, what is apparent is that the *fear* of being abducted or trafficked is clearly very real for children and their parents/care givers living through floods.

**4.5** Anecdotal evidence suggests that children living on bamboo platforms attached to their house face a great risk of being abducted than children staying

in shelters do. This is perhaps because when the parents/caregivers are out at work during the day, there is no one to watch the children, whereas most shelters have some security measures.

**4.6** Some INGO staff consulted mentioned distinct groups of children which are particularly at risk of abduction. Children from minority religious and ethnic groups are seen to be more at risk as their neighbours are less likely to look out for them and protect them from harm. Children from villages are thought to be 'less aware' of the danger of abduction than children from towns, so they are more easily tempted by abductors. It was also the opinion of the INGO staff that poor children are more easily abducted and trafficked than the rich ones. However, it was also argued that most children do have common sense and some capacity to resist abduction.

## **5. Child protection issues associated with relief distribution**

**5.1** When questioned about relief distribution, particularly distribution of food, the overwhelming problem identified by children was the lack of respect shown to them by relief workers and other adults. Children of all ages complained of having to compete with adults for food. They talked of elders not seeing them as worthy of being given food, and of being pushed, shoved and beaten out of queues. They felt 'humiliated' and 'like beggars' to have to wait for hours for food and plead for small amounts. Teenage girls described how they do not like to stand in queues with men as they face sexual harassment. Children aged 10-18 years told how sometimes shelter leaders or relief distributors would demand money in exchange for food. Adults were described as snatching children's food tokens or even food away from them. Many younger children also remembered their hands getting burnt as they were shoved around in queues where hot food was being distributed. Lots of children aged 6-10 years remembered crying from hunger. Children felt that when it came to food, they suffered the worse, being at the bottom of the status hierarchy.

**5.2** The distributed food itself was also identified as a problem. Many children said that they rarely had enough food, and the food was not appropriate for children. Indeed, many children expressed fears of malnutrition and starvation. Often the same type of food was given for days on end, which was described as boring and demoralising. Many of the children and adults interviewed recognised that children really needed 3 meals a day, and that rice is more nutritional and satisfying than bread. Often



bad quality food is distributed and children talked of having to eat 'smelly food' and then becoming sick. Children and adults raised the issue of irregular distribution of food, with many days in-between and a lack of information sharing about when and where food would be distributed.

Children and adults also commented on the importance of safe water; "clean water is the most precious thing during the flood."<sup>98</sup> All FGD participants stressed the need for distribution of water purification tablets or for tubewells to be raised above the level of flood waters.

**5.3** Parents/care givers commented about the lack of any special food for young children, and the consequential anxiety of watching their babies starve. The issue of lactating mothers not getting enough nutritional food was also identified; they were unable to feed their children as much as they needed to.

**5.4** Many children expressed their frustration at the lack of a fair system of distribution. Wealthier people were seen to receive more relief than poorer people. Friends of the relief workers or shelter leaders did better than others, even though there were token systems in place. Some children lamented that systems of relief distribution with registers and tokens were not implemented rigidly, others pointed out that these systems do not benefit all children. Significant discrimination between registered and non-registered children was noted. This affects the unaccompanied children particularly harshly, as they are rarely included in the official registration lists. In some cases, amounts of relief appear to be calculated at a household level; a practice which ignores children who are outside of the household unit. Some children commented, "we orphans stayed in the shelter with fear and hunger. We did not get food because relief workers think that as we have no parents/care givers, it is not necessary to give us food."<sup>99</sup>

Similarly, many street children said that even if they received relief, it was after everyone else had received food. They were given the dregs--smelly food in small amounts. Their names were often not included in the relief list. In addition, some street children aged 6-10 years and 10-14 years complained of being bullied by older street children. For example, the older children threatened them saying if they didn't get them food, then they will throw bombs at them.

**5.5** Children and adults also noted the problem of relief distribution systems clashing with their work done. Some people were handed relief cards instructing them to go to a relief distribution point

that would start distribution supposedly at 10.00am, but this was a time when perhaps they would have to be at work, if they did not want to lose their jobs. So, it was a 'relief or regular job?' situation for them.

