

VIETNAM: Child-led disaster training saving lives



Photo: Brennon Jones/IRIN

Children are the most at risk of death and injury from typhoons, cyclones and flooding disasters and from the water-borne diseases and poor sanitation that are spawned by such crises

HANOI, 1 October 2008 (IRIN) - Children are frequently the most affected by [natural disasters](#) and yet rarely are their voices heard.

"Children are always one of the most vulnerable groups in emergencies, especially in poor countries," Nguyen Van Gia, emergency coordinator for Save the Children USA in Vietnam, told IRIN.

"Our community-based disaster preparedness programmes always have a focus on child protection and child rights," Gia said. In addition, children are trained to take part in all aspects of emergency preparedness. He said all the child-focused or child-led disaster preparedness activities were implemented by the Save the Children Alliance, not just Save the Children USA.

Funding for the projects comes from the Disaster Preparedness Programme of the European Commission Humanitarian Aid Department and the Alliance.

According to Save the Children's 2008 report, *In the Face of Disaster, Children and Climate Change*, [In the Face of Disaster, Children and Climate Change](#) more than 50 percent of those affected by natural disasters worldwide

are children. In addition to the threat of death, they are much more at risk than adults to water-borne diseases and by the loss of adequate sanitation facilities.

They are easily separated from their families in the chaos of emergencies and face mental stress and physical exploitation, according to the report. In light of these realities, Save the Children USA made children the focus of its community-based disaster risk-management programmes.

The agency has been operating child-led disaster risk-reduction programmes throughout Asia, training children in all aspects of emergency preparedness. In Vietnam, such programmes have been running for more than five years in seven provinces; more than 600 children in 30 schools have been trained in child rights, disaster risk reduction (DRR) and hazard-vulnerability-capacity assessment processes.

"Children sometimes have an even more creative approach and ideas to DRR than adults," Gia said.

The children have participated in risk assessments, produced school-risk maps and action plans, advocated for mitigation measures, educated their communities about responding to emergencies and educated decision-makers about the impact of disasters on children, according to Gia.



Photo: Brennon Jones/IRIN 

Increasingly UN agencies and humanitarian agencies are training children to be prepared for disasters and to be informed on evacuation and response procedures

The programme includes first-aid training and has equipped communities and schools with child-sized life vests and boats for evacuation. It has identified high ground for evacuation; maps are posted to show the way to safe areas, and boreholes have been drilled to provide safe supplies of water.

According to the report, sessions are held when children produce art, drama, dance and songs that help them become better prepared for a disaster and stops them from panicking.

Taking effect

The programmes are making a difference, according to Gia, who was part of an assessment team in Yen Bai, one of the provinces hardest hit by flooding in August.

Save the Children runs programmes in the three most disaster-prone of Yen Bai Province's nine districts and will expand in 2008 to two more districts. Although it has not formally assessed their success in the context of Typhoon Kammuri, "we have learned some lessons from this disaster", Gia told IRIN. "In the project areas, the number of people killed is much lower than in the area where they don't have the training and knowledge."

Two children died in one district without the programme and none in the others.



Photo: Brennon Jones/IRIN 

In Vietnam, Save the Children's Child-Led Disaster Risk Reduction (CLDRR) programs have been operating for more than five years in seven provinces with more than 600 children in 30 schools have been trained

More time is needed to measure the direct impact, but there seems to be general support in Vietnam for the initiative, with Save the Children Alliance, the Ministry of Agriculture's Disaster Management Center, the Ministry of Labour, provincial governments and other NGOs working together.

Nguyen Trong An, a pediatrician and deputy chief at the Ministry of Labour's Administration of Child Care and Protection, said: "I can see in our other projects that people are gaining knowledge from this programme. When we implement our own programmes, we often think about partnering more on these activities related to children and disasters."

Gia told IRIN that he firmly believed the role of children in disaster preparedness and response had taken hold. "In general now in Vietnam, children have more of a voice."

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