**5.6** Some people interviewed commented that during the flood time many different NGOs came to ask them questions but that they had not received any further assistance as a result; this was very frustrating for them.

## **6. Child protection issues associated with access to Education**

**6.1** The main problems children identified with access to education during flood time included: the closure of schools due to the buildings being submerged or because the teachers cannot reach the school; that the school is itself being used as a temporary shelter for flood affected people; that children are unable to travel to school due to the flood water. Educational materials being ruined by flood water also hinders education and causes anxiety. Many families cannot afford to replace lost materials. Teenage girls in particular also cited wet clothes as a reason they could not go to school. Many children described only being able to salvage one set of clothes from the flood waters, or of having their other clothes stolen and not being able to afford new clothes. For girls especially, wet clothes can result in increased sexual harassment and general embarrassment.

Furthermore, after the floods, many children cannot simply return to school. One reason is that the building is often damaged or dirty either from flood waters or from having been used as a temporary shelter.

**6.2** Anecdotal evidences suggest that the levels of child labour increase dramatically during flood time. Earning money for food is considered the most important thing. Many parents/care givers engage their children in work and do not encourage them to study. If children are not actually employed, then their parents/care givers often need them to run errands such as going long distances to collect water, or taking care of their younger siblings so that the parents can work. For many children, this is not a temporary gap in their education; after the flood, they are unable to leave their work and return to school.

**6.3** Many children recognised that the impact of missing school is huge. It not only has a detrimental effect on their long-term opportunities, but also on their short-term well-being. For example, children

discussed how lack of access to school also means that they are deprived of safe spaces to play. They feel like prisoners trapped in temporary shelters, and miss educational and play activities that would help to take their mind off the distress caused by the flood. Mothers commented that children become 'spiritless' from lack of education and play during the flood.

**6.4** Some children also expressed anxiety at being left at home unsupervised during the day while their parents/care givers were at work and they could not attend school as usual. Leaving children unsupervised leads to an increased risk of accidents such as drowning and also increases their vulnerability to abduction.

**6.5** Children forgetting what they had learnt and getting out of the habit of studying was also identified as a major reason for increased drop out rates after floods. The need for some kind of education in shelters during floods to help prevent these increased drop-out rates was raised. Some teenage boys described returning to school after floods, but they were then feeling so embarrassed in front of the teachers and other students because of how much they had forgotten, and eventually they dropped out. Many children who sat for examinations soon after the flood period felt that the government should make allowances for flood affected children and delay holding their examinations.

**6.6** For many FGD participants interviewed, such as street children and children who work full-time, the question of 'missing' school did not arise. They said that they cannot think about education during floods; they have no time as they are working, and they felt that no one will admit them into schools anyway. However, they did say that they want to have the opportunity for education and suggested building schools just for street children.

## **7. Child protection issues associated with hazardous work**

**7.1** The stress placed on families during floods can force them to resort to drastic coping mechanisms such as taking children out of school and sending them to work. Normal wage-earning family members can move away, become sick or die, and so children are forced to earn money. In addition, many children who normally work can find themselves unable to carry out their normal trade, and have no choice but to engage in more hazardous work.

**7.2** The children interviewed raised many child protection issues associated with the types of

dangerous work carried out in floods, such as making brick chips, collecting waste, working as porters, pulling heavy boats in dirty water and pulling rickshaws. The work itself is described as physically strenuous considering their small statures, and the dangers associated with moving around in the flood water are also apparent. Many children recall many accidents occurring while they worked, such as getting broken legs from falling down drains, being bitten by snakes and being wounded by rubbish or electrocuted by live wires in the water. Some children also complained of getting ill from working in polluted water or wading through it on their way to work. Furthermore, the risk of drowning is also increased due to working outside shelters and homes. Many children are unable to swim, this is especially a problem in urban areas, where drowning in flood waters is a very real danger. In addition, children spoke of accidents occurring during hard domestic work too.

**7.3** Some girls described their fear of facing sexual harassment if they took work in the fields or other places away from the protection of their parents/care giver. In addition, some girls actually said that they had engaged as sex workers during this time due to sheer desperation for food. Linked to this issue, and the related issue of sexual harassment, many girls in the age groups 10-14 years and 15-18 years said they feared losing their 'honour' during the flood period, due to the lack of privacy and increased risk of sexual abuse.

**7.4** Many children, especially of the age groups 6-10 years and 10-14 years, spoke of the dangers they faced when sent out to travel long distances on errands, viz. to collect water, firewood, or relief. In addition, some children complained of being treated like servants by people in their temporary shelters; they were bullied into going out to fetch items such as drugs and alcohol which the children did not like at all.

**7.5** Children who were working outside homes and shelters during flood time recognised that this exposed them to increased risks of being abducted. Children who are desperate for work are also more vulnerable to the temptation of promises of employment by strangers, who may turn out to be abductors.

**7.6** It was noted that wages are very low during the flood period, even though the work is very risky. Some children were forced to engage in hazardous work only for food, and did not receive any pay. Other children took loans from neighbours paying high interest, such as Tk.10 against Tk.100 in a month. Some employers were described as refusing to pay children if they arrived late at work because

of the flood water.

**7.7** Some working children described their distress at not being able to earn a living in their normal way, and their fear that their employers will not accept them to return to their old jobs once the floods are over because they have been absent. Many working children lost their jobs during this time. Some employers allowed children to stay at the workplace overnight, to ensure that they will be present for work next morning. However, this is also a protection risk as the children often then have to work for longer hours than normal and are living in miserable conditions without proper bathroom facilities or bedding etc.

**7.8** Some adults and local NGOs pointed at the correlation between flood time and rural children migrating to towns to look for other sources of work.

**7.9** Some children described how they faced anger and abuse from their parents/care giver if they did not work or earn enough during this time. Clearly, the tension created due to the need to earn money and the risks associated with certain types of employment place stress on child-parent relationships. Mothers who were interviewed discussed the tense choice of choosing between going to work and leaving children alone unsupervised and unprotected. Not wanting to see their children go hungry, some mothers took the option to start begging accompanied by their children.

**7.10** Street children and children from minority groups face additional problems in finding work in order to feed themselves during flood time. Street children argued that no one wants to employ them because of the stigma associated with them. If they do get work, then they are often not paid as promised and the master sees it as their right to abuse the children. Some national NGO workers commented that this is also the case for children from ethnic and religious minorities.

**7.11** Civil Society members in Kurigram reported that due to lack of security in the border area, 'black marketing' and smuggling across the border increase during the flood period, and children become involved in such activities.

## **8. Child protection issues associated with health and hygiene**

**8.1** Virtually, all children and adults interviewed identified lack of medical care as a major protection risk for children. Children staying in temporary shelters said that there were no visits, or too few visits, by doctors or nurses, and a general

lack of medicine distributed or available at affordable prices. Several children said that if they asked a doctor to explain the correct dosage of the medicine to them for a second time, they were shouted at and beaten. Parents/care giver also complained of doctors giving the medicine but not explaining how to take it. They would try and find literate people to explain the dosage to them, then gave the medicine to their children. Some patients died because of erratic treatment. A lack of faith in doctors was expressed.

**8.2** Many children felt imprisoned by the flood water, being unable to leave shelters and go for medical treatment, when necessary. Those that did travel to medical centres often described being forced to queue up for many hours in rain or direct sunlight. Children are often pushed out of queues, and poor people in general felt that they were not a priority to the health workers. Street children and unaccompanied children were simply turned away from medical centres out-right without any help.

**8.3** Women and girls talked about their need to see female doctors, but often only male doctors were available. It was also noted by the national NGO staff that there are considerably fewer medical facilities in villages than in large towns, so, many people in the countryside seek medical advice from traditional healers instead. In addition, people who did not stay in flood shelters but on bamboo platforms attached to their slum dwelling or on roads etc did not get visited by a doctor and could not afford or travel to reach medical treatment in a hospital.

**8.4** Being able to afford medicine was highlighted as a major problem. Many people interviewed complained that the prices of medicine become inflated during flood time. Some poor people who are unable to afford medical treatment from a hospital or doctor sought treatment from local traditional doctors, especially in rural areas. Sometimes medicines such as ORS or 'pain killers' were included in packages of relief. This unsupervised distribution of drugs was a problem for some children who did not know how it should be taken, or what the medicine was intended to treat. This situation was often exacerbated by children and adults' illiteracy as they were unable to follow the printed instructions.

**8.5** Anecdotal evidence suggests a possible increase in sexual activities during flood time. This is in the form of sexual abuse of both boys and girls, some teenage boys and girls choosing to have sex and also extra-marital affairs. Unhygienic living conditions combined with a real lack of adequate medical care resulted in serious problems with

8.6 Snake bites were identified as a major hazard for children during floods. Many children and adults felt that there was a lack of provision for handling snake bite incidences, both in terms of awareness of how to treat them and assistance with getting appropriate medical attention. Many people knew of children who had died during flood time due to snake bites.

8.7 Pregnant women pass particularly harsh times during floods. There is a clear pattern of no provision in shelters for medical care for pregnant women, and in most cases, the pregnant women complained of not even having a separate room for child delivery. When childbirths take place white bed sheets are held up as screens. Several case studies were described where both mother and baby died during child birth as there was no transport to take them to any hospital to receive the medical attention they needed. Lack of antenatal care combined with unhygienic conditions meant that many new-born babies became sick or died.

8.8 Lack of clean drinking water and safe food were seen to be major threats to children's health. The need to install tube wells above the flood water level, especially in arsenic affected rural areas, was expressed. There were no facilities to even boil water in most shelters. People were often forced to drink dirty water and cook with flood water in which they were also washing, urinating and defecating.

8.9 Children described not having enough food, sometimes eating only once a day, or none at all. Sometimes they had no choice but to eat raw food or rotten food. Many children became malnourished and their growth was seen to be stunted as a result of these intermittent periods of hunger. Lack of food was also felt to make children weaker and more susceptible to other diseases. Many children spoke of other children they knew of who became sick and died during the flood time.

8.10 The general lack of cleanliness and hygiene in shelters was also identified as a health risk. Diseases spread quickly among the shelter population. The lack of clean toilet facilities was discussed by all. Many children swam or waded long distances each day through dirty water to be able to defecate in the open air away from other people. Maintaining personal hygiene is very difficult during this time. Girls reported doing without bathing at all due to the lack of privacy and the harassment they faced. They also discussed the need for sanitary cloths; most menstruating girls during flood time were forced to re-use wet cloths.

8.11 It was noted by parents/care giver and NGO workers that floods often interrupt vaccination programmes.

8.12 The psychological effects of living through the difficulties of floods are discussed more thoroughly in another following section of the findings. But it is worth mentioning here that many adults described children as becoming traumatised during this time, and of suffering loss of memory, re-occurring nightmares and becoming withdrawn and sullen.

8.13 In many areas, the graveyards go under water during flood time. This is very distressing for all concerned as there is nowhere to bury the dead and bodies have to be simply dumped into the water. This, in turn, exacerbates the all-round polluted environment as bodies are found decomposing in the same water that people are using for bathing and drinking.

## **9. Child protection problems associated with psycho-social issues**

9.1 Not all children have bad experiences of flood time. Some children had positive memories of floods too. For example, when asked what good things there are during the flood, some of the younger children described how it felt like an adventure to leave home and go somewhere else. Some said they liked not having to go to school, and some boys described how they liked being able to fish freely perched on the edges of the roofs of their shelters. For many, it offered them an opportunity to spend more time with the family. Teenagers especially described becoming closer to their siblings during this time as they were not able to talk to their friends as much. Spending quality time with the fathers was also valued as often in non-flood time, fathers work outside the home for long periods of time. In addition, although many children described not receiving enough attention or affection from their parents/caregivers during this time, some children did feel that their parents/caregivers gave them extra care and 'loved them more'. For example, some teenage girls said: "Attention from parents/caregivers was more than normal because of the crowded situation. Parents/caregivers always paid close attention to us to prevent us from developing intimacy with boys." 100

9.2 However, the vast majority of children interviewed said that they felt sad when they remember the floods they have experienced and said that they dreaded the next flood. Children



talked of both their every-day discomfort and of specific traumatic events. Children of all ages expressed their difficulties, such as, wearing the same wet clothes for days together, having no option but to defecate while standing up in water and constantly feeling hungry. In addition, many children experienced a major incident during this time, such as losing a sibling to abduction, early marriage or drowning; or suffering abuse while staying in shelters or another home. These traumatic incidents cast sad and dark shadows over the emotional wellbeing of the children, which, in many cases, stayed with them long after the flood waters had receded.

**9.3** Children of all ages identified the impact that the stress of the flood had on their relationship with their parents/care giver as a major source of emotional distress. A grim picture is painted of increased family tension; of elders shouting and beating, of parents/care giver arguing about food and money, and of their being no peace in the family during this time. Anecdotal evidence suggests the chances of extra-marital affairs increasing during the flood period, and it is not uncommon for parents/care giver to remarry after being separated for a long period of time – for example, after one parent has moved away in search of work. This also creates tension in children. Some children, especially boys of the age group 10-14 years and 15-18 years, described feeling like they wanted to run away because of the awful atmosphere in the family.

**9.4** The flood experience often began with a bad feeling between children and parents/care giver. During the initial evacuation or shifting from their home, parents/care giver described their panic and stress and children remembered being shouted at and beaten if they dropped anything. There were also arguments between family members about what items to save; in some cases, parents/care giver were asking children to save livestock but children were prioritising their toys to save instead.

**9.5** Many children described the change in their relationship with their parents/care giver as “feeling that they become strangers to them.”<sup>101</sup> Children described their parents/care giver as preoccupied with their fears about the future, and so inclined to neglect their children; “my parents did not show me any affection during that time.”<sup>102</sup> Indeed, many mothers who were interviewed were aware that they had a rougher attitude to their children during this time. They described feeling anxious and worried and talked of shouting and beating their children all the time. It upset them when children asked for food and they were unable to provide them with any.

**9.6** However, not all children found that their relationship with their parents/care giver became worse. Some parents/care giver spoke of how they consciously tried to be more affectionate to children during this time. They commented that when they have nothing else to give their children then they can still give them love. Indeed, some children described feeling sad, but then receiving a little more care or love from their parents/care giver made them happy; “parents loved us more than they had before the flood.”<sup>103</sup>

**9.7** Many children expressed fear and anxiety at being left alone. They were upset to be left in shelters to fend for themselves while parents/caregivers went to work. This was true of both very young children and also teenagers who felt they were more at risk of abuse if alone. Most children, especially the teenage girls disliked sleeping in separate areas of the shelter away from their parents/caregivers. Children of all ages also described feeling upset at being separated from their siblings. A seven year old girl spoke of how her elder sister was married off hurriedly during the flood, “I felt very sad, but I could not cry, because the elders would have shouted at me then.”<sup>104</sup> Some teenage boys talked of being worried about the safety of their younger sisters who had to work as domestic workers, or wait alone at the shelter while other family members were at work. This shows another source of anxiety for children, but it also shows the capacity the children have to look out for each other and seek to protect others.

**9.8** The most overwhelming thing is that children of all ages raised the issue of their need to play and the many negative feelings they experienced when they were unable to play. Older children were able to articulate that through playing they’d playfully overcome the traumatic experiences they were having, and that it was as well a way of learning what life was made of and of course, playing helped entertaining themselves. Children were upset that they could not study and were unable to talk to their friends. Many described feeling like prisoners in shelters or homes, being unable to move around due to fear of snakes, sexual harassment or drowning.

**9.9** Many children knew of someone who had drowned, and worried about this danger. Older children especially feared drowning, perhaps because they were more aware of other children drowning in the past and also because they hadn’t learnt how to swim (living in slums, however, offered no such facilities though!).

**9.10** Older children described feeling as though they could not express their emotion or share their

bad feelings with others, as everyone has their own problems and no one wants to listen. This feeling was exacerbated in situations where they were unable to sit and talk to their friends.

**9.11** The lack of bathing and toilet facilities upset all children. Many children spoke of the physical discomfort of having to swim distances to urinate and defecate in flood water, but also of feeling repeated embarrassment, frustration and shame, and were conscious of the negative effect this had on their self-esteem. Girls dreaded getting their monthly period in flood time; both because of the physical difficulties of being unable to keep clean and dry, and the overwhelming feelings of shame and embarrassment due to the lack of privacy.



younger siblings crying from hunger. Some teenage boys described how feelings of frustration from not being able to feed their younger siblings made them want to steal food.

**9.14** Children who had experienced being sent to collect food relief asserted that this was not a job for children. They struggled to maintain their place in queues and were not treated with respect. They felt they faced abuse from all sides; competing with adults during the relief distribution to get a meager share, and then facing anger at home when they did not bring back enough food. Lack of safe and clean water was also another source of worry. Many children had to travel long distances on hazardous journeys to collect water.

**9.15** Many children described how bad they felt to witness domestic violence and sexual abuse. Fathers are described as beating mothers in front of children, which was very distressing. Anecdotal evidence suggests a correlation between increased levels of violence directed at wives by husbands leading to increased levels of violence directed at children by mothers. Older children, perhaps because they are a little more aware, described

*Photo : Save the Children UK*

**9.12** Losing treasured belongings caused great sorrow to many children of all ages. Older children, who have experienced floods before, also knew that it was unlikely that these favourite toys would be replaced after the flood due to their parents/care giver's increased levels of poverty. Most children also commented on only managing to hang on to one set of wet clothes, which they were forced to wear all the time. Girls especially commented on how this made them feel vulnerable to sexual harassment. Children in rural areas described being upset to see their houses washed away due to river erosion, and their fields of crops go under water. Many children were upset to lose their livestock in the flood water, which they had considered as pets or to be unable to care for animals that was ailing.

**9.13** Boys and girls of all ages stressed that not having enough food put them in a bad mood during floods. Many children aged 10 years or more described the most upsetting thing as seeing their

feeling upset at having to witness sexual activities in flood shelters. Teenage boys and girls spoke of sex workers or desperate girls sleeping with men for food – they hated to have to witness such things and to suffer these incidents as part of the atmosphere in the flood shelter. Young and older children alike talked of adults quarrelling and fighting frequently with each other, and described this as frightening to observe.

**9.16** Older teenage boys, especially of the 15-18 age group, described how they felt themselves becoming 'crazy' during flood time. Boredom, frustration and anger led them to do things that they would not normally do. Some boys described becoming obsessed with gambling, others tried drugs or alcohol. Some boys had stopped communicating with their families and took off for days on end, going far away just to escape the gruesome reality of shelter life; maybe



to watch a film, for example. One boy commented that “children have the tendency to be bad in flood time. They think bad things. Sometimes they engage in bad work while they were upset, e.g. having sexual relations with sex workers, or using drugs etc by stealing money from anywhere.”<sup>105</sup>

**9.17** Many street children described increased feelings of helplessness and hopelessness during the flood. They talked of being shouted at more, beaten more, and abused more during this time.

**9.18** Some children, especially street children and working children, expressed how they felt ‘the shame of the poor people’ during this time and described crying out to God, ‘why did you make me poor?’ They felt that they were treated without respect and lost all self-respect and dignity and suffered miserably. Many parents/caregivers and NGO workers asserted that the sufferings of the flood have stayed with children, and they still feel upset to talk about that traumatic time.

**9.19** Due to parents/caregivers moving away in search of work, being sick, or dying, some children had to take on the responsibility of being the main earners in their family. This often necessitates trying out very difficult and hazardous work, and the

pressure of the responsibility also weighs heavily on children. Teenage boys especially mentioned this, as in the absence of their father, their mother and the siblings looked to them as their ‘saviours’.

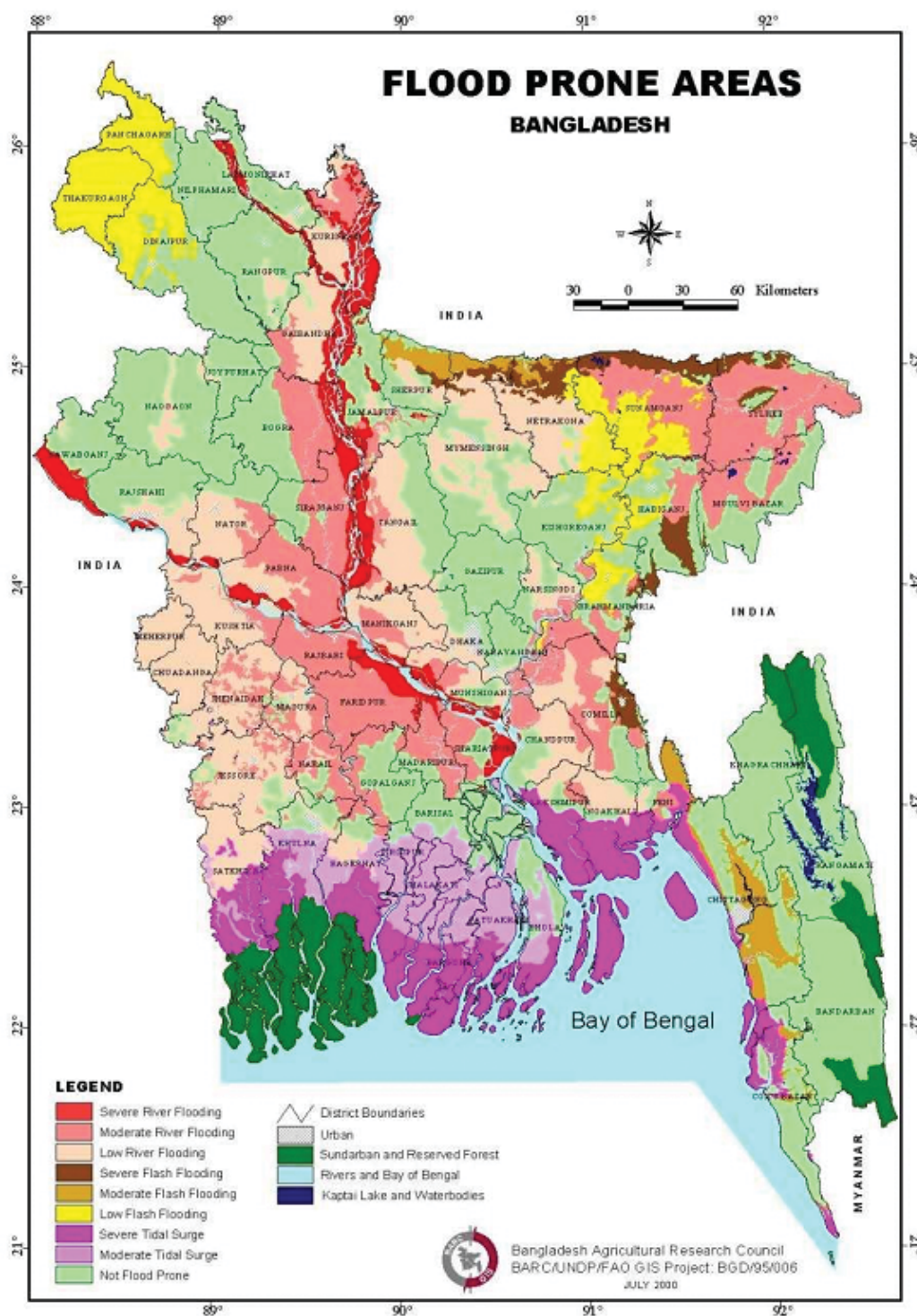
**9.20** Some children commented that their difficulties do not end with the flood water receding. Having to go back to what is left of their house and trying to clean and repair it is unpleasant and upsetting. They described how disheartening it is to take stock and realise that their situation is worse than what it was before the flood because of what they have lost. For many children their perceptions of reality is permanently changed by floods. For example, a family member may have died, or they may be forced to leave school as they are needed to work.

**9.21** During floods, children live with fear of many things; thieves, abductors, sexual abuse, snake bites, drowning, illness etc. Children reported being unable to sleep during flood time due to these various worries. Many children complained of the lack of any light in shelters at night, and of being afraid of ghosts (like all other children living in other parts of the world!). Some children of different ages described still having nightmares connected to the flood time experiences.



*Photo : Save the Children UK*

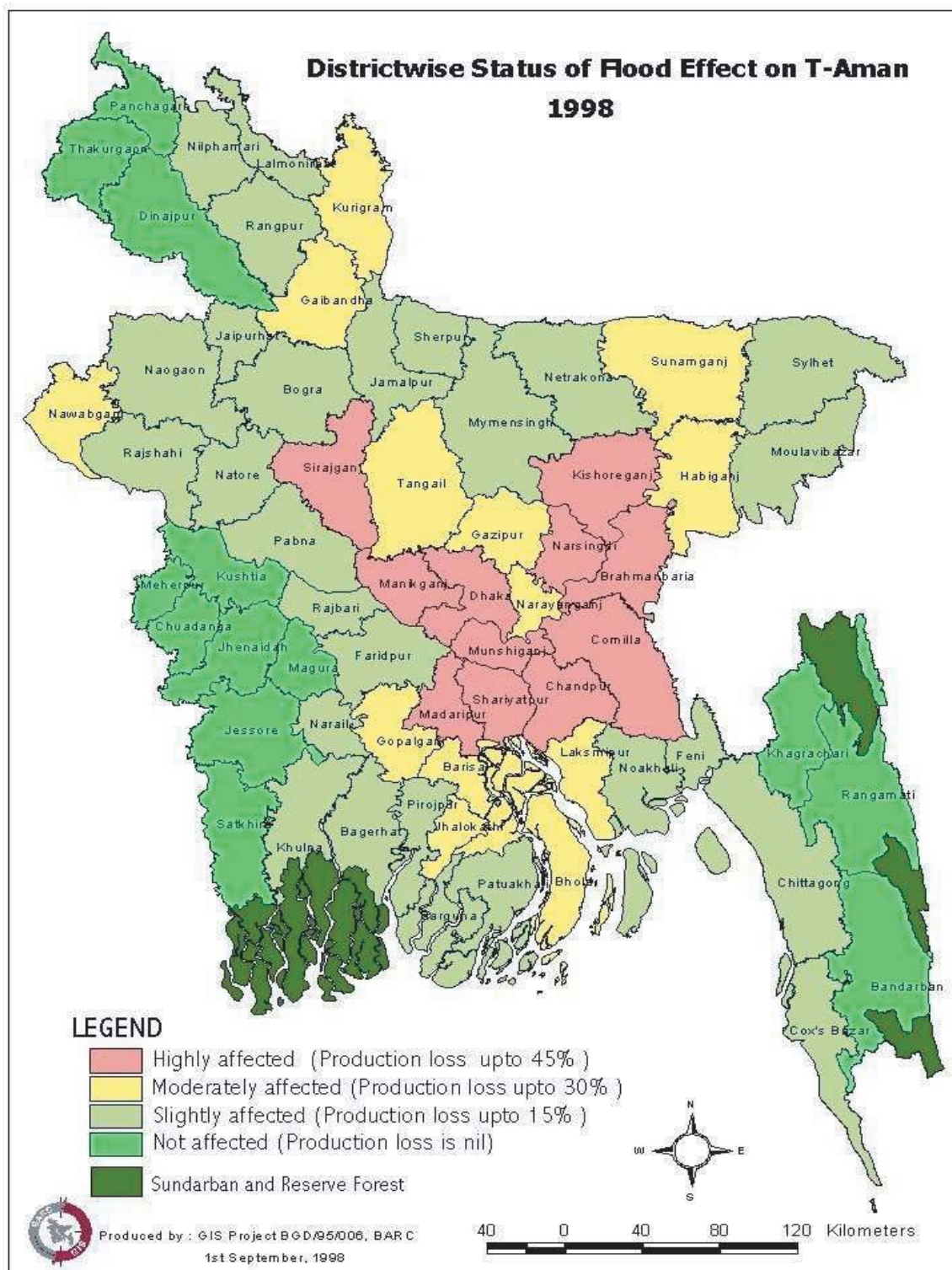
# Annex-2



Source: Bangladesh Agricultural Research Council, 2000.



# Annex-3



Source: GSI Project BOD/95/006, BAR C 1st September, 1998

# End-notes :

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- 17 Comment by participant in FGD group of boys aged 15-18, Dhaka.
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